Traduttore Traditore: From aesthetic approach to social stigma

Interpreters in war and conflict zones: Word and craft under suspicion.

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Summary

The persistent paronym: "traduttore traditore" undermines the integrity and the professional ethics that should be at the very heart of the interpreter’s performance: neutrality. This paper will not only consider the essential difficulty of the profession, but also look at other reasons that might explain the saying's cultural longevity, such as the unconscious yet unsettling perception of the “other”, combined with the fact that interpreters have to embody otherness. This paper will consider the stigma attached to the perception of disloyalty and treachery and the abuses that arise from such stigma, and not only in the area of translation.

Why this paper

It may be interesting to take a quick look at the circumstances that led to the writing of this paper. I get a real kick from knowing the background and biography of the person behind a creative work, just like watching "the making of" a film. So this is what happened:

A major effort has gone into the attempt to obtain an international declaration recognizing the status of interpreters and the neutrality of their output, providing them with a safe working environment and guaranteeing their physical integrity in zones of war and conflict. All too frequently this endeavour encountered misgivings that weakened political support for it, even from otherwise culturally adroit foreign ministries who would have been inclined to support the cause. Although ministries of defence and foreign affairs recognize the vital importance of reliable translations in their deployments, when it comes to shielding their employees through asylum or refuge at the end of their mission, they express - not without acerbity - their fear that each interpreter could in truth be a fifth columnist. With half a smile they trot out the hackneyed condemnation masquerading as a pun "traduttore traditore"which would have been fine as just a gag but which is both unfair and unfounded because it has never been held up to even remotely serious scrutiny. What does stand proven is that civilisation and human co-existence on earth would be inconceivable without the agency of translation and interpretation, with all their limits and imperfections.

Neither should we conflate ideas or fall back on clichés. Nobody would doubt the extraordinary work and courage of war correspondents because a terrorist disguised as a journalist killed Ahmad
Shah Massoud of the Northern Alliance, at the time the great hope of the West against the Afghani Taliban. Let us therefore try to understand - even if just in part - the origin and career of this glib expression, and halt its misappropriation.

The feasibility of translation

This is not the place to discuss the viability of translation or its oft-scorned "faithfulness", despite "traditore" figuring in the title.

Nobody is more acutely aware of the difficulty of the task than interpreters and translators. They are expected to produce a single version of a text that could give rise to an infinite number of translations depending on the period of history, the context, the distance between the language pair, the existence or non-existence of cultural correspondences, the expectations of the target audience, the purportedly objective function of communication, and many more factors.

This difficulty only began to attract serious academic attention quite recently, in the 19th century, and with the birth of the science of linguistics in the 20th century; since then it has received increasing attention, and has developed as a subject of academic study in its own right, branching into semiotics, philology, theory of translation and drawing on insights from other disciplines such as psychology, cultural anthropology, comparative literature and the philosophy of language.

The origin of the ill-starred saying is unclear. Opinions range from the irritation of Italian scholars with the questionable beauty of French translations of Dante to the assertion that it was in fact the French who coined the melodic, Italian saying, a theory taken up by Myriem Bozaher, Umberto Eco's French translator, in the introduction to Dire presque la même chose.

The feasibility of translation gave rise to an intense debate in the 20th century that ranged from Croce’s untranslatability of poetry for aesthetic reasons to the extreme of disallowing any reformulation, even within a single language up to translation/interpretation as the revelation of the essence of the discourse: Benjamin (1923) said:

If there is such a thing as a language of truth, the tensionless and event silent depository of the ultimate truth which all thought strives for, then this language of truth is – the true language. And this very language, whose divination and description is the only perfection a philosopher can hope for, is concealed in concentrated fashion in translation.

Despite appearances to the contrary, Borges said nearly the same thing, using a pithy phrase typical of scholars:

"a definitive text belongs only to the realms of religion or exhaustion."

The debate between "faithfulness" and "betrayal" of translators is not new; it has no genuine intellectual substance and is based on the utopian aspiration of exact equivalents. In 1932 Borges provided a literary summary in his essay Some versions of Homer, to which I refer you. The world as we know it today would not exist without the contribution of linguists. How useful would Archimedes' Principle have been if it had remained in Greek? Or Galileo and Copernicus if they had remained in Latin? How can we understand the Renaissance without the knowledge of astronomy and science of the Arabs and Greeks that was passed on by a group of translators and interpreters known as The Toledo School of Translators? Here is another example from literature: 7,600 editions of "Alice in Wonderland" have been published in 174 languages. How can we conceive of the co-existence of nations and building their at times rocky relationships without the input of interpreters?
In fact what concerns us here is the enduring nature and inexplicable use of a judgemental and trite word pair that has a direct bearing on the work and safety of translators and interpreters working in conflict zones and also on the integrity of a large body of professionals. We need to look at it from different angles.

**The interpreter as the other**

The perception of language as a self-referenced reality that is separate and independent of the material universe, of relationships and of the identity of the speaker is a relatively new construct. As is our admission that the content of a linguistic carrier or language can be converted, plausibly if imperfectly, into another.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis regarding the ability to communicate between two languages states that it is an illusion to imagine one can adapt to a reality without using its language: ‘The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality’ 6 or, ‘we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data’ 7 within this society.

Although not entirely abandoned, this proposition has clearly been qualified, so that the difficulty of transposing from one language to another is a question of level, context, circumstance and type of communication. For the purposes of the matter under examination we should call to mind the difficulty in obtaining first hand information about the Pashtun Taliban community because it prefers to live isolation, something that puts us in mind of Moctezuma's stubborn refusal to communicate with the outside world 8. This gives us an insight into the hatred that interpreters attract because the fact of knowing a language means they naturally belong to that language community, although that same community sees them as renouncing it for a plate of lentils.

Central to our consideration of this matter is how the interpreter is perceived. I am referring to the perception of the interpreted party, the perception of the person receiving the translated version and the interpreter's own perception of self.

There are significant and connected issues we'll mention in passing: who recruits or contracts (establishing the presumed hierarchical relationship with its concomitant chain of command), which of the parties does the interpreter accompany to the meeting and what is his outward appearance (town clothes or tribal dress, veil, uniform, armbands, badges, insignia, weapons etc)? We shall come back to visibility in a different context.

The way the interpreter is perceived by the person hiring him has changed over history and according to circumstance. This process cannot be compared with the recruitment of interpreters in the West by international organizations, although all wars and conquests have features in common, whenever they occur: the inability to find enough interpreters who speak the local languages within the community of the invader and the need to use local interpreters and train them to facilitate communication in local languages. A second feature in common arises from the first: the systematic suspicion that local interpreters might be a fifth column, act as informers or spies for a real or imagined enemy, all of which leads to the introduction of stringent controls and penalties, as has been well documented. This has happened throughout history, from Cortés and the Conquest of America 9, via the Balkans to the wars in the Pacific, Iraq, Afghanistan among others.

There is no doubt, and this is borne out by ethnic and religious conflicts, that some interpreters are driven by a missionary or militant spirit to use their role as a platform to explain or provide more information about the particular interests of the cause they support 10. This tends to happen when
the recruitment process is seriously flawed because the urgent situation means it's hurried or because social order and administrative standards have broken down. But it does not explain a toxic and sweeping distrust, far from it.

We should remember that it is a universally accepted convention that when working the interpreter speaks in the first person, alternating the first person depending on who is speaking. This creates at least a triad of "Is", an area that has not been researched to any great extent, although examining it could allay some doubts. Which, or who, is the interpreter's true "I"? When is he the "other" and for whom? How do the parties perceive him? Does the interpreter know or suspect whom he embodies when he says "I"?

I, the barbarian

We know that the Greeks called people who didn't speak their language barbarians (an onomatopoeia for the apparent gibberish of a language they could not understand: bar-bar); although they were aware of civilizations in India and China, they called them barbarian too. This is explained in part because in Greek "word" and "knowledge" are the same word: "logos".11 So a person whose language I do not speak also personifies all I do not know and everything I fear, a bottomless well of ignorance, the mysteries of the beyond that are in fact not beyond but within ourselves. This is our dark side, our irrational side, our shadow.

Our shadow is connected to the "ominous", the "uncanny", Freud's das Unheimliche, something within us that is both archaic and known, familiar and diabolic, something that should remain hidden and is suddenly thrust into the light 12.

The "other" whom we fear - the barbarian - embodies this unacknowledged fear that lives within us. Our anxiety about the unknown within us causes us to dread the "other" because he embodies it. According to Levinas (1971) it could also be seen as the fear of the infinite that the other embodies. The "other" not as a person but as a totality, a representation of the unfathomable, of the otherness we are incapable of embracing 13.

The immediate and instinctive perception of the other as hostile is the foundation of social prejudice, causing outbreaks of racism and hate speech, particularly in these times of migratory upheavals where the interpreters are also playing a humanitarian role. This is not the place to consider it, but its relationship to the matter under discussion warrants further study.

When the interpreter performs, caught between the real world and dark infinity, he conjures for himself and those around him "the other", that which lives within us as a double, a mask. It is not easy to deal with this display and readily trust the spoken word. Neither is the situation easy for the sides in the conflict; when they hear the interpreter speak their language they feel well disposed towards him, but when they hear him address the "other" the incomprehensible words ring sinister. The situation is even more convoluted for the interpreter: he has to identify with one group and subsequently with another when conveying his speech in the first person, at times verging on imposture. The interpreter lives with this ambivalence, with his double and must do so under the gaze of the public, pulling the strings like a puppeteer.

Marzano sees in this "other", that is also ourselves, the image reflected back to us by the mirror “that introduces a disruption at the very core of the likeness". "I" adversary and brother, "I" and "other", our double like a "vital breath and also a guardian angel vouchsafing immortality; "double" both material and vulnerable, able to slip the bonds of the body” 14.

The above refers to high-risk situations that involve opposing parties and interpreters but it also reflects daily life in the real world and Marzano makes the point by quoting Rimbaud: Je est un
autre or Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* to which we could add Nerval’s *Je suis l’autre* and Borges’ text: *Al otro, a Borges, es a quien ocurren las cosas*. We all experienced the "other" the first time we heard a recording of our own voice. We listened, bewildered.

**Stigma**

The word comes from the ancient Greek στίγμα, a mark on the body of slaves, criminals or traitors so they could be recognized or shunned in social exchange and avoided on the public thoroughfare. Goffman (1963) says that before the foreigner arrives among us, we anticipate his category and attributes, in other words his social identity. When there is a mismatch between our social stereotype and the other's, the foreigner's, true social identity, the visible or imputed differences turn him into something that is deeply undesirable, dangerous or evil.  

Goffman identifies three types of stigma. Abominations of the body and physical deformities, then blemishes of individual character, like domineering passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, alcoholism, criminal background, addiction and mental disorder and finally tribal, national or religious stigma that can affect all family members. This last type of stigma was developed by Falk (2001) for whom "...we and all societies will always stigmatize some condition and some behaviour because doing so provides for group solidarity by delineating 'outsiders' from 'insiders'".

As we live with our own shadow and fear the presence of the "other" that symbolizes it, so we are all stigmatizers and stigmatized. Nobody can match our society's model of perfection and so we hide or cloak anything that does not fully meet the standard. Within North American society all men aspire to be and yet cannot be, the flawless male according to the ideal. In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: "a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, andand a recent record in sports".

Every person learns to cope with or hide his shortcomings that are more or less apparent, his small grey areas, a shameful memory from his own past, his stigma. We often do this in secret, accusing others of the same or worse faults and fears, which is consonant with prejudice and the construction of scapegoats.

In translation and interpreting, if a rendition that explains a concept, a new metaphor or a concept free of vested interests are at variance with the views of those in power, it can give rise, as we see, to efforts to discredit a group, tantamount to killing the messenger, which has a long history and is still standard practice in the here and now.

We manage social stigma as part of our daily routine. This is the subject of academic study, debate among educators and within society. To what extent do we loftily accept as "normal" those that we don't consider normal, either fairly or not? How do the stigmatized don their real or ascribed stigma when interacting with others and when using spoken language?

Visibility is crucial for the interpreter, as mentioned earlier. Visibility is also important in managing an immediately recognizable stigma such as a physical feature or deformation, a stammer, skin colour; conversely a person can try to keep it secret, like medical records, time in prison, or as a prostitute or burglar; or conceal one’s origin by improving diction or lightening one's skin with treatments, so as to gain unfettered access to the group of the "normal".

Obviously the role of the interpreter not only cannot but also must not be concealed, it has to be made explicit but without ostentation and the interpreter must avoid any distinctive feature that is
symbolic of either of the parties. The interpreter however cannot escape the unconscious apprehension - that brooding shadow of the "other" - that he arouses. Managing such situations is a major and unfinished task.

Future research could centre on loyalty and the perception of loyalty in the handling of secret or strategic information with specific groups. In another work, Goffman 18 distinguishes between informers, spies, shill and impostors who join a group with malicious intention. Traitors enter a group by identifying with its values only to change their allegiance once inside. The expectation and perception of neutrality on the part of intermediaries, arbitrators, mediators and even chairmen of formal meetings is also an interesting issue. Goffman enters this terrain but more work needs to be done from the standpoint of interpreters in conflict zones, as well as in courts, public service and international organizations. It would also be helpful if the profession's ethical code were brought up to date through being subjected to contemporary scrutiny. This would help smooth the path to the recognition of interpreters by society.

It is true that as long as stigma remains hidden in the tribal cave, and its existence is neither admitted nor recognized, it will be impossible to deal with its outward signs or oppose its abuse. So far the notorious saying has not emerged from the cave.

**Traitors**

Society's excoriates those who betray the trust of the group or betray a relationship; it is one of the oldest and most basic of stigmas. For this reason it has been open to abuse, and we should therefore stand up in a final defence of these seeming traitors.

Betrayal can only happen in a trusting or loving relationship, between people, with friends, parents or siblings 19 but one can also betray the spirit or norms of community existence, discipline and obedience within the group.

Adam was cast out of Paradise because he betrayed God's command not to eat the fruit of the tree in the centre of the Garden of Eden. This was nothing less than the tree that opened the door to knowledge and the ability to distinguish good from evil, that had until then been the exclusive preserve of God. Although God created man, it was Adam or his betrayal that allowed him to escape his beatific state of grape-eater creature in Paradise to fully enter the state of man, free and responsible for his own actions.

Judas' betrayal is another Western classic that challenges us. Another example of a happy - subconscious - paronym of the name Judas and Jew, an open invitation to prejudice. Moving beyond a near impossible historical discussion and exegesis of the Aramaic and Greek translations of the Apostles, it is the action taken by Jesus' chosen disciple that scholars see as the sacrifice that takes Jesus to his universal destiny: “Judas, unique among the apostles, intuited the secret divinity and terrible intention” 20.

What appear to be distant events may not be so distant because they live on with us and we can read about them every day in the newspaper. We know, often with name and surname, people who live in the shadow of a church, of a group of intellectuals or the powerful, either through fear, ambition or sheer hypocrisy; they are dazzled by a zealot, by fanaticism or by their own dark side that the "other" has the courage to personify.

Luckily there are those who face their demons, indeed there is a long list of those who were not served fairly by a sluggish and inadequate legal system. For example Giordano Bruno and the Church, Alfred Dreyfus facing anti-Semitic prejudice in France or José Martí, accused as a traitor before reaching his destiny as national hero. Among those challenging the notion of unequivocal and
incontrovertible truth we find: Albert Camus, Paul Nizan, Joseph Brodsky, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Andrei Sakharov, Yitzhak Rabin, murdered by a visionary or Amos Oz defending unarmed his moral integrity and the right to creative freedom, to dissent, to be "other".

We must note that this is the same game played in totalitarian states, and in some that are reputedly democratic. They fall back on conspiracy theories and accusations of disloyalty to discredit their opponents. Sometimes the supposed traitor uses the only available route to fresh air, which is to cut the ties to unbending authority and closed, suffocating societies where it is easier to survive wrapped in a stagnant daydream that affords apparent protection.

Translating or interpreting is, ultimately, an act of creation and freedom; choosing one meaning among the many potential meanings in a different conceptual universe; this is not very different from the act of communication within a single language. It is a quest for meaning within a labyrinth of distorting mirrors, and we should not judge its results on the basis of stigma but accept it as an enrichment.

In The Labyrinth of Solitude Octavio Paz (1950) says that the Mexicans of today, because they had not invented themselves in the 16th century, define themselves by attacking the foreigner "those sons of bitches - hijos de la Chingada" an imaginary foe, again the "others". La Chingada represented the violated mother and La Malinche the symbol of submission, an unpardonable betrayal. Paz however recognizes that:

... in this shout we disown our origins and deny our hybridism... The Mexican wants to be neither Indian nor Spanish...And neither does he claim to be a mestizo, but an abstraction: he is a man. He becomes a child of nothing. 21

New writing in America attempts to transcend passive surrender, and sees in La Malinche female assertiveness and in the mixed race the germ of the new Mexican nation 22. Translation itself does not aspire to purity, to a robotic and poorly understood fidelity. The ferment and contribution of translators arise from their essential mixture, of different backgrounds, often antagonistic, that bring forth new offspring. Thus is human history, its culture and its music. And the history of nature that spreads its unseeing pollen on the wind.

**Conclusion**

A political consensus does not change simply as a result of a change in thinking. It needs time and a propitious environment. That is surely what awaits an international political declaration recognizing the status of interpreters. However it is important to discuss the concepts, and we do at some point have to begin this debate. This is in fact the ultimate purpose of considering the shadow cast by the "other", the abuse of stigma and, above all, in asserting that the creative selection of meaning is an act of liberty, not of disloyalty. We need to consider further the perception of disloyalty. It would also be helpful if the profession's code of ethics could move forward thanks to some serious self-scrutiny through modern eyes.

*(Translated from Spanish by Philip D. Smith)*

References and further reading


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5 Borges, *Discusión*, Las versiones... Ibid.


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