February 22 2013: On Translation II – Benjamin

From Rosie Lavan

Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1923) proved to be a provocative and at times divisive text for discussion. Points raised and considered included:

- Benjamin as opposed to Schleiermacher: translation not as loss but as improvement. Borges on the 17th C translation of the Arabian Nights cited as an example of when a translation has become more popular than the original.
- Benjamin doesn’t take the audience into account—doesn’t this make his argument contradictory?
- The possible influence of Benjamin’s Cabbalistic origins
- Do Benjamin’s metaphors work? i.e. the echo from the edge of the forest, and the idea of the circle and the tangent. Shouldn’t both the original and the translation be circles—and the translation not just a straight line?
- Benjamin’s idea of translatability: is it negotiable? Link to Damrosch’s question of what is translatability, gain and loss etc. Intranslatability is an interesting question in terms of cultural difference.
- This is a very abstract and theoretical text but a more pragmatic approach to the translator’s task. What is that task and who is it for?
- What about Steiner’s idea that all reading is translation?
- There are two voices: the ‘creative’ voice and the ‘linguist’s’ voice. Can the two be married? Think about the idea of the artist-translator developing the language, not just viewing it as a system comparable with other systems (cf Muldoon and Irish). The debate about ‘literal’ word-for-word translation and creative translation stretches back to the Classics. Also the status of the ‘imitation’—that it’s not something sleazy—and there’s a scale of possibilities between translation and imitation.
- Megan cites the example of translating from Urdu: different expressions for emotion or illness shape the intention, so e.g. “a cold happened to me”. (Cf to Irish, e.g. “happiness is upon me”; though this is carried over idiomatically into expressions like “My dog died on me”.) WB seems not to consider how the language can shape intention.
- The translator encounters problems with thematic words, e.g. “repos” in 17th C French has many meanings and occurs many times in the most famous novel of the period, La Princesse de Clèves, but a translator can’t use the same word at each occurrence: some would argue that you should, but it would seem peculiar in English.
- Think about the motivations for translation, and the ways in which a reader’s approach is directed, when e.g. a book is pitched as “the Turkish Ulysses”. Ulysses doesn’t have a stable meaning in English—yet there must be some if not stable then core senses of things, because otherwise we are just left with a postmodern space in which everything is up for grabs. Perhaps WB’s idea of the intention to express which all languages share in common is helpful, because that is a stable, commonly held idea or space within and across languages which is still sensitive to the specifics of different times, cultures, places, and purposes of communication.
- Idea of the unreflective and reflective voices: the unreflective voice which we know is the authentic one. Only when the reflective part gets absorbed into the unreflective part does it work. Simultaneous translation is an interesting case in point: the unreflective voice is reflected in this translator’s work; working unreflectively you
make fewer errors and this is something for the reflective scholar to bear in mind. (Links into recent work on cognition.) But even in the unreflective state words exist in a language—they carry etymologies and histories. WB’s idea about the maturing or ripening of the language is helpful in this regard.