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The Power of Example

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Preface

This is a series of excursions into the lands of art and literature, law and ethics, and, not least, the varied landscapes of the humanities. There is a common theme – the inevitability of examples in concept formation and cultural understanding. As befits such matters, the procedure is example-based throughout, interspersed with the kind of hints and comments that are needed to make the examples stand out as examples *of* something.

I am deeply grateful to Struan Robertson, who has not only proved his proficiency as a translator but also, through his many queries, prompted a good number of improvements in the texts which make up this book.

El Quseir, February 29, 2008

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Cultural Translation

The art of the impossible

In a Norwegian collection of papers from the 1990s, translating is described as ‘the art of the impossible’. That translating is in fact an impossibility is an opinion backed by the weight of tradition. In a letter to A.W. Schlegel written just over 200 years ago, Wilhelm von Humboldt, the German philosopher and linguist, had this to say on the matter:

All translation appears to me as attempts to solve an absolutely impossible task. Because all translators must run aground on one of two rocks: either you stay far too close to the original at the expense of the tastes and language conventions of your own nation, or you stay far too close to your nation’s conventions at the expense of the original meaning. A middle path between these two is not only difficult, it is simply impossible.

If the good von Humboldt had actually been right, it would not have been possible to reproduce his German statement in English. The fact that his text can be translated refutes the theory that translation is in principle impossible.

One of the objections that may be raised against Humboldt’s theory is that the national characteristics are not brought out in all texts. Presumably he was thinking of literary texts, texts

that draw heavily on the possibilities a language has to offer. An aphorism by the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus may illustrate this point: 'Je höher der Stiefel, desto grösser der Absatz.' The effect of the aphorism derives from the dual meaning of the German expressions 'Stiefel' and 'Absatz', which mean 'boot' and 'heel' and also 'swindle' and 'profit'. If this German sentence is to be translated into other languages, then these very ambiguities must exist in those languages. I cannot think of any way of reproducing the duality of the original in an elegant aphorism in English. There will be two different translations: 'the bigger the boot, the higher the heel' and 'the bigger the swindle, the higher the profit'.

But Humboldt's proposal does not hold as a general theory on the possibility of translation. There are many examples in my own immediate surroundings that contradict this theory. The instruction book for my Siemens refrigerator is written in nine different languages. I can choose any language I want, as long as I keep to a language I understand. The section on user options begins with the sentence 'Füllen Sie die Eisschale zu $\frac{3}{4}$ mit Wasser und stellen Sie sie in den Gefrierraum.' If I wish, I can read the Swedish version instead: ('Fyll islådan till $\frac{3}{4}$ med vatten och ställ den på fryshyllan.'), or the English version ('Fill the ice-tray three-quarters full with water, and put it in the ice-cube container.').

It does not follow from this that the theory at the other traditional extreme of the possibilities of translation is valid. As a proponent of this tradition, I choose another eighteenth century German author, J. J. Breitinger, who published a work entitled *Critical Poetry* in 1740. In the section on translation Breitinger wrote that all people in the world think in the same way, 'and since the mental powers of human beings are limited in the same way, it follows with necessity that the thoughts of human beings must be fairly similar, and therefore it must be

so also in their expression.’ According to Breitinger, spiritual characteristics are subject to the same limitations irrespective of time and place, which led him to the conclusion that the art of translating consists of finding signs in the two languages that evoke the same thoughts in the reader’s consciousness.

Thus Breitinger belongs among those who emphasise only the cognitive aspect of language, an approach which works well with a booklet of instructions for a refrigerator, but not in a case such as the above statement by Karl Kraus.

In light of these considerations, we must note that the truth lies somewhere between the two extremes represented by Humboldt and Breitinger. An expression in language or some other phenomenon that carries meaning (a gesture, a facial expression, a picture) may offer greater or lesser resistance to translation into other languages and cultures. What this involves can best be explained with some examples. I choose three examples from different cultures and, towards the end of the chapter, offer some more general observations on the conditions that are essential if translation is to be possible.

The first example – Arab virtues

At the beginning of the 1960s, when I arrived in Sudan as a newly-appointed university teacher in philosophy, it soon struck me that the students thought along different paths than those I was used to from growing up in my northern European culture. And as time passed I discovered that the ethics that surrounded me in Khartoum were very similar to the ethics described in classic works on Arabia such as Doughty’s *Travels in Arabia Deserts*, Dickson’s *The Arab of the Desert* and Musil’s *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins*.

There appeared to be similarities between Arabian Bedouin ethics and those of the Sudanese students. And there was more –

when I read about the pre-Islamic time in the Arabian Peninsula I was once again struck by the similarities with the conditions I learned about in Sudan. Montgomery Watt, the authority on Islam, summarizes pre-Islamic ethics as follows:

The place of law and of the abstract idea of right and wrong is to some extent taken by the conception of honour, the honour first of the tribe and then of the individual. Being hospitable and keeping trusts were signs of one's honourable condition; lack of generosity or bravery was a mark of dishonour. The custodian and registrar of honour was public opinion.

I gradually formed the impression that ideas of honour and dignity, decency and self-respect, courage and generosity played a different and more important role in the culture of northern Sudan than they did at home in northern Europe.

When I began to examine the central concepts in northern Sudanese ethics, I ran into translation problems. In Wehr and Cowan's dictionary, I found the following translations of the three key terms *'ird*, *sharaf* and *karāma*:

'ird: honour, good repute; dignity;

sharaf: 1) elevated place; (2) high rank, nobility, distinction, eminence, dignity; honour, glory;

karāma: nobility; high-mindedness, noble-heartedness, generosity, magnanimity; liberality, munificence; honour, dignity; respect, esteem, standing, prestige; mark of honour, token of esteem, favour;... miracle (worked by saint).

According to this dictionary all these three terms can be translated with the words 'honour' and 'dignity', but the dictionary also indicates that there are some differences between these terms, without making the precise differences particularly clear. And that, not least, was what attracted my interest. My Sudanese interlocutors also considered that these three terms

meant more or less the same thing. But they suggested that there are differences, without being able to make a more detailed statement on the subject.

Neither could I assume that the information in the dictionary was fully comprehensive with regard to the current situation in Sudan. What applied in other parts of the Arab world was not necessarily wholly true in that country, or of the people with whom I happened to have contact.

My sources were bilingual. Arabic was their mother tongue and, after many years of being taught in English at school, as well as studies of the English language, they had a fairly good command of that language. When I reached an agreement with some students to carry out a more detailed study of northern Sudanese ethics, our conversations were in English. We decided to try to keep to some standard translations of key terms, except for the occasions when we used the Arabic expressions as technical terms in English.

The list of standard translations and standard expressions included the following:

'ird = decency;
sharaf = honour;
karāma = dignity;
iḥtirām = respect;
iḥtirām al-nafs and *iḥtirām al-dhāt* = self-respect.

The task was now to map out the conceptual content that lay hidden behind these language façades.

In this context, the distinction between open and closed concepts was important. A closed concept may be defined by using a traditional 'if and only if' definition – that is to say by stating the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to fall into this concept. Examples of closed concepts are mathematical terms such as two, three, four, circle, equi-

lateral triangle, etc. An open concept is a concept that cannot be defined satisfactorily in this way. It seemed reasonable to assume that central ethical concepts such as honour, dignity and decency have an open structure. Their content must then be determined in some other way than by stating necessary and sufficient conditions. The way the expressions *'ird*, *sharaf* and *karāma* are actually used must be studied, in particular in paradigmatic situations that serve as important examples. Thus, in conversations with my sources I had to collect descriptions of series of examples which, taken together, could help produce a satisfactory picture of the meanings of these expressions.

To be more precise, answers were needed to the following questions: does everyone have *'ird*, *sharaf* and *karāma*? If some people have these virtues and others do not, what is the reason? Can it be that everyone is born with these virtues? Can you lose your honour or dignity or decency? If so, how? Can you do anything to repair the damage if you have lost, for example, your dignity or decency? Can you do anything to increase your dignity or your decency? If so, what? Is it true that the loss of *'ird*, decency, automatically means that you lose your honour and dignity, *sharaf* and *karāma*? If so, are there any interesting exceptions? What are they? Is there any connection between virtues like courage and generosity and one's honour, dignity and self-respect? Are virtues like honour and dignity dependent on what you do, or is the important factor more the way others perceive what you do? And so on.

My main sources for conceptions of northern Sudanese ethics were three gifted and committed philosophy students. They emphasized that the key concepts in Arab ethics – decency, honour, dignity and self-respect – are closely interrelated. But in time we began to come across cases that could be useful in separating them from one another. On one occasion, one of the sources said that no clear distinction could be made between

honour and dignity, *sharaf* and *karāma*. On second thoughts, however, he said it was true that deceitful behaviour may cause you to lose the respect of others, although not necessarily to lose your own honour and dignity. For more examples, please see my book, *Sudanese Ethics*.

The picture that gradually emerged from conversations with my informants was this: the preservation of the decency of the female members of the family (*'ird*) is essential to the maintenance of the family's honour (*sharaf*). Should someone lose her *'ird*, this also affects the other members of the family. Decency, honour and dignity are, in fact, all matters of common interest. The male members of the family have, as a result of the inherent weakness of women's nature, a particular responsibility in this area. Because of their weak nature, women are not capable themselves of defending their honour with sufficient vigour. Dignity (*karāma*) proved to be a more personal matter than honour (*sharaf*) and decency (*'ird*). If they are not rebuffed forcefully enough, insults may affect a person's dignity without harming the honour of the family. It may in fact be assumed that all people have dignity. But some people, for example the 'slaves' (people from southern Sudan) do not demonstrate clearly enough that they possess these characteristics, and there is therefore a tendency to see them as people who have no dignity. If your honour and dignity are lost, there is no way to regain them. Neither can you regain your honour and dignity through your actions. Honour and dignity are among the virtues that must be preserved. There is also an assumption here that all people are equal, with the reservations implicit in what has already been said.

Thus, a reasonably adequate understanding of such ethical expressions as *'ird*, *sharaf* and *karāma* (decency, honour and dignity) requires far more than knowledge of the synonymy relationships the dictionary suggests. To master open concepts

of this type, one must be conversant with series of exemplifications. This skill is an important component of all attempts to understand cultures.

The skills that accompany a command of such expressions are closely related to a good deal of empirical knowledge of the culture in question, including familiarity with what is sometimes called *realia* in language studies. The ethical concepts we have glanced at here are interwoven into many different activities which in turn require knowledge of both facts and language to be properly understood. If these activities are not known to an outsider, or are based on circumstances the person knows nothing about, then they must be explained to him or her.

In the final analysis, an understanding of expressions like *'ird*, *sharaf* and *karāma* requires a fairly thorough knowledge of an entire culture. Taken together with their exemplifications, these expressions are interwoven in activities which, in their turn, have their determined places in the whole which we call a culture or a way of life. The example of bridge shows us that it is not enough to be familiar with the rules of a given activity to be able to understand what it is about. A person who knows the rules of this card game but does not know that bridge is a *game*, with all that implies, has missed something important.

When it comes to translating, this means that the competence of the reader (listener, viewer) must be broadened to the degree that the two language cultures are separate from each other. It could be said that this is a question of a dual expansion of competence. The language competence of a person must sometimes be expanded by adding new expressions, for example, and the same applies to the person's factual knowledge. An important part of the art of translation is the ability to find successful solutions to the kind of problems that are associated with extending knowledge in that way.

The second example – a placard from Iran

The need to expand skills as discussed above is demonstrated clearly in the next example; a text on a placard used in a demonstration in Iran shortly before the fall of the Shah at the end of the seventies. The original text can be read in the May 1979 issue of a magazine called *Islamic Revolution*. For all of us who do not understand Persian, here is a rough English translation:

Brave soldier, do not kill Moses for the sake of Pharaoh, do not kill the Prophet's (grand-)son for Yazid's sake.

Most of us need comments and explanations to make this sentence understandable. We need to supplement the pure language translation with something that could be called cultural translation. The text on the placard is embedded in a particular cultural context, which one must be familiar with to understand it correctly. The text refers to people and events in the history of Islam that is part of general cultural knowledge in the Muslim regions of the world. The text uses a contrast, well known to the Iranian public, between earthly power, represented by Pharaoh, and theocracy, represented by Moses. The text also refers to a central event in the Shiite conceptual world; the murder of Hussein, the son of Mohammad's daughter, which was plotted by the Umayyad Yazid. Every year, in the month of Muḥarram, ceremonies of mourning are held to commemorate this event, and the demonstrations against the Shah culminated just at the end of this period of mourning. Hussein's death as the centre of the Shiite conceptual world paves the way for martyrdom and revolt against earthly power – this is roughly how Professor Jan Hjärpe describes the situation. To the extent that this description contains information that is unknown to the reader, additional comments are required. What, for example, is meant by 'the Shiite conceptual

world'? What is the month of Muḥarram? Why has the murder of this Hussein come to have such importance in this part of the world?

As with the previous set of examples, we may note that to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of this brief text in Persian, the reader has to be familiar with an entire culture.

The third example – Goethe and Atterbom

To clarify the implications of the concept of cultural translation referred to above, I introduce a third example, this time taken from a culture that in many ways may be said to be closer to many of us than the culture from which the example of Iran was taken.

Goethe's estate contained the draft of a poem which is reproduced on the next page. The manuscript is clearly unfinished; the author may have intended to return to it later. For those who are not used to reading older handwritten German texts, a printed version of Goethe's manuscript may be of help:

Es ist ein schlechter Zeitvertreib,
Ramdohr- und Speth- und Schreibergeschreib.
Was sie alles gegen mich sagen,
Wird wohl am Abend vorgetragen.
Wie nickt das Haupt, wie schmeckt die Ruh,
Kommt nun noch Atterbom dazu.

Derselbe setzt sich zu Gericht.
Hat gar eine eigene Kunstgeschichte.

Das hören wir alles ohne Scherz
In jener Gesellschaft für Geist und Herz.

Those who do not read German also require a simple language translation. But as we can see, it is of little help in this case:

Cultural Translation

These Ramdohr, Speth and Schreiber writings
Are a poor pastime.
All they have to say against me
Will surely be voiced in the evening.
How the heads will nod then, how the calm will be relished.
And now comes Atterbom as well.

He takes the judge's seat,
Even has his own history of art.

With complete seriousness we have to hear it
in that society for the soul and heart.

Es ist ein schlechtes Zeitvertrieb,
Ramdohr- und Speth- und Schreibergescheid
Was sie alles gegen mich sagen
Wird wohl am Abend vorgetragen.
Wie wenig das Haupt, wie schmerzt die
Fah,
Gehört nun noch Atterbom dazu.

Dasselbe seht mir zu Gerichte
Hat gar eine eigene Faust geschickt

Das hören wir alles ohne Litore
In jener Gesellschaft für Geist und Herz

As in the earlier examples, the references to people in the poem must be explained, and the context described. Why did Goethe write these lines? Why was he so angry about what he refers to as Atterbom's history of art, and which work can he mean? It is reasonable to assume that the words Ramdohr, Speth and Schreiber are the names of people. Who were they and what had they written to evoke such grave displeasure in the great writer? And what might the strange final line about 'the society for soul and heart' mean?

In an article from 1932, the Swedish scholar Carl Santesson put forward a number of suggestions that appear to be convincing. The name Atterbom is presumably that of the Swedish author, philosopher and literary historian Per Daniel Amadeus Atterbom, known to older generations as the author of the lyric-dramatic work *Lycksalighetens ö* (The Isle of Bliss), which was among the literature taught in Sweden's schools until well into the twentieth century. After some years as professor of theoretical philosophy at the University of Uppsala, he was appointed to a newly created chair of aesthetics in 1835. The areas to be covered were the history of literature and art as well as philosophical aesthetics. But P.D.A Atterbom did not write a history of art in the usual sense, i.e. a general presentation of the evolution of art. He did, however, make the first major attempt to write a history of Swedish literature. If we assume that this is the person Goethe referred to as Atterbom, many questions still remain unanswered. Atterbom is mentioned in passing in Goethe's diary, which was pointed out by the learned Dr Santesson. The entry for June 26, 1821 includes the following note: 'Atterbom's Letter from Rome.' Several hypotheses have been put forward about which letter was referred to here; it might, for example, have been a copy of a long letter that Atterbom wrote from Rome in 1818 to Schelling, his philosophical mentor. Santesson offers convincing evidence

to support the assumption that it refers to a long article by Atterbom entitled 'Brief aus Rom' that was published in the Berlin journal *Der Gesellschafter* in eight chapters from May 11 to 23, 1821, that is to say, just a few weeks before the reference to Atterbom appears in Goethe's diary. What in this travel account can have aroused such fury in Goethe?

Atterbom spent the spring and summer of 1818 in Rome and wrote with enthusiasm about the new romantic art which he encountered there, the work of the so-called Nazarenes. In this context, he also ventured a criticism of the old Master in Weimar. In the second volume of the journal *Kunst und Alterthum in den Rhein- und Main-Gegenden*, Goethe had expressed himself in harsh terms about something that he himself had not seen with his own eyes, thereby further contributing to an already confused situation, wrote Atterbom. He continued by citing the young Roman artists' view that the responsibility for these rather unfortunate ideas rested with 'a certain theorising painter in Weimar called Meyer, a friend and companion of Goethe for several decades: a learned man but a bad painter', according to Atterbom's sources.

The famous article on 'Neo-German Religious Patriotic Art' Atterbom refers to here had been published by Goethe together with the painter Meyer. Goethe and Meyer denigrated the Nazarene romanticism with 'its religious tendency towards the archaic, its propensity for the forms and symbols of the Catholic Middle Ages, all its (in his /Goethe's/ view) sickly spirit of mysticism and sentimental hypocrisy', as Santesson summarises it. It seems reasonable to assume that Atterbom's contribution to *Der Gesellschafter* had been a topic of conversation with Meyer on June 26, 1821. Immediately before the words 'Atterboms Brief aus Rom', the entry 'Hofrath Meyer' appears in the diary.

And thus the building blocks fall into place for someone

familiar with the cultural scene of that time. Ramdohr could be the aesthetician F.W.V. von Ramdohr, with whom Goethe had earlier engaged in polemic. But it is likely that Goethe made a mistake and confused Ramdohr with the art historian C.F. von Rumohr, the eminent expert in Italian art and one of the founders of the discipline that goes by the name of the history of art. In another place in his diary Goethe also writes Ramdohr instead of Rumohr, as Dr Santesson points out. Von Rumohr was the author of some contributions to the *Kunst-Blatt*, a journal, which also published writings by the signature '-ber', which presumably stands for the historian and aesthetician A.W. Schreiber. And a certain B. Speth was also active in the same publication; a person who, a couple of years earlier, had published a book on art in Italy in which Goethe was roundly criticized for his comments on the Bolognese masters.

We now have an explanation for the cryptic final lines of Goethe's draft – 'Das hören wir alles ohne Scherz/ In jener Gesellschaft für Geist und Herz'. 'The society for the soul and heart' may refer to the practitioners and admirers of the new romantic art. But there is certainly another layer of meaning here. The new journal, in which Atterbom's letters from his journey were published, had a subtitle: *Der Gesellschafter oder Blätter für Geist und Herz* – The Partner or Leaves for the Soul and Heart.

With this Swedish literary historian as our Cicero, we are taken through the landscape of cultural history of which the fragment of Goethe's is a part. This is a significant aspect of cultural translation – to illuminate past cultures so that the historical relics that were once invested with meaning are presented in a way that conveys meaning to us as well.

Translatability is mutable

I have attempted, with the help of some examples, to demonstrate that in addition to simple language translation, cultural translation often entails extending the knowledge of the audience. The reader of the translation must be brought to a point where he or she sees the texts in the social and historical contexts in which they are embedded.

Let me conclude by indicating some structures that characterize cultural understanding, and therefore also cultural translation in general. Let us return to these three sentences:

(1) “Füllen Sie die Eisschale zu $\frac{3}{4}$ mit Wasser und stellen Sie sie in den Gefrierraum.”

(2) The text on the Iranian placard, which translates into English as: “Brave soldier, do not kill Moses for the sake of Pharaoh”.

(3) “Es ist ein schlechter Zeitvertreib, Ramdohr- und Speth- und Schreiber-geschreib”, the first line of Goethe’s unfinished poem.

It is easier to translate the first sentence into English than the two others, at least if the translation also includes all the comments with which the average English reader must be provided to arrive at a full understanding of the meaning of the text. And it is in this broad sense that the expression ‘cultural translation’ is used here. But this does not mean that, in terms of understanding it, the first sentence is less complex than the other two.

In all understanding of language two levels of meaning can be identified, both of them characterized by constitutive (meaning-determining) relationships – the lexical level and the pragmatic level. At the lexical level we find internal relationships between concepts and examples of the kind illustrated

by the Arab moral concepts of *ird*, *sharaf* and *karāma*. In real communication situations there are also internal relationships between language expressions with their meanings (which we can understand to the extent that we have the necessary lexical competence), and given situations. The Iranian placard and the fragment from Goethe suggest some of the problems that can be found on the pragmatic level, at the level of an understanding of the situation. The problems are, not least, linked to the role played by proper names in our linguistic understanding. The names of people play a crucial part in, for example, the text on the Iranian protest placard and Goethe's poem. To summarise, it may be said that local knowledge plays a central part in cultural understanding and cultural translation.

This brings us back to the theme of a dual expansion of competence. Both the recipient's simple language competence and his/her empirical competence must be expanded when the store of language and knowledge is not sufficient. If an activity is not known in another culture, there is nothing to translate it into, writes Jakob Meløe, the Norwegian philosopher, in a brilliant contribution to the literature on translating: 'Even if a foreigner learns our language and the way we act, he is still not able to *translate*. There is nothing to translate into.' But all natural languages and all factual knowledge can be expanded. The dual expansion of competence is, as all translators know, a process that can always continue. Improving the reader's competence also opens up greater opportunities for better translations. Translatability is a mutable phenomenon.

References

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- On open and closed concepts: M. Weitz, *The Opening Mind. A Philosophical Study of Humanistic Concepts*, Chicago 1977. 'Open concepts' in Weitz's sense are related to (but not quite the same as) W.B. Gallie's 'essentially contested concepts' (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1956.)
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- The Iranian example comes from Jan Hjärpe's book *Politisk islam*, Stockholm 1980.
- Carl Santesson's interpretation of Goethe's little poem can be found in the essay 'Goethe och Atterbom. Till tolkningen av ett Goethe-inkektiv', *Atterbomstudier*, Stockholm 1932.
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