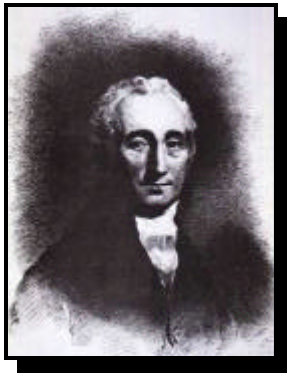


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BICENTENARY OF TYTLER'S *PRINCIPLES OF TRANSLATION*

This year, 1991, marks the bicentenary of the publication of one of the seminal works on translation theory, at least in English—Alexander Fraser Tytler's Essay on the Principles of Translation.

Tytler (the name is pronounced Tittler) was a Scotsman, a prominent Edinburgh lawyer who rose to high office in his profession. The first version of the Essay was presented in the form of lectures to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1790 and published, anonymously, the following year. The main impression the modern reader gains from reading the Essay today is how relevant it still is; Tytler's judgements seem so well founded that they seem to be unarguable common sense. And he expresses himself much more clearly than many modern writers on translation theory.



Who was Alexander Fraser Tytler, and how did this Scottish lawyer come to be a pioneering theorist and critic of translation?

It is apparent, from the entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* and from the introduction by Jeffrey Huntsman to the 1978 edition of the essay, that essentially Tytler was a cultivated gentleman, from an intellectual family, who moved in a select circle of kindred souls, and whose taste and opinions were formed by wide, eclectic but thoughtful reading in several languages.

During his lifetime Edinburgh was a major intellectual, scientific, philosophical and literary centre—it was after all the age of Robert Burns, Walter Scott, David Hume as well as many lesser luminaries. Many of the leading intellectuals came together in the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh, which later became the Royal Society, the body which first heard Tytler expound his theories.

It was an age, we should remember, which enjoyed delineating first principles, of subjecting everything to rational examination. Other members of Tytler's circle had written works such as *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (George Campbell) and *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Commonsense* (Thomas Reid).

Tytler's father, William Tytler, was himself a leading member of the Edinburgh

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literary community, a writer, critic and musician. Alexander Fraser Tytler, born in October 1747, the oldest of the eight children of William Tytler and his wife Anne (also remarkable for her intelligence) did well at the Edinburgh High School, before reading law at the university, and being called to the bar. By 1790, the same year that he delivered his lectures on translation to the Royal Society, he was Judge-Advocate of Scotland, and he went on to become a Lord of the Court of Session in 1802 (taking the title Lord Woodhouselee), and a Lord of the Judiciary in 1811.

He had married in 1776 (his wife was also called Anne) and also had eight children, several of whom rose to prominence in different spheres. A son, James, became Professor of Conveyancing at Edinburgh University; a daughter, Anne, was the author of several popular novels; another son, Alexander, was a leading administrator in India; and yet another son, Patrick, became one of the leading historians of his time.

Patrick Tytler's interest in history was shared by his father. Alexander Fraser Tytler had been appointed in 1780 to a joint professorship of universal history at Edinburgh University, and in 1786 a full professorship of civil history and Greek and Roman antiquities. He published several works, including *Elements of General History* (1801), which has its place in the history of historical studies.

Our hero, then, was something of an intellectual polymath, and a polyglot as well (he had a mastery of Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish and German). What this wide knowledge, wide reading and intellectual environment produced was an individual with sharp critical faculties who was always spoken of by his contemporaries as possessing a high degree of taste and discernment. "Taste", "discernment", "nice perception", "judicious", "elegance" are also phrases which occur frequently in the *Essay*. The lack of taste or gentility is always lambasted, as when he writes of the *vulgar petulance* of a translation compared with the *chastened simplicity* of the original. Other words of criticism are *intemperate*, *impertinent*, *gross impropriety*.

Perhaps the clearest statement of the importance Tytler gives to taste and discernment is on page 132.

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But a translator may discern the general character of his author's style, and yet fail remarkably in the imitation of it. Unless he is possessed of the most correct taste, he will be in continual danger of presenting an exaggerated picture of a caricature of his original. The distinction between good and bad writing is often of so very slender a nature, and the shadowing of difference so extremely delicate, that a very nice perception alone can at all times define the limits. Thus, in the hands of some translators, who have discernment to perceive the general character of their author's style, but want this correctness of taste, the grave style of the original becomes heavy and formal in the translation; the elevated swells into bombast, the lively froths up into the petulant, and the simple and naif degenerates into the childish and insipid.

Three editions of the *Essay* were to appear in Tytler's lifetime, the third shortly before his death in 1813. In each of the successive editions he expanded the content, generally by giving more examples.

Tytler's approach is given at the end of the short first chapter of the *Essay*, and is succinctly and cogently expressed. This passage, which is frequently quoted by subsequent theorists of translation, reads as follows:

I would therefore describe a good translation to be, that, in which the merit of the original work is so completely transfused into another language, as to be as distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt, by a native of the country to which that language belongs, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work.

Now, supposing this description to be a just one, which I think it is, let us examine what are the laws of translation which may be deduced from it.

It will follow,

- I. THAT the Translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work.
- II. THAT the style and manner of writing should be of the same character

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with that of the original.

III. THAT the Translation should have all the ease of original composition.

In the succeeding chapters, Tytler expands on these rules, but the above passage has never, to my knowledge, been bettered in English as a set of general precepts for the translator.

Chapter two makes clear the need for competence in both the source and target languages:

...numberless instances of those very delicate shades of distinction in the signification of words, which nothing but the most intimate acquaintance with a language can teach; but without the knowledge oh which distinctions in the original, and an equal power of discrimination of the corresponding terms of his own language, no translator can be said to possess the primary requisites for the task he undertakes.

Wide and careful reading in the two languages involved is what Tytler recommends for enhancing awareness of the nuances of language. It did occur to me that here is a danger for the future. Already University staff are lamenting that new students seem to have read far less than those of earlier generations, and this is inevitable in a world where the visual image predominates. But will this lead to a lowering of the ability to recognise fine distinctions in meaning?

In dealing with ambiguities in the original text, Tytler comes down clearly on the side of resolving the ambiguity, not conveying it to the target language, as other writers on the subject (mentioned in the *Essay*) have suggested.

Where the sense of an author is doubtful, and where more than one meaning can be given to the same passage or expression, (which, by the bye, is always a defect in composition), the translator is called upon to exercise his judgement, and to select the meaning which is most consonant to the train of

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thought in the whole passage, or to the author's usual mode of thinking, and of expressing himself. To imitate the obscurity or ambiguity of the original, is a fault...

Many examples of both good and bad translation are given in the *Essay*, including examples of bad translation by translators usually good. In each case Tytler carefully explains how the passage has been misunderstood, or how the translation could be better expressed.

For example, he often writes in praise of Pope's translation of *The Iliad*. Pope is obviously one of his paragons, and he quotes several passages with approval, though he will criticise even Pope if he feels it necessary.

The characteristic of the language of Homer is strength united with simplicity. He employs frequent images, allusions, and similes; but he very rarely uses metaphorical expression. The use of this style, therefore, in a translation of Homer, is an offence against the character of the original. Mr Pope, though not often, is sometimes chargeable with this fault...

Elsewhere Tytler gently chides Pope for "injudicious embellishments" or "enfeeblement by amplification". With lesser translators, Tytler can become quite caustic in his comments.

If we are thus justly offended at hearing Virgil speak in the style of the *Evening Post* or the *Daily Advertiser*, what must we think of the translator, who makes the solemn and sententious Tacitus express himself in the low cant of the streets, or in the dialect of the waiters of a tavern. (page 119)

We may affirm for certain, that the writer who could depart thus widely from the character of his original, had not the smallest feeling of that beautiful simplicity which characterises it. (page 127)

Cowper has spun it out into ten heavy lines, without a spark of the spirit

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of the original. (page 131)

The most licentious of all translators was Mr Thomas Brown, of facetious memory, in whose translations from Lucian we have the most perfect case; but it is the case of Billingsgate and of Wapping. (page 221)

Even when he is quoting a good example of translation, he cannot help pointing out any infelicity (if you have the good fortune to get hold of a copy of Tytler, an example of this—too complicated to quote here—occurs in a footnote on page 187).

It is difficult to disagree with Tytler, so commonsensical are his judgements, so illustrative are his examples. It is astonishing to what extent the *Essay*, after 200 years, can still be read as a relevant treatise on translation.

What is particularly refreshing is his decisiveness. His three main rules of translation, quoted above, illustrate this quality. So does the short Chapter VIII, where he deals with the arguments for and against translating poetry into prose. After looking at both sides of the question with considerable fairness, he comes down clearly in favour of always using a verse translation for poetry.

He is never afraid to translate a passage anew himself, in order to show how it should be done. For example, he takes issue with Melmoth, normally one of the Translators he singles out for approval, and his translation of one of Pliny's Epistles (Ep. lib. vii 3). Melmoth had written:

“Are you obstinately bent to live your own master, and sleep and rise when you think proper? Will you never change your country dress for the habit of the town, but spend your whole days unembarrassed by business? It is time, however, you should revisit our scene of hurry, were it only that your rural pleasures may not grow languid by enjoyment.”

Comments Tytler:

The looseness oh this version, and at the same time its insipidity, when

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contrasted with the happy case and familiarity of the original, would almost incline us to suspect, that in this instance the translator had not fully apprehended his author's meaning. The sense, at least, if not the full spirit of the passage, may be thus more faithfully given:

“How long must you enjoy the royal privilege of idleness—sleep when you please, and wake when you please—saunter the livelong day, with your book in your hand; in all the comfort of an old coat, and a pair of easy shoes; your town accoutrements and dress-pumps gone, the Lord knows where, and not to be found for love or money?—For heaven's sake, come and taste of our turmoils: seek something to plague you, were it only to give a zest to your happiness.”

We may certainly, from the foregoing observations, conclude, that it is impossible to do complete justice to any species of poetical composition in a prose translation; in other words, that none but a poet can translate a poet.

The modern reader, I think, would not share Tytler's enthusiasm for Pope., whose style seems overblown to the modern ear. And on one issue, we moderns would definitely disagree with Tytler. This is where the original is “indelicate”, and Tytler appears to prefer avoidance of the indelicacy in the translation, even where this is not a proper rendering of the author's intention.

In the 9th book of the Iliad, v. 484 where Phoenix reminds Achilles of the care he had taken of him while an infant, one circumstance extremely mean, and even disgusting, is found in the original...

Tytler then apologetically offers his own ‘straight’ translation of the Greek passage concerned, followed by his comment, and then the translation of Pope, which we would consider insipid and evasive.

“When I placed you on my knees. I filled you full with meat minced

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down, and gave you wine, which you often vomited upon my bosom, and stained my clothes, in your troublesome infancy”.

The English reader certainly feels an obligation to the translator for sinking altogether this nauseous image, which, instead of heightening the picture, greatly debases it:

Thy infant brease a like affection show'd, Still in my arms, an ever pleasing
load;
Or at my knee, by Phoenix would'st thou stand,
No food was grateful by from Phoenix hand:
I pass my watchings o'er thy helpless years, 'The tender labours, the compliant
cares.

And Tytler's prissiness, for so it must seem to our coarser age, when censorship is a much greater evil than indelicacy, is borne out in the last sentence of the book, when he declines to quote from a translation of Rabelais which he considers 'one of the most perfect specimens of the art of translation'.

If I have foreborne to illustrate any oh the rules or precepts of the preceding Essay from this work, my reasons were, that obscurity I have already noticed, which rendered it less fit for the purpose of such illustration, and that strong tincture of licentiousness which characterises the whole work.

Of course, many of Tytler's examples are taken from Classical Latin and Classical Greek, although translations from French, Italian and Spanish are also considered. He obviously thought his readers would be familiar with at least Latin; he could not foresee that from the 1970s on even linguists would be emerging from the universities without benefit of a grounding in the Classics.

The most difficult part of the task of a translator, in Tytler's view, was to achieve "the case of original composition". "It is not easy for one who walks in trammels, to exhibit an

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air of grace and freedom", he writes in Chapter IX, which deals with this problem.

On the vexed question of how free should one be in translating, Tytler, who devotes Chapter X to this issue, prefers to demonstrate his advice by example, showing that it depends on the circumstances. Examples are also his chief arm in showing how to go about translating idioms (Chapter XI), but as always, mixed in with clear, sound advice.

A translator will often meet with idiomatic phrases in the original author, to which no corresponding idiom can be found in the language of the translation. As a literal translation of such phrases cannot be tolerated, the only resource is, to express the sense in plain and easy language.

Chapter XII is in fact an extended example, because he quotes at some length two contrasting translations of *Don Quixote*, by Motteux and Smollet, generally to the advantage of the former, but giving Smollet due credit when his version is the better. This chapter also shows both Tytler's attention to detail, and his judiciousness. He deals with an accusation against Motteux, that he had taken his version from a French translation, and demonstrates that this cannot be so.

One odd thing is that Tytler himself was not a major practitioner of translation. In 1792 he had produced a much-praised translation of Schiller's *Die Räuber*, which had done much to introduce Schiller to the British public, and it is on record that he had also translated Petrarch. Curiously for a translator of Schiller, he gives in the *Essay* hardly any examples of translation from German.

The *Essay* itself appeared to come out of the blue, without any previous indication, prior to the Royal Society lectures, that Tytler had interested himself in defining the principles of translation. Almost certainly he had become irritated, through his own wide reading, at the inadequacy of much of the translation work performed in his day, and determined to do something about it. He writes, in the Introduction:

While such has been our ignorance of the principles of this art, it is not at all wonderful, that amidst the numberless translations which every day appear,

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both of the works of the ancients and moderns, there should be so few that are possessed of real merit. The utility of translations is universally felt, and therefore there is a continual demand for them. But this very circumstance has thrown the practice of translation into mean and mercenary hands. It is a profession which, it is generally believed, may be exercised with a very small portion of genius or abilities...

How little has changed!

By the end of the book Tytler, to his satisfaction and ours, has shown that translation, when done properly, requires intellectual abilities of a very high order indeed. The final chapter, Chapter XV, begins:

From the consideration of those general rules of translation which in the foregoing chapters I have endeavoured to illustrate, it will appear no unnatural conclusion to assert, that he only is perfectly accomplished for the duty of a translator who possesses a genius akin to that of the original author. I do not mean to carry this proposition so far as to affirm, that in order to give a perfect translation of the works of Cicero, a man must actually be as great an orator, or inherit the same extent of philosophical genius; but he must have a mind capable of discerning the full merits of his original, of attending with an acute perception to the whole of his reasoning, and of entering with warmth and energy of feeling into all the beauties of his composition..."

If translation today is still not appreciated as it ought to be, then certainly it is no fault of Tytler. No-one to this day has so clearly stated its difficulties and its responsibilities; no-one has sought harder to enhance the status of translation.

May I express the hope that some time in this year 1991, of the bicentenary of the publication of *Essay on the Principles of Translation*, some gathering of translators somewhere will see fit to raise their glasses and drink a toast to our distinguished precursor, adviser and guide, Alexander Fraser Tytler?

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