

AUTHORITATIVE TRANSLATION

Notes from a presentation
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The subject is “Authoritative Translation.” Williamowitz-Moellendorf’s Definition: “Translation is a statement in the translator’s own words of what he thinks the author had in mind.”

If you analyze that, that’s all he can do. He can’t say what the author said. He can’t say what the author had in mind; he doesn’t know what the author had in mind. That would make translation a very individual business, of course. And yet, there is plenty of advantage of digging things up from each other.

In his famous work on the translation of Homer, Matthew Arnold says:

Shakespeare sometimes uses expressions which pass perfectly well as he uses them, because Shakespeare thinks so fast and so powerfully that in reading him we are borne over single words by a mighty current; but if our minds were less excited... they would check us... What Shakespeare *means* is perfectly clear... but his grammar is loose and idiomatic.

Justifying his own translation of some lines of Homer, Arnold says:

In the sixth line, I put five words... which are in the original by implication only. For in the Greek language itself there is something... which gives one a *clue* to his thought, which makes a *hint* enough; but in English language, this sense of nearness, this clue, is gone; hints are insufficient; everything must be stated with full directness.

We’ve got to put down more than we have been given. If you would translate literally and correctly when Hamlet says, “For to be great is not to move without great argument. The great mistake the quarrel with a straw,” he says exactly the opposite of what he means. We know perfectly clearly what he means. To be great is not to wait until there is some great issue to go to war about, but to have the spirit and dash that you’ll quarrel about a straw. But he says the very opposite. For to be great *is* to move without great argument and take great quarrel with a straw—that’s what he means. But he says, “For to be great is not to move without great argument.” He puts that “not” in there. It’s perfectly clear to anybody, but if you take it word for word it says the exact opposite.

The ideal situation is the person with the perfect knowledge of two languages. There is no training program just to make a person that way. Is it an impossible ideal? No, it is not. It has been achieved but it is very rare.

Authoritative translation with scriptures has to bridge the gap between time and cultures. Even modern languages are not contemporary, only on a rather superficial, urban, technological level.

C.S. Coon notes that a language produces almost automatically a photographic likeness of just one culture. If there are objects in the culture you talk about, you have words for them. If you don't have those objects in your culture, you have no words for them. They drop out. You get a photographic image of just one culture. That's why you have most of the differences. It's the differences that make up the difference. If you try to switch or substitute photographs, all kinds of explanations are necessary. That's why every translation that tries to be exact must fall back continually on elaborate explanatory notes. We learn a language not in order to translate, but because there is so much in language that can never be translated. It's there, and it's very essential, too.

Describing life in the village, you talk about the village, the wagons, the people, the festivals, the main square of the village, and so on. After describing this village in detail, you get a clear image of it. Then you say, "It was one of the finest villages *in the Congo*."

You've got to change your whole image entirely: the wagon, the horse, the man, the house. You've got to get a different image for everything you describe. Or: "It was the finest village in all of Delacardia;" or, "It was the finest village in southern Scotland;" or "the finest village in Italy," or in London. It's a different picture for each one. You use the same words, almost. You use house, you use dog, you talk about the finest food, in Guatemala; you're thinking of a different thing entirely.

Aside from any spiritual matters, words constantly change with time. An example of this is military vocabulary, which is conservative. If armies are to hold their own, they must constantly change their tactics and equipment. That keeps the words changing that they're using for tactics and equipment.

Whether you're speaking of the British, German, American, or Russian armies, they have many old words in common: general, colonel, major, division, brigade, platoon, sergeant. But, in no two armies are either the words or the things designated the same as in any of the others. The officers so designated all have different degrees of authority. A major isn't the same thing in Germany, and a major general in England and America and Germany is a totally different officer, although they have certain things in common. The units are all different in size, strength, and function. Various headquarters all represent different degrees and lines of control. It's quite easy to take the handbook and translate a military document from one language to another, but if a commander tries to act on such information, he's doomed. This can be corrected—with vast trouble and expense.

Yehoshua Bar-Hillel, the Israeli expert on machine translation, says:

The machine will never be able to deliver flawless translation of scientific or technical works, if only because the relationship between the language and the ideas it seeks to express are by no means simple and direct.... The precise meaning of a sentence is often only apparent in its context, which the reader must understand and which a machine can never understand.... The sooner we realize that the perfect translation machine is an illusion, the sooner we can turn our attention to pursuing a real improvement in linguistic communications.

The human translator is often obliged to make use of extralinguistic knowledge that sometimes has to be of considerable breadth and depth.

You have to be familiar with the situation. Every word of an ancient religious text is loaded with extra-linguistic associations. If anyone had ever produced such a thing as a perfect translation, then we might design a machine to duplicate the process. But it has never been done because we can't even imagine a perfect translation. The very concept eludes us. Why?

A perfect translation would have to convey, imply, suggest, hint, recall and suppress the same things—no more and no less—in the mind of its reader that the original does to a reader of the original. It would have to bring identical images to the minds of the two readers. But the only reason we have a translation in the first place is that the two readers do not live in the same world and therefore do not have the same images. But you have to make the transfer here. If they lived in the same world, you wouldn't need to translate.

What is it that appeals to us so strongly in the idea of machine translation? A time saver? For the kind of straightforward prose which lends itself to such translation, any good translator can move as rapidly as a machine and more surely. In the same way, I can write much faster on my electric typewriter than I can longhand or shorthand. It's the idea that because the machine has done it, we have bypassed all the weaknesses and foibles of human nature; that we have a translation on which we can *rely*.

We've been taken in by gadgets and conveniences. I'm talking about the average man who doesn't actually work with those things and doesn't realize their nature. But gadgets and conveniences have facilitated certain aspects of modern life. They work on scientific principles.

The translation, as we've heard before, is not a science but an art. Do not write your translation with your text in front of you. Always close the book, because then it will be your own words and it will be spontaneous. You won't be able to write unless you have a clear idea of what the author said. Unless you have, then keep at it until you get your clear idea. But close the book. Don't keep it in front of you. It will drag you in one direction or the other. Continue to digest it; then you can regurgitate it all right. It's a literary composition, then, in its own right, demanding the same literary talent and feeling for words. The translator has to be equally literate in both languages.

What is a poem? Obviously you're not going to be able to translate a poem. Houseman says, "the essence of great poetry is that it has a sound." You have a feeling that you're getting a portentous message when actually it says nothing. But there's a tremendous feeling.

All of Shakespeare's sonnets are examples. They all say the same thing: "Art is long a life is speedy," and "It's too bad that we have to die," and "Beauty fades," and that's that. We go through a hundred sonnets just to say that. Aah! But what sonnets, you see!

When you translate these, you say, well here's the gist of it, now you go ahead and translate. You just write a poem of your own on the same subject, that's all. Once you've got the idea, it's all you can do because you're not going to use his meter and you're not going to use his rhyme. You're not going to use any of the things that make a Shakespearean sonnet a great

sonnet. How on earth are you going to write in any other language, “Let me go not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds; nor bends with the remover to remove.” This is one of the great sonnets. But you put that into your own machine and see what comes out.

The person who’s translating has to be as great a poet as the one who’s written the original. What about some little poet-actor who’s really incompetent and incapable of writing a poem himself? What’s he going to do for translation in that case, if he has to be a great poet in his own right? That’s why some of the greatest translations have been made by great poets.

In the early part of the century it was discovered that the virtuosity of the greatest pianist could be completely captured by the player piano. Everywhere people started buying player pianos. And they really worked. Here the music was interpreted as it should be, and no nonsense.

What happened to the player piano? Why was this popularity so short-lived? Why did the piano companies go right on making the other kind of piano that you had to hit yourself? There’s nothing mechanically wrong with a player piano. It did actually hit the keys exactly as the great Hoffmann hit them, and it was simply fascinating to watch them jump as the perforated roll marched by. It worked more perfectly than any translating computer could, and it revolutionized piano playing. Yet there was something repellent about it—something rather silly; kind of showing off. Humanity rejected it. It was no real fun at all and quickly became a bore. It played the same perfatape perfectly every time.

So if we must be scientific about it, a translation should be nearly a perfect equation. One should know both the languages equally well. But with ancient languages you have a lopsided equation. And there results a franchise of all sorts of quackery.

How well should the translator know Greek or Arabic poetry? Ahlwaretts made the first great collection of Arab quotes. In the introduction he says, “Now it’s true I don’t understand much of these words; I can’t understand what they’re talking about. But I’m a better authority on Arabic quotes than any Arab was because I have *wissenschaft*; I have *unsicht*, and with that I really know what it’s all about.” This gives us a control which the ignorant poet himself, who is probably illiterate, didn’t have.

Say somebody knows Egyptian better than somebody else does. Is that enough? If he knows it better than anybody else does, is that enough? No. At what point is his knowledge satisfactory? A man trying to translate Aeschylus or the New Testament today is in a state of desperate imbalance. He knows the one language so much better than he knows the other. He’s in the position of the one-armed violinist. One arm may work superbly. But without the other, fiddle-playing is not a task he should undertake.

To know one language as well as another is to know one world as well as another. But what if the world has been out of existence for two or three thousand years? Basic training for any branch of communication, I believe, should be a stiff course in Latin composition rather than the vagaries and bull-sessions learning of semantics and linguistics, and so forth. Latin is different enough to be significant and enough like most modern languages to be plausible. Of

course one student in fifty would never learn to write with *syntaxis ornatissima*. He'd never learn it. But every student who got the least involved would soon find himself plunged into basic realities of communication. If he stuck to it, in time he'd come to understand and feel genius, above all the vocabulary, and the power, and the flexibility of his own language. And he would not say, "It was give to my wife and I," or "That is something for we to attempt," or something like that.

Arnold's thesis is that you can have an authoritative translation, but you've got to have two things which by their very nature are incompatible. You've got to have scholarly equipment, and feeling. Then you've got to combine them. Each is hopeless without the other.

Arnold says:

No one can tell how Homer affected the Greeks, but there are those who can tell how Homer affects *them*. These are scholars who may possess, at the same time with their knowledge of Greek, adequate poetical taste and feeling. They alone can say whether the translation produces more or less the same effect *upon them* as the original.

We're dealing with an artistic system. You hear these men and you say, "Ah, they know; they have their feelings and they have their knowledge. Well they're all we have. I suppose their translation is what they'll have to trust." There's no guarantee that it's adequate. Ask, for example, how the works affect those who don't know Greek and yet can appreciate poetry.

The frame of mind in which you approach an author influences our correctness or appreciation of him. To suppose that it is fidelity to an original to give its matter unless you at the same time give its manner, or... that you can really give its matter at all unless you give its manner is to miss the point that the peculiar effect of nature resides in the whole and not in the parts.

When you're making a translation, you must be whole in mind. The translator almost should penetrate himself with a sense of plainness and directness.

All the poetic feeling in the world will not enable a man who is not a scholar to judge him truly.... The scholar alone has the means of knowing that Homer who is to be reproduced. But it lies with the scholar who is not pedantic, who knows that Homer is Homer by his *general effect* and not by his *single words*... and who demands but one thing in a translation—that it shall, as nearly as possible, reproduce for him the *general effect* of Homer.

Now here you have the general effect of scripture. Those "came to passes" and "beholds" in the Book of Mormon are absolutely indispensable to the general effect. Well, who's to judge general effect?

This then remains the one proper aim of the translator—to reproduce on the intelligent scholar, as nearly as possible, the general effect.... [works that] bear, like *The Iliad*, the magic stamp of a master [cannot be translated by committees]. I cannot imagine several poets, or one poet, joined with Dante in the composition of *The Inferno*. I will boldly

affirm in Professor Thompson or Professor Jowett a feeling totally different from that incited in them by the words of Homer which these expressions profess to render.

He quotes some ballads and some attempted translations of Homer, and he says, “will that produce that feeling in these particular men?”

Arnold continues, “I may say that the presence or absence of the grand style can only be spiritually discerned.” Now we’re getting spiritual. What is the grand style? He says it’s a literature effect, and he says that’s the ultimate test.

Of the literature of France and Germany in general, the main effort, for now many years, has been a *critical* effort; the endeavor, in all branches of knowledge—theology, philosophy, history, art, sciences—to see the object as in itself it really is.

He says the English is weak so he thinks that what is necessary is for one to be stronger in the critical functions. He concludes with:

The main rule is: “*It is the spirit that quickeneth....*” The one book in which you find this, of course, is the Bible. My bibliotry is perhaps excessive, and no doubt a true poetic *feeling* is the Homeric translator’s best guide for the use of words. Happily, in the translation of the Bible, the sacred character of their original inspired the translators with such respect that they do not dare to give the rein to their own fancies in dealing with it. The translator will find *one* English book *one only* where, as in *The Iliad* itself, perfect plainness of speech is allied with perfect nobleness; and that book is the Bible.

Speaking of translation of the New Testament, C.S. Lewis talks about the Germans and their scientific attempts to translate. Then he says:

First then, whatever these men may be as Biblical critics I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack the literary judgment, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the text they are reading. It sounds a strange charge to bring against men who have been steeped in these books all their lives. But that might be just the trouble. A man who has spent his youth and manhood in the minute study of the New Testament texts and of other people’s studies of them, whose literary experiences of those texts lacks any standard of comparison such as can only grow from a wide and deep and genial experience of literature in general, is, I should think, very like to miss the obvious things about them. If he tells me that something in a Gospel is a legend or a romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavor.

The revolution in thought and sentiment which has occurred in my own lifetime is so great, that I belong mentally to Shakespear’s world far more than to that of the recent interpreters. I see—I feel it in my bones—I know beyond argument—that most of their interpretations are merely impossible.... This daily confirms my suspicion of the same approach to Plato or the New Testament. The idea that any man or writer should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture... and yet be transparent to those who have none of these advantages, is in my opinion preposterous.

The “assured results of modern scholarship,” as to the way in which an old book was written, are “assured,” we may conclude, only because the men who knew the facts are dead and can’t blow the gaff.

[The Bible translator is] everywhere faced with customs, language, race characteristics, class characteristics, a religious background, habits of composition and basic assumptions, which no scholarship [can know surely and intimately]. Dr. Bultmann never wrote a gospel. Had the experience of his learned, specialized... life really given him any power of seeing into the minds of those long dead men who were caught up into the central religious experience of the whole human race?

There are at least six images, or “texts,” or interpretations involved in every translation: 1) the idea in the original author’s mind; 2) the same as entrusted to paper or parchment (alteration is inevitable in that); 3) the copyists and transmitters of the document; 4) the reaction excited in the translator’s mind by the page before him; 5) the way he transmits his ideas to paper; and 6) the impression made on the mind of the reader.

The efficiency of a transmitter is very important. In a copper wire, if the metal is entirely pure, there is no resistance. But there’s no such thing as a perfectly pure metal, so there is resistance, heat, misdirection, wasted energy, because the conveyor is not pure. It is the same way if a translator is not pure as these things are transmitted. There’s going to be trouble.

In this long process the degree of receptivity in each terminal link is of great importance: the degree of purity determines absolutely the efficiency with which the electric current moves. Both the transmitter and the recipient must be pure. The recipient must also pass it on. How good is his capacity for expressing and transmitting the ideas which the characters have stirred in his mind?

The speaking of mind to mind is actually a miracle. The operation of the written word is far more marvelous than the operation of the television. A spark must leap a complete gap between mind and mind.

It’s like the flight of a bee. There is no reason in the world why a bee should be able to fly, but it flies. In the same way, in an Arabic text, without any capital letters, without any division between words, without any marks of any kind, but every word capable of many meanings, how can you possibly read it? Well, the paradox is that if you separate the words and put accent marks, and so on, that actually makes it more difficult to read. If you ask a person how he does it, it’s like asking a centipede, “How do you walk along?” It’s really a remarkably efficient means of communication. And yet it’s a mystery. It can’t be explained. It’s theoretically impossible.

For such a meeting of minds there must be faith. If you lose faith in front of that page, if you’re very tired or exhausted, or you don’t feel like work, or if you have just a momentary loss of confidence, the page before you—even when it is in English—can suddenly go blank. Don’t try to translate then.

It's just like working with the Urrim and Thummim. The Urrim and Thummim is something of a dictionary or a grammar. Joseph Smith eventually dispensed with it entirely; he didn't need it. But it was a help to get him going, and some days it wouldn't work at all. It's the same way here. You can look at a page—say a Greek chorus—that was lucidity itself last week. You look at it today and you wonder how you ever could make heads or tails out of it at all. And yet it's the same text. How can that be? You have to have faith, confidence, empathy—willingness to give and receive.

Where parties are eager to communicate, language may even be dismissed as an obstacle. The perfect example of communication is when an old couple, who are at the end of their lives, sit in the door of their cottage at the time of sunset, and converse, and not a word passes between them. It's a lively conversation, but they don't have to say anything. They have such feeling, such empathy, that the cues are reduced to nothing. So language becomes hearing a cue, a reduced cue, that will sometimes be cut to a sound or a gesture.

Actually language serves as a barrier more than a means of communication. If you go to a foreign country, it is almost impossible to practice the language because the people all want to speak English with you. They are almost proud of the fact that they've excluded you. They have some point in which they're superior, and it gives them a dominance over you. A person who knows the language has a dominant position over the one who doesn't some people might even be insulted by the fact that you try to speak their language.

For most people today, an authoritative translation would be one approved by an individual or committee (who had been chosen by another individual or committee which had been appointed by another individual or committee) to look into the matter for some individual or parties who were under orders from someone holding authority. Their recommendation could automatically render the translation authoritative.

By good fortune, the man who has the most to say on authority in the Church in our generation, J. Reuben Clark, wrote a whole book on translation, *Why the King James Translation?* Brother Clark is almost profusely apologetic in his introduction. Above all he avoids like the plague any suggestion of an authoritative position in translation. Nothing is further from his mind than the answer some would give to the question, "Why the King James Version?" i.e. "Because we said so!" "That's not it at all," says Brother Clark.

He says:

If the original was in Aramaic... then all we have in our English Bible is a translation of a translation.... The primer purpose of the higher critics is to establish the original Greek text. They are not too concerned with what the Savior actually taught.

What is wanted is a statement in the translator's own words of what he thought the original writer had in mind. But that is not what the critics who read it are interested in at all. They're after the original text. He continues:

It would seem that the whole critical structure built by the extreme textualists would crumble to the ground because the Greek words upon which they comment and surmise... are not the words of Jesus at all.

[What we have in the Book of Mormon] is a translation of a translation, but it may be fully relied upon because it is the product of an actual revelation.

Brother Clark, after quoting Doctrine and Covenants 68:2-4, writes:

The very words of the revelation recognize that the brethren may speak when they are *not* “moved upon by the Holy Ghost.” Yet *only* when they *do* speak as so “moved upon” is what they say Scripture. No exceptions are given to this rule or principle. It is universal in its application. The question is, “How shall we know when the things they have spoken were said as they were ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost?’”

I have given some thought to this question, and the answer thereto so far as I can determine, is: We can tell when the speakers are “moved upon by the Holy Ghost” only when we, ourselves are “moved upon by the Holy Ghost.” In a way, this completely shifts the responsibility from them to us to determine when they so speak.

The Book of Mormon, a translation, has great impact because of the spirit in which it was translated. The best test of accuracy is that spontaneity, intuition, and spirit. The more laborious and careful the translator, the more contrived and more suspect he is.

Quotes from Dr. Nibley’s new book, *The message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, were used to finalize these remarks. It is recommended that the reader continue reading Chapter III of that text.

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-Williamowitz-Moellendorf-

Every translation is an interpretation. A perfect translation would have to convey, imply, suggest, hint, recall, and suppress the same things (no more and no less) in the mind of its reader that the original does to a reader of the original; it would have to bring identical images to the minds of the two readers.

Edited by Benjamin Brown
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