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**TRANSLATION AFTER WITTGENSTEIN**

Terry Eagleton (1994: 153) has commented that Wittgenstein is ‘the philosopher of poets ... playwrights and novelists’. He might therefore be the philosopher of those engaged with poems, plays and novels, either as critics or, in my case, through literary translation. The point of looking at Wittgenstein is to see what support he, as a philosopher of language, can tell me about translation. In turn this may reveal something about style.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) is a fascinating figure in the history of philosophy. In the vast secondary literature, he comes over as a philosopher-saint like Aquinas, whose life can be retold for our edification and whose works have the aura of revealed truth. It therefore needs to be asserted that my reason for studying Wittgenstein is because I hold that the insights that he brought to philosophy are valuable ones. Read (2007: 4) makes this an important part of his methodology on applying Wittgenstein: ‘what matters is whether Wittgenstein’s chosen methods work. And what matters is whether we can learn *to go on*’. This paper is about going on, not an exercise in Wittgensteinian exegesis. Wittgenstein in any case did not himself address translation directly at any length, although from time to time he used the example of translation to make a philosophical point.

One of the most amazing things about Wittgenstein, and for the non-philosopher one of the most confusing, is the way that two philosophies are associated with him. There is talk of the early Wittgenstein and the later Wittgenstein as if they were two separate philosophers. The early Wittgenstein is the sage of the *Tractatus*

*Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 1990), the 1922 volume of numbered propositions that presents a view of the world sometimes referred to as logical atomism and that puts forward ‘the picture theory’ of language. Wittgenstein had been influenced by a report he had read in a magazine of a French lawsuit about a road accident, in which a model had been used in court to represent what had happened, a toy car representing a real car etc. Similarly, the propositions that I form, form a picture of the world in which I live. A proposition such as ‘I am in Italy’ pictures my being in Italy, which could be symbolised, and which would be true if I am in Italy. This is a correspondence theory of truth, which leaves no room for metaphysical or ethical statements. Wittgenstein famously ended the *Tractatus* with the words: ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’ (1990: 189).

Some years later, after he had returned to Cambridge in 1929, a gesture by the Italian economist Piero Sraffa is said to have instigated the new approach of the later Wittgenstein. Sraffa had brushed his chin with his fingertips (a Neapolitan sign of dismissal) and asked: ‘What is the logical form of *that?*’ (Monk 1990: 261). This came as a revelation to Wittgenstein: communication depends on many phenomena – such as body language, tone of voice, context etc. – that cannot be pictured by propositional calculus. The realisation would lead to an entirely new approach to philosophy, one that is profoundly ‘anthropological’ (Monk 1990: 261), i.e. it is set in the world of people. It uses examples, thought experiments, dialogue, concrete instances of the use of words: the ‘stream of life which gives linguistic utterances their meaning’ (ibid.). This is the 1953 *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2001). Meaning – the most important concept for any translator – is no longer seen as involving correspondence to states of affairs. Meaning is use (Wittgenstein 2001: 18). If you want to know the meaning of a term like ‘happy’ or ‘good’ then look at the way

the term is used, or imagine how you would teach the meaning of that word in that context to a child. (It is not coincidental that Wittgenstein had worked as a teacher during the period in which he had given up philosophy after writing the *Tractatus*.) The *Philosophical Investigations* speak of leaving behind a world of crystalline purity – where it is all too easy to slip because of the lack of friction – and of returning to ‘the rough ground’ (Wittgenstein 2001: 40). A central concept for the later Wittgenstein’s understanding of the rough ground is that of the language-game.

Wittgenstein (2001: 10) gives a list of language-games, which I quote as text (1).

(1)

Giving orders, and obeying them –

Describing the appearance of an object or giving its measurements –

Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) –

Reporting an event –

Speculating about the event –

Forming and testing a hypothesis –

Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams –

Making up a story; and reading it –

Play-acting –

Singing catches –

Guessing riddles –

Making a joke; telling it –

Solving a problem in practical arithmetic –

Translating from one language into another –

Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

For the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, meaning is not a quality that can be extracted from a word: the meaning of a word ‘is its use in the language’ (Wittgenstein 2001: 18). To work out what a word means, it necessary to look at the context. Meaning is embedded. Two people – such as an investment banker and a Buddhist – may mean very different things when they describe themselves as ‘happy’, for example.

This has implications for translation. Translation, despite the etymology of the word being to ‘carry across’, is not a scientific procedure of transferring meaning safely and intact from one place to another. Translation – and here I am referring specifically to literary translation – will be more about playing games than breaking a code. This militates against the view of language as code, against the tendency in the West to look at literature in terms of content that can be traced back to Plato, who (1998: 89) analyses Homer’s account in *The Iliad* of Chryses the priest appealing to the Greeks on behalf of his daughter by decoding the episode, stripping away the style in order to find ‘the pure narrative, which is free from representation’. The translator who falls into the trap of decoding is likely to see his or her translation as rendering the content not the style. This is something that good translators have always been aware of. As Weinberger & Paz (1987: 43) put it: ‘The point is that translation is more than a leap from dictionary to dictionary; it is a reimagining’. Wittgenstein offers a conceptual tool for recognising the trap. To use his own image, he offers the fly a way out of the fly-bottle.

Perhaps it is the refusal to play, the insistence on seeing literary translation as transference, which accounts for bad translations. Berman (2004) asserted in 1985 that translators tend to treat literary texts as if they were non-literary texts, and a recent article by Sarah Lawson (2009) describes how literary translations are still

being evaluated for the fluency of their English rather than for how they convey the style of the source text.

An example from a recent translation of the New Testament shows how a language-game can be maintained in translation. In Luke 6:20, Jesus of Nazareth makes the statement quoted in text (2). The language is Hellenistic Greek, following the edition of Aland et al (1968), which has been both transliterated and glossed. The translation from the New Jerusalem Bible (1990) is given as (3) and that by Nick King (2004) as (4).

(2)

Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοί, ὅτι ὑμετέρα ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ.  
Makarioi hoi ptôchai hoti humetera estin hê basileia tou theou  
*blessed the poor because yours is the kingdom of- the God*

(3)

How blessed are you who are poor: the kingdom of God is yours. (NJB)

(4)

Congratulations to the poor – for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven.

To tell poor people that they are happy is on the face of it nonsensical. King maintains the language-game of the good news being announced to the poor by his version that the poor are to be congratulated.

Wittgenstein did not address translation directly in his work, but in *Last Writings on Philosophical Psychology Volume I*, he makes this remark: ‘What is the correct German translation of an English play on words? Maybe a completely different play on words’ (Wittgenstein, 1982: 278). As anybody who has ever wanted

to translate a pun or a joke knows, to attempt to transfer its meaning through conscientious word by word rendering is usually to come up with something that will only puzzle the addressee. Here Wittgenstein shows that questions such as ‘How do you translate a *double entendre* literally?’ are wrong-headed. The concept of playing the same language-game, however, allows the translator a great deal of freedom. If I need to translate a joke in a novel, the key factor may be that a joke is being told, rather than that somebody is making a pun on a certain verb, so that the best choice may be to write an entirely different joke. Again this is something that good translators have always intuitively grasped. Anthea Bell describes her translations of characters’ names from the world of Astérix, the cartoon creation of René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo: ‘Names: the books to date contain some four hundred proper names of people ... nearly all of which have had to be changed in translation, since they are not *really* names, but comic spoofs on names made up out of French words in the original. For instance the village bard Assurancetourix = *assurance tous risques*, ‘comprehensive insurance’. As with all the Gauls, his name ends in the suffix –ix, to echo the genuine Vercingetorix. But translated straight the phrase sounds nothing like a name of any kind. In English he becomes Cacophonix because he is tone-deaf and sings and plays so badly out of tune that his music is mere cacophony’ (Bell 2009, on the British Council’s literary translation website).

My conclusion that a reading of Wittgenstein does have more to offer the student of translation than is commonly thought. This philosopher does not have to be what Rupert Read (2007: 4) calls the ‘esoteric preoccupation of a clique’. The Wittgensteinian approach to meaning can drive a translation by making the translator aware of the language-games in the text. Wittgensteinian terms and methods can also be used to describe both source texts and translations.

Fergus Kerr (1998: 50) sums up Wittgenstein's position: 'To see what is obvious is difficult because we so much want to see something beyond it.'

Wittgenstein returns us to the rough ground. We want to make meaning Platonic, we want to make it a mental activity: but 'nothing is more wrong-headed' (Wittgenstein 2001: 146). Meaning, the primary concern of the translator, is not to be sought in some metaphysical realm beyond the text, but in the text itself. Wittgenstein (2001: 128) stresses: 'Meaning is physiognomy.' Meaning is style. It has to do with form not with a chase for the Platonic Forms. This has great implications for translation and also for the art of stylistics.

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### **Website**

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