

Activity Sheet no. 2 – “A Translator is always a beginner”

There are always tricky words, phrases, and sentences in a translation. At the start of a translation, whether just beginning, like you, or more experienced, like me, exactly where the problems will be, what form they will take, and how to resolve them into good English will be almost entirely unknown at the start. A translator is always to some extent, then, a beginner. It is, therefore, difficult, if not impossible, to know in advance whether one is prepared and ready to translate a particular text. It takes courage! You may read a French text and understand it. But when read through the eyes of a translator, who needs to turn the prose into good English, things look a little different: what English word best captures the sense of the French? What was the author trying to say in this passage? How does this read in English? Will the reader be convinced by this translation?

Suggested Method (Summary):

(1) Read the entire passage in order to discern its sense as a whole, asking yourself questions about register, style, purpose, and, perhaps, even guess its context.

« Quand je m’y suis mis quelquefois à considérer les diverses agitations des hommes et les périls et les peines où ils s’exposent, dans la cour, dans la guerre, d’où naissent tant de querelles, de passions, d’entreprises hardies et souvent mauvaises, etc., j’ai découvert que tout le malheur des hommes vient d’une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre ». (Pascal)

(2) Think about how you might explain the passage to someone who does not understand French. This iterative process will help reflect upon your initial impression of the text as a whole via an imagined other person.

For example, ask yourself: what is the basic observation that Pascal is making in this passage? How would you categorise the « diverse agitations » he lists? What is the cause for such agitations? How does this contrast with « repos »?

(3) After you have read through the passage and imagined how to explain it to a non-French speaker, you should have already identified sentences, phrases, and words that you feel may pose an obstacle to straightforward translation. Think about ways you could translate them into English, using your French to English dictionary and/or English thesaurus, with one eye on the sense of the passage as a whole.

« Quand je m’y suis mis quelquefois à considérer les diverses agitations des hommes et les périls et les peines où ils s’exposent, dans la cour, dans la guerre, d’où naissent tant de querelles, de passions, d’entreprises hardies et souvent mauvaises, etc., j’ai découvert que tout le malheur des hommes vient d’une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre ». (Pascal)

A number of potentially difficult words have been circled to illustrate this third step. You may find these words quite straightforward or find other words difficult. Let us take one of these circled words: « hardies ». Looking this word up in the dictionary, you should find its meaning

listed as something like ‘proud’, ‘impudent’ or ‘courageous’. Note that these words do not have quite the same meaning: ‘courageous’ does not mean quite the same things as ‘impudent’. A translator must decide which is closest to the intended meaning in French.

(4) Draft your translation, leaving aside any obstacles (if you have not found any good solutions yet) in favour of the more straightforward parts first. Return to the awkward or untranslated sentences, phrases, and words later. Repeat until the sense of the difficult parts emerges through this iterative process, altering your translation so far as appropriate. Whatever way you decide to translate a difficult sentence or phrase for this class is fine so long as (a) it approximates the meaning of the French and (b) you can give reasons that justifies doing it that way and not another.

For example, the very first line contains a syntactical construction that is not easily translated into English: « quand je m’y suis mis quelquefois à considérer ... ». Translate what you understand (e.g., “when I sometimes consider ...”). This does not lose too much sense but leaves out the preposition *y* and the verb *mis*. You can, however, return once you have finished your first draft and think about the best way to refine the translation. Translation is an iterative process – that is, a task built up through repetition. There will be parts of the translation you return to again and again, tweaking, and adjusting, until it does justice to the French and the English. You will see the meaning of the text emerge more clearly as you engage with the trickier passages. This active process is, in my view, the privilege of translation: you will come to know the text in a very different way to passively reading it. Returning to the last step in the method above, the verb *mis* and preposition *y* are translated in the third translation: *mis* = set and the use of *y* rendered with ‘the task’.

Exercise no. 3

Let us put this method into practice. Try translating the whole passage discussed above. This passage is taken from a first-year undergraduate translation exam.

« Quand je m’y suis mis quelquefois à considérer les diverses agitations des hommes et les périls et les peines où ils s’exposent, dans la cour, dans la guerre, d’où naissent tant de querelles, de passions, d’entreprises hardies et souvent mauvaises, etc., j’ai découvert que tout le malheur des hommes vient d’une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre ». (Pascal)

Translation :

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