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At the Crossroads of Displacement

To Rome and its inhabitants

Everyone will agree with Chekhov, that, “without the knowledge of a language one feels somewhat without a passport.” However, that moment of sudden multilingualism, the collapse of the Tower of Babel, does not represent a particularly happy moment: people stopped understanding one another. We discovered that the same concepts could be expressed in completely different words. At the same time we discovered that a word to express a concept in one language may not even exist in another, as perhaps the concept itself does not exist. Concepts which represent cultural identity do not always lend themselves to words. The difference between cultures does not lie merely in the different words, but rather in different ideas about the world. Yet even two speakers of the same language can have different memories and perhaps therefore difficulty in communicating.

J.M. Lotman considers all communication to be a “translation” of the language of my “I” into the language of your “You.” This translation is possible only because the codes of the “I” and “You” form endless crossing points.

Just think of the enormous number of books in circulation that deal with the topic of translation. *The Language of Gestures, Understanding Body Language, The Language of Cinema, Understanding Your Dog*, the variety of cat dictionaries, and yes, we already know that flora speaks and that sometime in the near future there will surely be dictionaries covering such topics as *Fleur-de-lis* and *Chamomile*.

The “I” is like an island surrounded by other islands, and the terra firma of the “You” and the “They” that speak foreign languages is at times enticing but scarcely comprehensible. Island life, while romantic, can be unhealthy and lead to a closed form of circularity, mental impoverishment and stagnation. Economic decline in certain countries can also be linked to a political “closed door” policy and closed borders.

Yet we are forced to undergo this uncertain and dangerous journey into translation every day. Any translation that is not mechanical stimulates our creativity: the further the distance between the two languages and cultures, the stronger and more fertile our learning becomes, and therefore the translation of such into our language.

If the “I” represents a kind of centre of the world, then, “You” and “They” are the periphery. The border between us is made of languages and cultural codes. The border of our physical being is skin, which defends us and at the same time represents an intermediary with the outside world. Language and translation can be compared to this idea of a border, psychologically speaking. They are both at once internal and external; we give them to others, and transformed, we then absorb them back.

If an inhabitant of Medieval England were to be transported to modern day Iowa he would have to adapt not only to modern day English but also the language of the thousands of small details that fill our daily lives: traffic lights, signs and signals which have become insignificant to us. Just imagine the scenario in a supermarket or a bank. We have probably all experienced something similar when traveling to a foreign country that uses a different system of codes than ours.

Misunderstanding the codes leads to gross errors, perhaps leading to scandals or even war. Some time ago, when I had just arrived in Israel and started to work as a secretary for a doctor, I had to write up the test results of a patient. I had studied Hebrew at the university and naturally always tried to find mother-tongue speakers to converse with. But I also listened to my

young children and their friends. On the results chart I thus wrote, “The patient’s *shit* is within the normal range.” We didn’t go to war over it, but the doctor had to excuse us at length and explain to the elderly civil servant that I was a new immigrant, “*ola hadasha*.” As we can see, synonyms are not always interchangeable.

How many lowbrow or even crude errors have been committed when translating classic literature and especially the so-called holy book! A translator or a tired and perhaps ignorant transcriber makes a mistake on the parchment, only for that same mistake to be carried forward to this day and find its way into books and onto the internet, to be offered as fact and consequently deform our ability to understand. However we adapt ourselves to this obscurity, sewing it into the very fiber of our culture. It is thus that the existence of such errors becomes part of us, even when the concept is unthinkable. “Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,” as it is written in the gospel of Mark. However, it would seem that the translator had confused camel (*gamla*) and rope (*gamta*). A mere difference of one letter in Aramaic and one in Greek: *kamelos* and *kamilos*. Clearly a rope cannot pass through the eye of a needle, but if a camel were to, then we would be looking at a fairy tale. But we have all accepted this quotation, which is, moreover, one of the most frequently used Biblical phrases. A hundred or so similar errors have been published in *The Dictionary of Biblical Errors* (2003) by Walter-Jorg Langbein.

On the subject of the translation of this “Book of Books” (peacefully commented upon and translated for centuries in the Jewish world) into European languages, it has to be said that there has been drama. At times the translation was politically driven. In the beginning the Roman Catholic Church chose not to encourage the translation of the Vulgate. Later it was forbidden for many Christians (Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox) to read versions of the Bible not approved by the Church. There were also periods when the reading of a translation required permission from the Inquisition. As recently as in the 19th century, certain priests within the Russian Church were strongly against the translation of the sacred book (written in Church Slavonic and quite incomprehensible to the general population) into contemporary Russian. Access to knowledge sometimes generates fear. The decision of the Protestants to translate the Bible directly from Hebrew and Greek rather than via Latin was almost certainly a political one, as well. The explosive influence that William Tyndall’s English (and hence the Church of England’s) translation had was sufficient to soon put him behind bars. He continued translating the Old Testament until being burnt at the stake as a heretic.

They say no translation is accurate and to understand it we must exercise “the principle of mercy.” Poets who have been translated and translators of poetry know this principle better than anyone. How can we translate something for which in your language there is no word? How can we conserve the meter of the poetry if the sound is lost in translation? How can we translate the word whose root is key to the comprehension of the text, yet in your language the translated word has another root? How can we transmit and communicate the context and the allusions if in your culture they mean nothing? What to do about rhyme when its musicality is different or even absent in your language? Give up, or sacrifice the real sense of the words?

At times the translation or the reading of a foreign code can be too rigid and literal. The first few days in Iowa a nice lawyer warned us to only cross the road with the green light (here it’s white!), based on the severe American laws. After just two trips out, waiting obediently all alone for the right kind of light, I realized that the reading of these codes was variable. Deviating from the norm is the privilege of those born in a place and of those who have become part of the fiber of that place. We often deviate from the standard in artistic texts.

This is particularly important when we talk about poetry, which is less predictable and less simply informative than prose: however in translation this precious roughness evens out.

Yet again it's difficult not to agree with Chekhov: "translating from the Russian is not a worthwhile task." Yes, the translation of poetry is all but impossible, but we have all in some way or another read *The Song of Solomon*, Homer, Virgil, Dante.

A special role awaits those who find themselves at the crossroads of culture. Not just the adventurous types such as Casanova and Cagliostro or assorted bilingual writers, but also simple observers of another reality who give to their language and culture a new genius thanks to this precarious existence. Wavering through two realities offers a new perspective, a new "reality." It might be considered a kind of destiny and is at times a very hard fate. Scientists say that by 2040, around a billion people will have left behind their place of origin for reasons of climate, politics and economy. Thanks to technology, wherever we go we feel at home. But perhaps refugees, even if they have a telephone, feel at home nowhere. Those who live at the crossroads of culture can experience both worlds. Having the richness, the luxury of both at once can sometimes create a sense of emptiness, of having neither, or nothing. At the crossroads it is at times easier to answer the question "Where am I?" than "Who am I?"

Every day a language or a dialect ceases to exist, yet at the same time new languages are born, current languages evolve, those belonging to closed groups, jargon, artificial languages, imaginary languages and so on. It is a constant process. At times, dead or dying languages come back to life, as in the case of Hebrew and perhaps, in the future, also of Yiddish. The translator who had the task of making the ATM card of the Vatican "speak" in Latin needed a great sense of humor. There will always be a coexistence of diverse languages and cultures, and there will always be the need for those who harmoniously or dramatically live on the crossroads of traditions, such as Philo of Alexandria, who translated not only linguistic unity but also whole intellectual bodies. We could say, too, that throughout the centuries it was thanks to Rome that both Jerusalem and Athens were "translated."

Ancient Romans, who knew all about movement, transposition and change, used the word *traducere* to indicate translation, a word which implies transportation, and more often still they used *vertere*, which indicates a process of turning towards or into something so as to evolve. This capacity for integration and assimilation has created a cultural explosion, the splinters of which still swirl around in our collective memory. It was thus the Ancient Romans who made Borges possible, when, traveling to work by tram in Buenos Aires, he had time to read *The Divine Comedy* first in the translation of Chaucer, then of Longfellow, then in the original. The expression goes that "all roads lead to Rome": perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Rome is without borders and that whatever our latitude may be, we are always there.

Translated by Rachel Smith from the Italian