Translating Nietzsche and the Fallacy of Formal Equivalence

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During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many significant translations appeared of works by historically important authors. New editions of works by Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Freud, and others were produced by some of the greatest scholars in the English-speaking world. The approach taken by these translators was almost universally that of ›literary‹ translation. It was understood that these translations were intended not for scholars but for students and the educated layman. Following the Great War, a new isolationism took hold. Teaching and knowledge of foreign languages were given less emphasis or simply ignored. After World War II, a new generation of scholars began revising and replacing these Victorian translations, which they believed to be unsatisfactory for scholars' needs. Instead of approaching these as literary works, they insisted on a rigid scheme of translation, known as ›formal equivalence‹.

This ›New Literalism‹, made the claim that the use of ›formal equivalence‹ in translation (i.e., *imitating* the original) produces translations that are more accurate. Such pronouncements amount to nothing more than what some (especially the physicist Richard Feynman) have termed ›cargo cult‹ science – a term borrowed from anthropologists who used the term ›cargo cult‹ to describe certain ritual behaviours among tribes in Micronesia and elsewhere following World War II. Members of these tribes constructed mock-airplanes and airfields from tree branches and twigs, believing that these would bring them desirable goods, such as the supplies brought by Japanese and American airplanes during the war for their troops. ›Formal equivalence‹ in translation, though, reproduces a ritual as ill-informed as those practiced by the cargo cult. Mimesis (imitation) in translation is *not* equivalence: on the contrary, it is merely the ›surface features‹ that are captured by the ›formal equivalence‹ approach to translation, or by cargo cult imitations. Just as the cargo cult's crude imitation airplanes are not real airplanes, resembling them only superficially, formal equivalence ›translations‹ are not authentic or rigorous translations, either. Though some may laugh at what they regard as the *naïveté* of the cargo cultists, and believe that we in the scientific Western world could never accept such foolish beliefs, the thinking behind formal equivalence in translation, namely that the translation should

be a *replica* or *imitation* of the original in some sense, is far more naïve since it occurs among people who have had extensive exposure to science.

This translation dogma rests upon a fundamental confusion between *similarity* and *equivalence*. Let us take for example the »equivalence« of different species of money. A $20 double-eagle gold piece and 20 silver dollars are exactly equivalent at face value. Yet they are dissimilar in size, appearance, and chemical composition. Likewise, the »equivalence« of statements made in different languages is independent of their form; it is entirely a matter of content as understood by the reader. What is needed in a translation is a form of what bible translator and influential translation theorist Eugene Nida called *functional equivalence*, not similarity of form, which is of no inherent or real value.[1] Rather than mimicking the syntax of the foreign-language text, it is best for translation to follow the style, usage, and syntax of classic contemporaneous texts in the target language, which can serve as appropriate models due to their acknowledged excellence.

It is a simple fact that most words have several meanings, and that in any verbal communication we depend on the context to help determine the *specific sense* or meaning. The greatest part of interpretation consists precisely in the identification of specific senses through context, through a process of elimination *What is significant* – and a problem for the translator – is that the multiple senses of words in one language seldom if ever closely match those of another language: no such simple one-to-one relationship actually exists for the vast majority of words in different languages that will allow such a rigid substitution scheme.

Translating Nietzsche

This statement (taken from the Translators' Note and Acknowledgments to their edition of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (*Zur Genealogie der Moral*) by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen) clearly expresses the formal equivalence dogma:

> [...] the goal...is (as Paul Guyer and Allen Wood have recently formulated it in their translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*) ›to give the reader of the translation an experience as close as possible to that of the reader of the German original.‹ This goal dictated a number of commitments: wherever possible, to translate every occurrence of a potentially significant word with the same English word, to use that word for only one German word, to translate all words deriving from a common German root with

1 | Eugene A. Nida: Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating. Leiden: Brill 1964.

words deriving from a common English root, and to avoid collapsing German synonyms into a single English term.[2]

In short, they rehearse the truisms of exact translation – that it preserves the consistency of the smallest lexical units. They continue to describe how Nietzsche's unusual punctuation must be faithfully reproduced in English. Clark and Swensen offer no arguments as to *why* any of this should be true. Their »ideal« is a chimera. They apparently accept Guyer and Wood's assertions naïvely and without question. Among their many unjustified assumptions is their belief that there is perfect homogeneity within the »experience of the reader of the German original,« when nothing could be further from the truth, for not all readers will interpret the text in the same way.

Nor do Clark and Swensen explain, in any coherent manner, the *benefit* to English speakers of following Nietzsche's idiosyncratic punctuation. They cannot do so, because there is none: it is nothing but a cargo-cult-like ritual, based on the superstitious belief that some benefit will be derived through copying the *form* of the original. There are norms for punctuation in English, and Clark and Swensen offer no good reasons for an English translation to depart from them. Although there is some flexibility in English punctuation practices (not to mention historical and regional variation), yet using arcane or bizarre punctuation interferes with the natural flow in reading. After all, the translator is working for the benefit of the target language reader, and should take that as his *primary* responsibility. Otherwise, why translate at all?

To my mind, the most important and distinctive aspect of Nietzsche's writing is his style in the broadest sense (not merely his verbal mannerisms, which are also distinctive). To quote from James Garvey and Jeremy Stangroom, authors of *The Great Philosophers*:

> Friedrich Nietzsche was influential, controversial, disturbing, systematically misunderstood and very good fun to read. It is his excellent prose that initially attracts many of us. You can easily spend an afternoon gorging on his words, by turns smiling at his wit and gasping at his dark pronouncements. You can then spend a lifetime working out his meaning.[3]

It is easy to lose one's way in all of this, owing principally to Nietzsche's style – clarity and argumentation is sometimes exchanged for rhetoric and good prose.[4]

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2 | Maudemarie Clark/Alan J. Swensen: On the Genealogy of Morality. A Polemic [A translation of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift* (1887)]- Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., pp. xxxix–xl.

3 | James Garvey/Jeremy Stangroom: The Great Philosophers: From Socrates to Foucault. London 2005, p. 116

4 | Ibid. p. 118.

In preparing the new translations of Nietzsche's works which I was asked to make, I naturally examined other translations (old and new) of the works in question. Most of the more recent ones suffered from the excessive literalism which can be attributed to the naïve, uncritical acceptance of the claims that translators should avoid giving their own interpretation of a text at all costs, and that a rigid, systematic correspondence between the *individual words* of the original and those of the translation must be established and rigorously adhered to. This kind of translation is really a sort of mimicry, as discussed earlier. The belief is that by making the translation mimic the original as closely as possible it is thereby made more »accurate.« This belief is false. Different shades of meaning may attach to words depending on their context, and by following a rigid system of substitution, regardless of context, as described above by Clark and Swensen, the ›subtleties that are available to the reader of the German text‹ are *lost*, not preserved. Virtually everything Clark and Swenson say about translation is false, and their translation betrays, rather than supports, their assertions.

Let us now examine some examples of translations produced using the literalist approach, to show you *why* I disagree. A good translation is not simply accurate; rather, it is one that does justice to the original.

I find it puzzling that anyone would treat Nietzsche's writings in the way that some have – or should I say mistreat? Many recent translations of Nietzsche's works have been prepared in this mechanical and rigid way, with a dry, overly literal style that is entirely wanting in the very qualities for which one reads Nietzsche in the first place! Those who produce such translations are seemingly more interested in showing off their knowledge than in producing something that is useful and appropriate. As Eugene Nida states:

> [...] translators tend to feel more concern for the critical reactions of their professional colleagues – favorable or unfavorable – than for the impact their work may have on the audience for which it is presumably intended. One highly successful editor-publisher, aware of this tendency toward elitism, never hires a theologian to translate a book on theology, since such a specialist would be »too anxious to show how much Greek and Hebrew he knows«.[5]

Furthermore, the usual method of evaluating translations (peer review) tends to be problematical because the specialist already knows the text well, *too well*, in fact.

This is especially true for Nietzsche, since he does not usually present cold, rational, ›philosophical‹ arguments for his views, but relies upon emotionally loaded language and striking, vivid imagery. His writing is *dramatic*. He is a

5 | Eugene Nida: Translation as Communication. In: Readings in General Translation Theory 1997, p. 29–39. Originally published in: Translation. Ed. by Gerhard Nickel. Stuttgart: Hochschul Verlag 1978, p. 131–152.

provocateur, not an analytic philosopher. His writing is full of scathing ridicule, vituperation, excoriation, sarcasm, witty observations, and psychological insights. He seeks to *entertain*, *stun* and *amaze*, rather than to *convince*. He appeals most often to the soul, not to the intellect. Yet so many recent translations of Nietzsche's works deprive us almost entirely of anything remotely like the feel of the originals. In others, one may find passages that are incomprehensible, again due to the fact that the translator was trying to avoid interpreting, and was just translating the individual words superficially, ignoring the context. Thus, conveying Nietzsche's intent to the non-specialist requires particular skills and understanding of the needs of the readership, and knowledge of how best to structure the text.

Losing and Regaining Our Balance

From *Morgenröthe* (*Dawn*), Section 133.

The German text:

Die Wahrheit ist: im Mitleid – ich meine in dem, was irreführender Weise gewöhnlich Mitleid genannt zu werden pflegt, – denken wir zwar nicht mehr bewusst an uns, aber sehr stark unbewusst, wie wenn wir beim Ausgleiten eines Fusses, für uns jetzt unbewusst, die zweckmässigsten Gegenbewegungen machen und dabei ersichtlich allen unseren Verstand gebrauchen. Der Unfall des Andern beleidigt uns, er würde uns unserer Ohnmacht, vielleicht unserer Feigheit überführen, wenn wir ihm nicht Abhülfe brächten. Oder er bringt schon an sich eine Verringerung unsrer Ehre vor Anderen oder vor uns selber mit sich.[6]

R. J. Hollingdale (1982):

The truth is: in the feeling of pity – I mean in that which is usually and misleadingly called pity we are, to be sure, not consciously thinking of ourself but are doing so very strongly unconsciously; as when, if our foot slips – an act of which we are not immediately conscious – we perform the most purposive counter-motions and in doing so plainly employ our whole reasoning faculty. An accident which happens to another offends us: it would make us aware of our impotence, and perhaps of our cowardice, if we did not go to assist him. Or it brings with it in itself a diminution of our honour in the eyes of others or in our own eyes.[7]

6 | Friedrich Nietzsche: Morgenröthe: Gedanken über die moralischen Vorurtheile. Leipzig: E. W. Fritzsch 1881/1887, § 113.

7 | Friedrich Nietzsche: Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 133.

Brittain Smith (2011):

The truth is: not out of, but inside compassion – I mean what customarily and misleadingly passes for compassion – we are thinking about ourselves, no longer consciously, to be sure, but very powerfully so unconsciously, just as, when our foot slips out from under us, we initiate, without any immediate consciousness of the action, the most purposive counter movements and in the process plainly make use of our entire faculty of understanding. The other person's accident insults us, it threatens to deliver us into the hands of our own impotence, perhaps even our cowardice were we not to offer our help. Or the accident *per se* involves a depletion of our honour in the eyes of others or of ourselves.[8]

My proposed translation of the passage:

The truth is that in our pity – I mean that which we erroneously call ›pity‹ – we no longer think consciously of ourselves, but do so *quite unconsciously*, just as, when we lose our footing and start slipping, we instinctively make the proper movements to regain our balance, and in doing so obviously draw upon all of our faculties. A mishap to another represents an affront to us; if we were to do nothing to help him, it would reveal in us impotence, or perhaps cowardice, bringing humiliation and dishonour upon us.

Analysis and Comment

In translating *zweckmässigsten Gegenbewegungen* it is hardly necessary to say something so technical-sounding as »perform the most purposive counter-motions« when ordinary literary language such as »make the proper movements to regain our balance« is perfectly clear and familiar. It is quite possible that no one would even understand that ›the most purposive counter movements‹ is intended to refer to flailing in the air with our arms and legs in an attempt to maintain or regain our equilibrium. For the same reasons, the translation of »allen unseren Verstand gebrauchen« need not be anything more elaborate than »employ all of our faculties.« (The word »purposive« is a biological technical term that refers to functional adaptation or vital behaviour in organisms.) For the second instance of *unbewusst* we need not repeat the translation »unconscious« since »instinctive« fits better in that context, and there is sufficient overlap in the meanings of »instinctive« and »unconscious« to allow it.

The way that different translators deal with »überführen« reveals the challenge of capturing the connotations of seemingly straightforward German verb. Translating »überführen« as »reveal« is clearer and simpler than the choices

8 | Friedrich Nietzsche: Dawn: Thoughts on the Presumptions of Morality. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press 2011.

made by Hollingdale and Smith, which are both too wordy, especially Smith's choice, »threatens to deliver us into the hands of our own impotence,« which doesn't even make sense. Earlier translators Johanna Volz (1903) and John M. Kennedy (1911) also pick wordy paraphrases for »überführen«: »convict us of our impotence« and »bring our impotence [...] into stark relief.«[9] Volz, Kennedy, and Hollingdale use »diminution of our honour« when the simple expression »diminish our honour« would be perfectly satisfactory. (They are attempting to follow the German syntax using a noun for a noun, when a verb is more natural here.) Smith has followed the same pattern, but chose to use the noun »depletion« which is even worse, as this choice is unidiomatic and quite odd. The word »depletion« is not ordinarily used in such contexts, but only in those dealing with *substances* such as ore deposits, or supplies of fuel, money, or food, which are *consumed*. It means that the reserves of these commodities are nearly exhausted. If you understand that the German word »Verringerung« generally refers to »lessening,« »decrease,« »reduction,« or »depreciation,« and can be used to refer to the debasement of coinage, the sense in play here becomes clear, and thus it can be seen that Smith's choice of »depletion« is wholly inappropriate. Honour is not something that is *consumed*, and thus it cannot become *depleted*. It would seem almost impossible for a native speaker of English to make this sort of mistake. The movement between languages, which can result in graceful surprises can also collapse into semantic discord.

9 | Friedrich Nietzsche: The Dawn of Day. Trans. by Johanna Volz. London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd. 1903; Friedrich Nietzsche: The Dawn of Day. Trans. by John McFarland Kennedy. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1911.