ON CREATIVE ERRORS IN TRANSLATION

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“Why do you try to enlarge your mind? Subtilize it.”
Hermann Melville, *Moby Dick*

What we want to achieve most of all in our translation courses is to render our students as error-proof as possible in their professional lives. A prospective employer or client needs to be convinced that with this translator, all target texts will be free of errors. Yet, errors and mistakes are committed by everyone, everyday. But with translations, the first and usual suspect will always be the translator. No one can deny the existence of errors; but we have to admit that their status is paradoxical. On the one hand, an error-laden text is less likely to be considered valid and to be long lasting than one with few or no errors. On the other hand, we can find in translation history some errors that endure and become institutionalized. Eventually, they might no longer even be perceived as errors. We are going to deal with this second class of phenomena.

But first, what is meant by the word “error”? According to Francis Bacon (1561-1626), a founding figure of European scientific thinking, an error is that which, in our judgment, is out of tune with reality or truth, two notions that are presented as synonymous:

The idols and false notions which are now in possession of the human understanding, and have taken deep root therein, not only so beset men's minds that truth can hardly find entrance, but even after entrance is obtained, they will again in the very instauration of the sciences meet and trouble us.

If we transpose this tentative definition into the realm of translation, an error will then, at first glance, be that which violates the principle of equivalence between source and target text (however tricky the concept of equivalence may prove to be). In this line of thought, the truth of the target lies in the source. So much for the theory.

In fact, there are at least two other contenders for this function of truth. In pragmatic texts (i.e. those with a communicative aim) specifically, we cannot translate efficiently without taking the real-life context into account. And reality
takes precedence over both source and target: how do we deal with an original text that is full of nonsense? More generally, we must consider the text recipient(s), who may perfectly validate a translation that is erroneous. If we consider the practical aspects of translation, the situation regarding errors thus becomes remarkably hazy. One way out of this less than clearly defined situation is to try and isolate some extrinsic characteristics of what are—rightly or wrongly—considered errors in translation. To that end, I will use examples taken from the history of arts and humanism as well as from the translation of major religious and constitutional texts. These particular kinds of written texts are interesting to us because time is on their side: they have the ability to last.

Nothing is more precarious than an error

Our first, and possibly quite well known, example is the monumental statue of Moses commissioned by Pope Jules II, and carved by Michelangelo. This masterpiece was completed in 1516 and can be admired in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli, in Rome. The statue has something very strange about it: the founding father of Judaism is represented with horns protruding from his forehead. This surprising feature was generated by a translation error dating back to Saint Jerome, the author of the Latin reference version of the Bible: the Vulgate (Saint Jerome has some excuses, however. He actually copied the error in question from an earlier Latin version: the Aquila Bible). In the original, Hebrew text (Exodus, 34, 29), Moses is said to have had a radiant, or shining face after he came down from Mount Sinai for the second time, bearing the Tablets of the testimony. These adjectives (radiant, shining) are supposed to translate the Hebrew verb qâran. However, since the translator worked with the consonantal Hebrew version (the vowels would only be added between the 6th and 10th centuries A.D.), the available text only amounted to the equivalents of the consonants qrm. The translator therefore mistook it for the noun qèrèn, meaning “horns”. It is a simple mistake, similar to those committed by translators on a daily basis: the context just makes it slightly more spectacular. It is also, incidentally, one of the keys to a recent and quite pleasant esoteric thriller resembling the Da Vinci Code.

The question I am asking now is this: is it still an error after it has been integrated into a representation that will stand as a reference? Michelangelo did not have to worry about that point in his time, as the text of the Vulgate was deemed valid for all Catholics (it is the very meaning of the word Vulgate). A few years later, in 1546, the Counter-Reform would even turn the sacred character of this Latin version into a dogma. A principle that was reaffirmed in 1870:
These books are sacred and canonical because they contain revelation without error, and because, written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, they have God for their Author, and have been transmitted to the Church as such. (Sacred Vatican Council, 1870, De Fide Catholica. Available at: http://www.religion-cults.com/spirit/bible.htm)

The Catholic world would have to wait until 1943 to see this text lose its status of infallibility. At that time, Saint Jerome’s translation officially became imperfect again (something scholars had always known, of course) and it then became possible to question the presence of those horns on Moses’ head. After five centuries, the possibility of an error was conceivable again.

Yet we have to admit that this horned Moses is perfectly convincing. According to some art historians, it is even the apex of Western statuary, making such an impression on Sigmund Freud, among others, that he subjected it to his psychoanalytic method, in a famous essay (Freud 1914). In my opinion, therefore, it was an error that preceded Michelangelo, but which became a truth through his artistic mastery. Using his powers of expression, the sculptor made this translation authentic. In such a case, we will let ourselves be persuaded of the relevance or falsity of an interpretation by its creative power.

This phenomenon is far from unique. The most publicized case is the translation of Freud’s works into French: at the beginning, phrases such as acte manqué (Fehlleistung, “overt act”…) or inquiétante étrangeté (Unheimlichkeit, “uncanny”), for instance, are wrong translations from the German language. Yet, eventually, those are operating and fertile psychoanalytical concepts. An error that lasts will thus become an accepted fact, even if this entails a lasting change in the way we see things. As an illustration, the recent retranslation of Freud’s complete works, edited and introduced by Jean Laplanche and André Bourguignon (see Bourguignon 1989 and Freud 1998-2005) explicitly excludes from its prospective readers the practitioners of psychoanalysis. Laplanche’s argument is that practitioners have become too accustomed to using concepts stemming from wrong translations to be able to change their minds about those linguistically wrong phrases… So for the psychoanalyst, as for the art historian, it does not matter whether those aspects are the results of mistakes, provided that the final product works. An error that succeeds will thus cease to be one for its users.

Nothing is more discreet than some errors

Some of those errors that endure may never even be noticed. Henri Meschonnic thus explains that most translations of the Genesis into English or French start with such an error (Meschonnic 2002, 143). Indeed, the first Hebrew
verse contains a subordinate clause which is hardly ever translated as such. We think we are reading “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth”, whereas we should be reading “In the beginning, \textit{when} God created the heaven and the earth”. And any theologian worth his salt will confirm it: Christians and Jews alike agree to consider that the first thing God created according to the Bible is light (verse 3), and not heaven or earth… The mistake, this time, dates back to the Septuagint (3$^{\text{rd}}$ century B.C.), after which it spread to all other versions for centuries. In French, it was not corrected until 1975 (“\textit{Lorsque Dieu commença la création du ciel et de la terre, la terre était déserte…”}). Yet, this error, unlike a lot of others divergences linked to this particular text has never caused the most minute of schisms, the smallest controversy: it has just persisted in its existence, a discreet inaccuracy among the very first words of a major text. One could say the same of Adam’s rib, dubbed the “patron saint of all translation errors” by Meschonnic, if some commentators had not used this phrase to infer some dubious sociological interpretations as to the “social inferiority of women” (Meschonnic 2002, 254).

Our first question—does a translation error remain as such after it has been validated by its recipients?—thus calls for a second one: Is it still an error if nobody notices a difference? For nothing is more discreet than some errors.

\textbf{Nothing is more voluntary than some errors}

One also usually assumes that errors are involuntary: who would make a mistake on purpose? No one, indeed. But one may willingly introduce a divergence. A case in point is the 1867 Constitution of Canada. Its French version is a translation, made under the supervision of political decision-makers. In that version, the English neologism “dominion”\textsuperscript{v} is translation in French by \textit{puissance}:

\noindent Article 3: Declaration of Union

\[ […] \text{the Provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick shall form and be One } \textbf{Dominion} \text{ under the Name of Canada […]}. \]

\noindent Article 3 : Établissement de l’union

\[ […] \text{les provinces du Canada, de la Nouvelle-Écosse et du Nouveau-Brunswick ne formeront qu\'une seule et même } \textbf{Puissance} \text{ sous le nom de Canada […]}. \]
Quite evidently, the two words are not equivalent. For some, this translation is nothing more than a blunder. I think, on the contrary, that it results from political will: the difference is voluntary and full of meaning.

Hence another blunt question: Is it still an error if it is made on purpose?

**Nothing is more subjective than an error**

What is the general purpose of whoever writes or validates such a translation? Surely he or she wants to persuade! To make objective that which corresponds to their subjectivity, their beliefs. The same mechanism explains, I think, the sad end met by Etienne Dolet in his time. This strong character is an important figure in the history of translation, not least because he is rumored to have coined the words *traducteur* and *traduction* in French. He also was a printer, the author of a book on typography, a minor theoretician of translation (a forerunner of target-oriented translation, one could say) (Balliu 2002, 54). Sadly for him, he also was, briefly, a translator, an occupation that cost him his life. Indeed, after 37 years of quarrel and financial difficulties, Etienne Dolet was accused of heresy because of the French version he gave of an obscure and probably apocryphal dialogue by Plato: Axiochus (also called Axiochos or Antiochus). According to Jean Delisle, “He had Socrates say ‘La mort ne peut rien sur toi, car tu n’es pas ci prêt à décéder, et quand tu seras décédé, elle n’y pourra rien aussi, attendu que tu ne seras plus rien du tout.’” [Death can do nothing unto you for you are not now ready to die. And after you die, it can do nothing either, since you will no longer be anything at all (my translation)]. This last phrase is supposed to render the Greek *su gar ouk esei*. The censors judged that the “anything at all” was not present in the original, was contrary to the author’s intention, cast a doubt on immortality of the soul, and could only stem from heretical thinking. As a consequence, Dolet was first strangled to death, then his body was burned in place Maubert, in Paris, on August 3, 1546, on, incidentally, his 38th birthday.

Can one really talk about an error here? I do not think so. To me, the controversy entails a two-fold time shift: On the one hand, by convicting Dolet for his attributing an heretic utterance to an author who lived five centuries before Christ, the censors are in fact anachronizing Plato’s works: they turn him into a Christian philosopher. This type of anachronism was, besides, perfectly common at that time: we, in the 21st century, consider it shocking, but nobody would in the 16th.

On the other hand, by overtranslating (since, as seen from our time, he did add a nuance that was absent from the original), Dolet behaves as a political activist: he declares his text independent from the Catholic dogma. That is the reason why he was later made into a martyr of freedom of thought and a figure in the centuries-
On creative errors in translation

long fight for the secularization of Western society. That is also why so many cities in France (the country of laïcité par excellence) have a street named after him.

Indeed, Etienne Dolet did not commit an error: he wrote just what a thinker in the Renaissance would have felt entitled to do, using the writs of the Ancients as a weapon, as the translation habits of his time would have it. Indeed, the Catholic censors did not commit any error either in their reading of Plato: as seen through the prism of the Church’s principles of which they were supposed to be the wardens, Dolet’s translation was truly heretic. The tragic aspect of this story is that both parties are right inside their respective world view. In this kind of controversy, there is no error: there is a fight. Therefore, nothing is more subjective than what may pass for an error.

Nothing is more telling than an error

Nothing is more telling either. Indeed, differences of opinion about the sense of a text—and thus about its translation—will most often appear at the turning point between two historical periods. Let us consider two series of examples concerning, again, the Bible.

First, we have the appearance of a theological competition between two religions—Judaism and Christianity—grounded in the same initial text: a rather awkward situation... According to Jaroslav Pelikan, “As a Christian author from the 2nd century will write to the Jews of his time, the texts of the Old Testament have become ‘not your scriptures anymore, but ours’” (Pelikan 2005, 12). Those Hebrew texts, though originally written earlier would therefore have to be made to conform in translation to those of the New Testament: a fine example of feedback. The translator’s notes in the French translations of the Hebrew Bible by Henri Meschonnic are full of such examples.

We will meet this problem again a dozen centuries later, with the quarrels about the retranslations of the very same texts by the first Protestant thinkers (around Dolet’s time, incidentally). Suddenly, indeed, one will start translating differently, because the world will not be seen with the same eyes anymore. This will cause a long series of rows between translators and institutions – among them Martin Luther and the Catholic Church. So much so that, according to Balliu quoting Cary “the wars of religion [...] are first and foremost ‘a translator’s quarrel’” xi. The underlying question, here, is who has the legitimacy to validate an interpretation? Is it the Church? Is it the individual person? This makes for an essential divide between those two main branches of Christianity.

And here, we also find again our link between subjective and collective aspects: the main point remains how to convince the others. For translation is primarily, and surely in all eras, a rhetorical art. No translator can ignore his public or the ideas of
his time. And logically, the target text will always mirror that time. Hence the frequent need to retranslate. It will also reveal a shift between two eras. In extreme cases (Martin Luther…), it will trigger such a shift, through what the conservatives of the time in question will reject as errors. Nothing, therefore, is more creative than an error.

**Revisiting our definition**

So far, we have examined a number of criteria to help us comprehend what is meant by the word “error”. An error has a precarious status; it can be voluntary or involuntary, covert or evident; it is often revealing, nearly always subjective, and, if it is a clever and interesting one, it will be creative. What is its actual contribution to translations?

It brings diversity and novelty. Eventually, there are two interesting ways in which a translation can go awry: by dissolution into clichés, and by divergence. And divergence—that is, what will be seen as an error—is what makes it possible to break the trend of repetition and thus to escape the logic of clichés. It will rejuvenate the initial text, replace it in the flow of time. For, as Nietzsche wrote, “One can die of being immortal.”

But why would such an error be so readily accepted? Maybe because, paradoxically, it first unsettled us. Let us go back to our statue of Moses with horns. Incongruities of this type will arguably present us with a special problem whose solving will require a surplus in creativity, which, in turn, will establish an esthetic coherence of superior ranking. Edgar Morin would say that such errors introduce a disorder that will itself bring a new form of organization. Error is thus, for the creator, a source of inspiration and, for the public, a means to see things differently. This change of vision operates principally through esthetic and poetic means. We find the same idea in Proust’s works when he writes about the way Renoir painted women. In science, it is the same when a new theory supplants an older one. It is even truer in translation: the power of conviction is not linked to accuracy – it may even be the contrary… Leaving the realm of errors in a strict sense, we find an extreme example of this in the first French translation of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1867), titled *Les Quatre filles du docteur Marsh*. Several chapters are missing, one of the main characters (Beth) “does not fall ill, does not eventually die, and the novel has a happy ending which is nowhere to be found in English. [Besides], any reference to religion has been taken out of the French version [and] if the housekeeper is still French, she is no longer a Catholic.” Last but not least, Mr. Marsh, a chaplain in the English version, has become a physician in French (hence the title). Apart from that, the text is more or
On creative errors in translation

less the same… However, this French version works. Therefore, it inspires confidence; therefore it has lasted!

Nothing is more vain than trying to fight errors

And that is why nothing is more vain than trying to fight errors, whether by instituting a dogma (the Vulgate), by setting up an intangible lexicon (the recent retranslation of Freud into French) or by regulating the form a translation must take (the principle of literality that prevailed for centuries after Justinian’s codification in legal translation).

Indeed, we must count not only on the ability of esthetics to convince, but also on the profound desire of rationality in us that never sleeps: an error will often cease to be one simply because it has been printed. And we will have no hesitation in denying that it is an error—even if we have to use the most convoluted or the most reckless arguments to that effect. As an illustration, which will take us back once again to Moses, a psychoanalyst with a certain liking of linguistics and etymology recently took the most scholarly stance to explain to us that Saint Jerome certainly made no mistake, that qâran is actually the same thing as qèrèn and that those infamous horns were never out of place on Moses’ forehead. This longing for rationality will often cause us to revert the burden of proof:

The real question, which has been evaded to this day, is that of the unexpected emergence of qèrèn underneath qâran, that of the horns which are glimpsed through transparency, in the light. This appearance of one word inside the fabric of another […] may be the hint that a fragment of archaic text that the Jewish orthodoxy could not admit successfully made its way into the official text. […] Therefore, the so-called ‘error’ in the Vulgate reveals its true nature: that of an agent of truth which in effect brings to light a repressed archaic signification […] (Rey-Flaud 2006, 85-86 and 91-92, respectively. Translation mine).

In other words, it is precisely where a text makes us uncomfortable that it says a profound historical or psychological truth.\textsuperscript{xvii} There is a convenient aspect to this argument: you can use it to justify almost anything…

The most impressive example of rationalizing inventiveness, however, should no doubt go to those Christian theologians that set out to explain some of the transcription errors in the Greek version of the New Testament:

Some of the supporters of the doctrine of divine inspiration went so far as to declare that those well-known distortions […] which were often shocking, at least for those familiar with classic Greek, were in fact the result of a deliberate divine intent to have the Bible written in ‘Holy Ghost Greek’. Thereby, they insulated it from any Pagan past. Later, in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, the discovery of papyri and other
Nicolas Froeliger

sources confirmed that the New Testament Greek was basically the common Greek language (or koine) that was generally spoken and written at the time in the Hellenistic world.” (Pelikan 2005, 238-39)

Beside esthetics, the other major means of validation of error is therefore rationality or, to be more precise, the not-always rational need for rationality. It functions both as a defense mechanism against error (reflection helps us avoid mistakes) and as a validation instance (reflection makes us stop seeing an error as such).

**Conclusion**

To make a long demonstration short, the general concept of error from which we started has to be dismantled into its various concrete components, examined and then reshuffled into a coherent whole. We will thus be convinced that, if translation eventually offers a nonpareil vantage point on the fecundity of errors, it is thanks to its threefold power of elucidation.

Elucidation with respect to oneself, first: no one can translate in a correct way without having at least the impression that he or she understands. And understanding the world, the languages, and the subject in question will finally lead to a better understanding of oneself: such is the structuring power of translation. The errors that we will commit during this process are therefore far from meaningless: they reveal the way we function as individuals in a profession where psychology is an all-important factor.

Elucidation of one’s era, also: as we have seen, a translator is always prisoner of his time, and more specifically of his time’s prejudices. Our errors, quite often, are only the logical consequence of that fact.

We may then reverse Francis Bacon’s definition. If we stop considering error as a concept and start envisioning its manifestations, it will no longer be that which contradicts truth or reality, but rather a pathway to our own, individual or collective, truth. Hence its enormous pedagogical potential. If we set out to grasp, with our students, the causes and conditions of their errors—or those of other translators—, we gain the possibility not only to make them feel more confident, but also to turn them into better translators. Indeed, a “good” translation has little to tell us, compared with an underperforming one… Error, eventually, stimulates and subtilizes us: it must be restored to favor. Through it passes the third elucidating power of translation. Far from condemning the concept of error, we must use it as a lever that will enable our students to produce, in due time, not perfect translations (a sheer fantasy) but translations that are good enough. For our craft is nothing if not a modest one.
On creative errors in translation

Notes

i With translation assistance from Carolyne Lee, University of Melbourne.


iii Caldwell *et al*. 2004, 178-84, the explanation for the presence of those horns is slightly different in this book.

iv This incidentally confirms one of the great empirical rules of translation: you can always find a mistake in a translated text, and it will preferably be located on the title page or in the first paragraph of the text you are about to deliver…

v The word had existed in English for a long time (in, among other places, the King James Bible), but the Canadian constitution saw its first use in the political sense it has enjoyed ever since.

vi See Gunnoo, 2005.

vii For a more thorough discussion, see Froeliger, 2007.


ix Delisle *et al*., 2004, article on Dolet.

x Gross, 1995, also explains that his translation was necessarily more prolix, and therefore, he writes, more precise than the deeply allusive original.


xiv See Kuhn, 1962, *passim*.


xvi Virtually no one know what a chaplain is in France. And for a man of religion to have regular children would have seemed most peculiar in this overwhelmingly Catholic country…

xvii For religious historians, it is even one of the most serious proofs of Christ’s historical existence: no one would have invented something as unlikely as the fact that God could die on the cross…

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