DANCING ON ROPES

Translators and the Balance of History

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Introduction

On 26 July 1945, the Office of War Information in Washington issued the Potsdam Proclamation, an ultimatum demanding that Japan, still at war with the Allies, surrender. On learning of it the next morning, the Japanese foreign minister Shigenori Togo did not see it as a command to surrender unconditionally, and instead proposed negotiations with the Allies, urging the government to treat the matter 'with the utmost circumspection, both domestically and internationally'. One of the cabinet members disagreed, proposing instead to reply that they regard the proclamation as absurd, but Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki supported Togo, and it was decided to publish the text in the press without comment. The papers, however, couldn't help remarking on the ultimatum, which they considered a 'Laughable Matter', to quote one headline. Another compromise was found: the prime minister would read a statement making light of the proclamation without rejecting its terms. At the press conference, Suzuki said that the government did not think the document very important, adding, 'We must *mokusatsu* it.'

The Japanese word literally translates as 'kill with silence', though Suzuki later told his son he had intended it to convey 'no comment', an expression for which Japanese has no direct equivalent. The Americans translated it

as 'ignore' and 'treat with silent contempt'. On 30 July, the *New York Times* front page announced, 'Japan Officially Turns Down Allied Surrender Ultimatum'. The fate of Hiroshima was sealed.

Historians are quite right to point out that the tragedy wasn't caused by translation difficulties alone. Yet debates around the translator's role, as old as the profession itself, always revolve around the question of their agency. In our multilingual world the balance of history, unstable as it is at the best of times, hinges on different interpretations of words. Some translators believe themselves to be a mere conduit, ideally an invisible filter through which meaning flows; others argue that it's far less straightforward: in the end, they use their own words, accents and inflections, and so they inevitably influence things. Can translators take liberties? Should they? The nature of the job, as we are about to see, means that interventions are hard to avoid.

When Donald Trump referred to certain states as 'shithole countries' in 2018, translators the world over took the trouble to mitigate this definition. The most polite version, used in Taiwan, was 'countries where birds don't lay eggs'; Japan went for 'countries that are dirty like toilets'; in Germany they said 'garbage dump'. The same year, the international media interpreted the word used by Jair Bolsonaro during the Brazilian presidential campaign, *limpeza*, as 'clean-up'. What did the candidate really mean? Did this translation underplay the predicament of his enemies, who might have actually been threatened with 'cleansing'? However broad the spectrum of meanings hidden in the original message, a translator's choice of words can have immense consequences. When the literal phrase 'Death to

America' – widely used in Iran since the 1979 revolution – is rendered as 'Down with America', the world begins to make a bit more sense.

My own work as a freelance translator and interpreter has never, to the best of my knowledge, tipped the scales of history. But it has given me ample food for thought, allowing me to see more vividly the figure of the translator surrounded by precarious events in which they cannot help intervening. It is this image that I would like to outline in these pages.

Human communication, even in one language, always comes with the proviso that we understand and are understood much less than we hope. Early in my interpreting career, a court case made this especially clear to me. The woman I was interpreting for sat there with her head buried in her hands throughout the hearing, which concerned the custody of her child. I didn't realise at first, and she wouldn't say when asked, how little the legal formulae (which I did my best to translate, showing off my recently learned legalese) meant to her, when all she wanted to know was whether she would be reunited with her son. When the judge got to 'It would be my intention to allow this appeal' she still didn't react to the good news. Afterwards, as her lawyer explained the judgement in plain English, I duly interpreted it, feeling the dead weight of dictionaries falling off my shoulders as she looked up and nodded. This time she understood it all.

Anyone who has ever tried translating anything will be especially interested in gaps between languages: gaps created by conceptual differences and cultural assumptions. It is in these often overlooked spaces that translators must

make decisions, often relying solely on their own judgement. What else are you to do when you are the one holding all the cards? What informs this decision-making process is your belief in the translatability of human experience.

The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset opens his famous 1937 essay 'The Misery and Splendour of Translation' with the claim that translation is a utopian enterprise. He argues that humans think in concepts rather than words, and that no dictionary is able to provide equivalents between any two given languages as no two words conventionally regarded as translations of each other can ever refer to the same objects. Others have made a similar point by talking of the language of thought, or mentalese, a non-verbal code processed by the human brain.

According to this theory, to be able to translate accurately you need a thesaurus with a comprehensive list of synonyms for each entry, as well as examples of each word's use in every context imaginable. Then, provided the other party has a similar reference book containing not merely words but experiences, you might be able to find the exact correspondence between the two. Unless such compendiums are available, perfect translation is a fantasy (and so, by the same logic, are writing, reading, speaking and indeed all intellectual endeavours). In this light, translation may appear to be an unsolvable problem, yet it's worth tackling, especially given the evidence that communication in more than one language is, after all, possible. It can be effected in infinite ways, though word-for-word translation is seldom one of them. Things would be different in the ideal world, where every word would have the perfect match in every dictionary, every sentence would be clearly written and every

message carefully enunciated. Our world is not like that – and so much the better.

The translator's real concern is not words but sense. To preserve it, you can smooth the original's strange features to make the meaning more accessible, or you can retain some foreign notes in your translation, ensuring that it comes across as such. Do these approaches have to be mutually exclusive? A hint lies in the way translation as a practice is defined. It can be considered an art, a craft, a pastime, a hobby, a necessity, depending on what motivates those engaged in it. It can be as creative as you make it, but it is also a secondary activity: the original has to be there first. It can be a vocation, a calling, a main occupation, but also a sideline, something to fall back on when you need a break from your other job, when you are desperate for some new experience or just desperate. Translators have often doubled as poets, slaves, doctors, apprentices, lawyers, spies, preachers, diplomats, soldiers, and so on. 'So let us say that translation is a trade, like cabinet-making or baking or masonry,' the writer and translator Eliot Weinberger proposes. 'It is a trade that any amateur can do, but professionals do better.'

Translation, therefore, is a job like any other, driven by supply and demand; something you can be inspired by or simply do for a living, taking things on as they come: a divorce case or an experimental novel, a car manual or a holiday brochure. As you go about your task, your actions can change the world around you in more ways than you expect. This book will talk about translators doing things that, while not being part of their official remit, shape the way they approach their job. It will talk about the quality of translators' work, an elusive concept, and look into the

relationships between translators and those who need them, something made especially complex by inevitable gaps in mutual comprehension. Finally, it will give a glimpse of the future – not too distant it seems – when translators may have to grow even more versatile in order to compete with machines.

The stories collected here show translators at work, describe what they do and what happens next: concrete actions and their consequences, momentous or otherwise. As for theory, it's the province of the translation police (as the more dogmatic among translation studies scholars are known in the trade), who see it as their task to enforce rules, from linguistic to ethical to political. These people are part of the translation ecosystem but not of this book. It is about those who, rather than lurching between abstractions, take the plunge, hoping to solve a problem that may or may not have a solution. What keeps them awake at night is not the thought of how feasible translation is, but the question of how to translate a particular idiom, treatise, poem, address, novel, judgement, joke; to make it intelligible while preserving both the letter and the spirit; to get at its meaning; to make it work.

If translation is about finding a space between gaps, or a compromise between meanings, how best to perform this balancing act? 'It is almost impossible to translate verbally, and well, at the same time,' John Dryden wrote in 1680 in the preface to his translation of Ovid's *Epistles*.

> In short, the verbal copier is encumbered with so many difficulties at once, that he can never disentangle himself from all. He is to consider at the same time the thought

> of his author, and his words, and to find out the counterpart to each in another language; and besides this, he is to confine himself to the compass of numbers, and the slavery of rhyme.

After giving the matter careful thought, Dryden delivers his verdict, still valid today:

> It is much like dancing on ropes with fettered legs: a man may shun a fall by using caution, but the gracefulness of motion is not to be expected; and when we have said the best of it, it is but a foolish task; for no sober man would put himself into a danger for the applause of escaping without breaking his neck.

A figure dancing on a rope, with its joyful as well as sinister connotations, is an apt image for the profession. Translators must simultaneously work towards several goals: to get the message across and not to break certain constraints, to stay upright and to maintain flexibility. To keep everything in balance, they constantly move between these near impossibilities, and the world moves with them.

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Shaking the World

If you want peace, prepare for war. As the USA and the USSR clashed in the Cold War, each striving to prove the supremacy of their ideology, both claimed to be acting in the name of peace. Along with a range of technological innovations, a new vocabulary was deployed: 'computer', 'cybernetics' and suchlike became ubiquitous; 'sputnik', the Russian for 'companion', was adopted to denote a satellite on the other side of the Iron Curtain; 'capitalism' and 'socialism' needed little translation, although their definitions varied between the rival camps. The conflict – as much a war of meanings as of beliefs – often had the opponents sound vague: sometimes genuinely unsure of what to say; sometimes trying to achieve something; sometimes falling into traps set by their own language of propaganda. Verbal exchanges between the two superpowers, refracted through translation, would occasionally spiral into a stand-off or culminate in a real showdown.

As Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev prepared for their first meeting in 1959, everyone expected a duel of proverbs. Given the Soviet premier's penchant for idiomatic expressions, the vice president was advised to brush up on American sayings. Having done so, he didn't pull his punches in their 'verbal slugfest', to quote Khrushchev's biographer

William Taubman. When a discussion about the Captive Nations Resolution, recently passed by the US Congress in support of the 'Soviet-dominated nations' (the Soviets, for some reason, preferred a less specific adjective, 'enslaved'), reached an impasse, Nixon ventured to say, 'We have beaten this horse to death, let's change to another.' Khrushchev hit back: 'This resolution stinks. It stinks like fresh horse shit, and nothing smells worse than that.' Nixon had his reply ready: 'I am afraid the chairman is mistaken. There is something that smells worse than horse shit, and that is pig shit.' Perhaps hoping to clear the air, Khrushchev's interpreter replaced 'shit' with the Russian word for 'manure', duly registered by the note-takers but later ignored by commentators in favour of the direct translation.

It was on this occasion, at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, that Khrushchev famously claimed the USSR would soon 'catch up with and overtake' or, in another translation, 'overtake and surpass' America. Nixon riposted by suggesting that his hosts might be leading in the development of rockets, but 'there may be some instances – for example, colour television – where we're ahead of you'. With these words, he gestured to the camera recording them on what must have been the first videotape to have travelled that far east. '*Nyet, nyet*,' Khrushchev interrupted. 'We've overtaken you in that technology too.' The 'kitchen debate' continued in the Miracle Kitchen, full of shiny state-of-the-art gadgets, which Khrushchev found ridiculous. 'Do you have a machine that puts food in your mouth and pushes it down?' he asked. Shown the IBM 305, he similarly waved it away, saying that the Soviets had computers too, in abundance, just as powerful but much bigger.

Nixon was impressed with Khrushchev's boisterous delivery style as well as with his body language, which included 'a repertoire of gestures that a conductor of a brass band would envy'. Not that it made his improvisations any easier to translate. The shit exchange was followed by more colourful boasts and threats from Khrushchev, yet it was his extemporaneous forays into Russian folk wisdom that made the aides' job especially difficult. Unlike literary translators, diplomatic interpreters tend to stick to word-for-word rendition as much as possible, even at the expense of losing a bit of atmosphere or fluency. So when Khrushchev promised to show the Americans 'Kuzma's mother', the proverb – an unspecified threat meaning, roughly, 'We'll show you what's what' – was translated literally, and subsequent explanations didn't make it much clearer.

The mysterious mother continued to puzzle the Americans for a while. At another meeting later the same year, when Khrushchev repeated, 'We'll show you Kuzma's mother,' his interpreter, Viktor Sukhodrev, chose to translate it as a teasing remark. Everyone braced themselves for an argument, but then Khrushchev turned to Sukhodrev: 'Did it go wrong with Kuzma's mum again? Listen, just explain to them, it's simple. What it means is, "something they've never seen before".' The penny dropped: Khrushchev had never intended to intimidate anyone (at least not with this expression); he had merely been misusing the Russian idiom all the while.

Literalism in translation can reduce the risk of what's known in the trade as 'extending a metaphor': a situation when a seemingly innocuous saying loses its figurative quality. Numerous examples of this have been passed down

the ages as true stories, albeit varying in detail and not always traceable back to a concrete occasion. Apocryphal or not, they illustrate well the treacherous nature of proverbs. One such incident is reported to have occurred at a major international conference when a Soviet delegate used a proverb approximating to 'mixing apples and oranges', and the interpreter went all in: 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.' When a Danish representative grabbed the mike to protest against this 'unwarranted slur', the dumbfounded speaker condemned what he assumed to be a provocation. On another occasion, an interpreter enlivened an EU meeting by translating 'Some prefer not to use liquid manure' as 'Liquid manure is not everyone's cup of tea.'

The uncertainty that permeated Cold War discourse, while often deliberate, could also stem from insecurity. If in doubt, the strategy seemed to be, crack a joke. Sometimes this approach worked; sometimes it backfired. Meeting Hubert Humphrey, an American senator, in Moscow in 1958, Khrushchev asked him about his home town, and when Humphrey pointed out Minneapolis on a map, Khrushchev circled it with a blue pencil, explaining, 'That's so I remember to give instructions to spare this city when the rockets fly.' The senator, on confirming that Khrushchev lived in Moscow, said, 'I am sorry, Mr Chairman, but I cannot return your kindness.' Although the exchange amused everyone present, it was not at all clear who was going to have the last laugh. The USSR was enjoying rapid economic growth and advances in space exploration, with the launch of Sputnik I in 1957 followed two years later by the first mission to the moon. Khrushchev was on a 'peace offensive', which culminated in a trip to the

US in 1959, a high point in his love–hate relationship with the West. He was accompanied by aides-cum-interpreters, among them Oleg Troyanovsky, soon to become his chief foreign policy assistant, and Sukhodrev, an accomplished linguist well respected in both camps. The pair draw on the visit in their respective memoirs.

Visiting America for the first time, Khrushchev was determined not to show how impressed he was. His interpreters were instructed to convey his reactions in an appropriate catch-up-and-overtake spirit. Things that required interpretation in more than one sense of the word emerged immediately upon their arrival when, on the way to Washington, they saw people lining the route: of an estimated 200,000, a few smiled and waved, but the majority stood there, as Taubman relates it, 'stone-faced and strangely silent'. The *Washington Post*'s George Dixon wrote of the mood in the crowd: 'I didn't know whether to cheer wildly, applaud perfunctorily or just stand there emitting little sounds that could be translated as anything.' Whatever sounds were emitted, the Soviet press translated them unequivocally: 'shouts rolling up like waves', 'outbursts of applause', 'joyous cheers', 'gladness, warmth and cordiality' all featured in their reports. Sukhodrev did notice some enthusiastic faces – the Soviet embassy had strategically placed its staff and their families along the route.

To break the ice at their first meeting, Khrushchev presented Dwight D. Eisenhower with a box containing a model of the space capsule that had recently reached the moon. He was as talkative as ever: Sukhodrev remembers his 'irrepressible volubility', while William Hayter, the British ambassador in Moscow in the 1950s, describes him as 'rumbustious,

impetuous, loquacious, free-wheeling, alarmingly ignorant of foreign affairs'. He 'spoke in short sentences, in an emphatic voice and with great conviction', even though he often 'stumbled in his choice of words' and 'said the wrong thing'. When that happened, his interpreters usually corrected him discreetly. There are no hard and fast rules on whether an interpreter should preserve errors or remedy them. Sukhodrev's basic principle was: if a speaker makes a mistake that's clearly a slip, correct it without drawing their attention to it. Not all interpreters are of the same school.

As his American hosts went to great lengths to impress Khrushchev, he wallowed in his insecurities, throwing tantrum after tantrum, taking many things as insults, and when his aides tried to explain that a number of more controversial questions reflected 'American pluralism', he still wasn't having any of it. Visiting IBM in California, in a reversal of his position on kitchens, he liked their cafeteria better than their computers (self-service catering facilities soon appeared in some Soviet cities, whereas computers took longer to arrive). Dismissing advances in information technology, Khrushchev said that he hasn't been 'converted to your capitalist faith' because, as a Russian proverb has it, 'Every *kulik* praises its own bog.' Sukhodrev – who'd heard of the bird called *kulik* but, like most city-dwellers, had no idea what it looked like – didn't know the English word for it. He extricated himself with the impromptu 'Every duck praises its own pond;' one of his American colleagues used the dictionary definition, 'snipe'; a newspaper report offered another variant, featuring 'snake' and 'swamp'. The next day, another paper ran a story headlined 'Cold War Between Interpreters'.