

1940s–1950s

TRANSLATION THEORY DURING these decades is dominated by the fundamental issue of translatability. Influential figures in philosophy, literary criticism, and linguistics all consider whether translation can reconcile the differences that separate languages and cultures. The obstacles to translation are duly noted, judged either insurmountable or negotiable, and translation methods are formulated with precision. Opinions are shaped by disciplinary trends and vary widely, ranging between the extremes of philosophical skepticism and practical optimism.

The skeptical extreme in Anglo-American analytical philosophy is occupied by **Willard Van Orman Quine's** concept of "radical translation," first articulated in the late 1950s. As the selection included here shows, Quine questions the empirical foundations of translating by pointing to a basic semantic "indeterminacy" that cannot be resolved even in the presence of an environmental "stimulus" Since he couches his arguments in an imaginary ethnographical encounter between a "linguist" who is "Western" and a "native" who is not, Quine's anti-foundationalism carries larger implications, both anthropological and geopolitical. His discourse, however, adheres to the abstraction of analytical philosophy, and these implications are not pursued, treated instead as the purview of other disciplines.

Quine acknowledges that translating does in fact occur on the basis of "regulative maxims" and "analytic hypotheses." And linguists rely on them to produce effective dictionaries, grammars, and manuals. Still, he argues that none of these translating tools can guarantee a correlation between stimuli and meaning. The "conceptual schemes" that shape interpretations of the data may divide the native from the linguist. These schemes may be not only mutually unintelligible, but incommensurable, likely to use different standards to evaluate translations.

Quine's doubt of metaphysical grounds for language leads to more pragmatic views of translation wherein meaning is seen as conventional, socially circumscribed, and the foreign text is rewritten according to the terms and values of the receiving culture.

Continental philosophical traditions, notably hermeneutics and existential phenomenology, continue to be conscious of the linguistic and cultural differences that impede translation. In 1946, a decade before Quine begins to deliver his challenging papers at American universities, Martin Heidegger's essay "The Anaximander Fragment" sets out a powerful understanding of how competing conceptual schemes complicate modern translations of ancient Greek philosophy. The versions of classical scholars are questionable, Heidegger argues, because they assimilate Anaximander to later metaphysical traditions which follow Plato or Aristotle. These translations carry philosophical assumptions that are either idealist or positivist, giving the Greek text a religious or scientific cast.

Heidegger's anti-metaphysical approach to language, unlike Quine's, comes with a practical solution that is distinctly literary. Reviving Schleiermacher's notion of translation as bringing the domestic reader to the foreign text, Heidegger recommends a "poetizing" strategy that does "violence" to everyday language by relying on archaisms, which he submits to etymological interpretations (Heidegger 1975:19). The etymologies are motivated by an exacting fidelity, designed to demonstrate a kinship between German and classical Greek culture. But they also inscribe Anaximander with a modern, peculiarly Heideggerian outlook.

When literary criticism addresses the issue of translatability, it emphasizes the impossibility of reproducing a foreign literary text in another language which is sedimented with different literary styles, genres, and traditions. **Vladimir Nabokov** sees national literatures as sites of international influence and affiliation which nonetheless develop in nationally distinct ways, producing unique "masterpieces" that demand from the translator an "ideal version," ultimately unattainable (Nabokov 1941:161). In the essay that appears here (1955), Nabokov describes the complicated resonances and allusions of Aleksandr Pushkin's poem *Eugene Onegin* so as to rationalize his own scholarly version of it: close to the Russian, devoid of Anglo-American poetic diction, and heavily annotated. For Nabokov, paraphrastic versions that "conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public" constitute the worst "evil" of translation (Nabokov 1941:160). Yet he too privileges the values of a given public, even if an elite minority: an academic readership who might want a literal translation that combines native proficiency in the foreign language, historical scholarship in the foreign literature, and detailed commentary on the formal features of the foreign text.

Nabokov's views on translation are very much those of a Russian émigré writer living the United States after 1940. He nurtures a deep, nostalgic investment in the Russian language and in canonical works of Russian literature and disdains the homogenizing tendencies of American consumer culture. Few English-language literary translators at the time follow Nabokov's uncompromising example. The dominant trend favors just the sort of "poetical" language he detests, free versions that seek to produce poetic effects in the translating language, usually deploying standard usage and canonical styles.

In 1958, a few years after Nabokov's essay appears, the American poet, critic and translator Dudley Fitts criticizes it precisely in these terms, asserting that in poetry translation "we need something at once less ambitious and more audacious: another poem" (Fitts 1959:34). The poem, moreover, has to be a particular kind, possessing immense fluency, written in the most familiar language: current American English with some socially acceptable colloquialisms. As a translator of classical and Latin American literatures, Fitts inclines toward adaptation, achieving notable success with his modernizing versions of Aristophanes. Nevertheless, he is aware that his translations of ancient Greek poetry might be anachronistic, risking "a spurious atmosphere of monotheism by writing 'God' for 'Zeus'" (Fitts 1956:xviii).

The optimistic extreme in translation theory during these decades is occupied by linguistic analysis. Linguistics addresses the issue of translatability by analyzing specific translation problems and describing the methods that translators have developed to solve them. The optimism derives to some extent from a theory of language that is communicative, not constitutive, of meaning, which in turn is conceived along empiricist lines as referential. Chaim Rabin's essay "The Linguistics of Translation" opens with the assertion that translation "involves two distinct factors, a 'meaning,' or reference to some slice of reality, and the difference between two languages in referring to that reality" (Rabin 1958:123). But Heidegger and Quine might ask: which *version* of reality will be used to measure the success of the translation, the adequacy of its reference?

Eugene Nida, drawing on research from the American Bible Society, considers the problem of translating between different realities. He argues that solutions need to be ethnological, based on the translator's acquisition of sufficient "cultural information." Since "it is inconceivable to a Maya Indian that any place should not have vegetation unless it has been cleared for a maize-field," Nida concludes that the Bible translator "must translate 'desert' as an 'abandoned place'" to establish "the cultural equivalent of the desert of Palestine" (Nida 1945:197). Here translation is paraphrase. It works to reduce linguistic and cultural differences to a shared referent. Yet the referent is clearly a core of meaning constructed by the translator and weighted toward the receiving culture so as to be comprehensible there.

The signal achievement of **Roman Jakobson's** widely cited 1959 essay (reprinted below) is to have introduced a semiotic reflection on translatability. Jakobson questions empiricist semantics by conceiving of meaning, not as a reference to reality, but as a relation to a potentially endless chain of signs. He describes translation as a process of receding which "involves two equivalent messages in two different codes." Jakobson underestimates the interpretive nature of translation, the fact that recoding is an active rewording that doesn't simply transmit the foreign message, but transforms it. Still, he is mindful of the differences among cultural discourses, especially poetry, where "grammatical categories carry a high semantic import" and which therefore requires translation that is a "creative transposition" into a different system of signs.

The most influential work of translation studies in this period is first published in 1958 by the Canadian linguists **Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet**. By approaching French-English translation from the field of comparative stylistics, they are able to provide a theoretical basis for a variety of translation methods

currently in use. As a result, they produce a textbook that has been a staple in translator training programs for over four decades. Their descriptions of translation methods involve some reduction of linguistic and cultural differences to empiricist semantics: “Equivalence of messages,” they write, “ultimately relies upon an identity of situations,” where “situations” indicates an undefined “reality.” But they also encourage, the translator to think of meaning as a cultural construction and to see a close connection between linguistic procedures and “metalinguistic information,” namely “the current state of literature, science, politics etc. of both language communities” (Vinay and Darbelnet 1995:42).

The enormous practical and pedagogical value of Vinay and Darbelnet’s work overcame any philosophical qualms about translatability—and distracted attention away from their conservative prescriptions about language use in translation. The extract reprinted below is remarkable both for its careful methodological description and for its criticisms of translation in the global political economy.

This period closes with Reuben Brower’s anthology (1959), which helpfully gathers together the main trends in commentary on translation. There, notwithstanding great conceptual and methodological differences, linguists, literary critics, and philosophers join in a remarkable unity of interest in translation as a problem of language and culture. And they are joined by translators, both academics in those fields and writers in various genres, who discuss translation and their own projects with theoretical sophistication.

Valéry Larbaud’s “invocation” of St. Jerome (1946), the patron saint of fluency in translation, must be ranked among the most accomplished of translators’ commentaries. Larbaud’s text is learned but literary, effortlessly conjuring up a range of theorists and practitioners from Quintilian to Alexander Fraser Tytler to Paul Valéry. Larbaud views translation through Aristotelian categories of poetics and rhetoric. Yet his concerns are modernist, including the recommendation that translations be given a “foreign air” despite the protestations of “purists, “whose vernacular nationalism he judges “more dangerous to the essence of culture than the most fiercely boorish ignorance” (Larbaud 1946:164, my translation). For Larbaud, only an approach to translation that combines theory and history can challenge the misunderstanding that greets the translator’s work in the present.

Further reading

Gentzler 1993, Hjort 1990, Kelly 1979, Larose 1989, Malmkjaer 1993, Robinson 1991, Sturrock 1991, Venuti 1995