

Luck and Pluck :
the Other Dimensions of Translation?

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ABSTRACT

IN HIS BOAST 'NOSOTROS SOMOS BAMBEROS', PABLO NERUDA DREW A PARALLEL BETWEEN THE JOB OF FIREMEN AND OF TRANSLATORS. IT THEN APPEARED TO ME THAT INDEED BOTH TRANSLATORS AND FIREMEN SHARE THE SAME FEATURES OF *LUCK* AND *PLUCK*. HOWEVER, IT ALSO APPEARED TO ME THAT LUCK AND PLUCK DO NOT EVENLY INTERFERE IN THE ACTIVITIES OF FIREMEN, AND TRANSLATORS ESPECIALLY.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Neruda in his boast believed that translators are in great demand only when the necessity arises and when it becomes urgent, just as firemen are when a whatsoever emergency calls upon.

The dimensions within which both translators and firemen work, and most particularly translators, seemed to me to be *luck* and *pluck*.

In the present paper, I will try to demarcate the area within which these two dimensions help the translator perform his o-so-hard-to-do task .

2. ¿ SOMOS BAMBEROS?

Firemen are lucky to do a special job: they help people out of danger. They are lucky because it is always them who save people's lives and possessions.

Firemen are also plucky because they take initiatives: they wait not. They are bold [and cautious] to go where the danger is, to the very source of it putting at risk their lives.

In the same vein, we contend that the job of translators isn't any different. A translator is both lucky and [cautious]plucky. Lucky because he is needed. He translates important and sometimes high confidential documents, and handles human thoughts and emotions from one language into another. It is only him who could do that.

He is also plucky because he, too, takes initiatives. He dares. He has this capacity to translate whenever the necessity arises, and necessity arises almost all the time. Evenly important, the translator must be cautious when he takes his pluck, as we will see presently.

3. LUCK AND PLUCK: HOW FAR, HOW WELL:

Translation is not simply moving from a departure text (DT) to an arrival text (AT). I do not wish to engage here in an argument over DT-AT correspondences because over the past years the matter has become strikingly indisputable. I would like rather try to shed some light on how far and how well luck and pluck could intervene in the translator's work.

3.1. LUCK:

3.1.1. WHY ME SIR?

By which mercy is someone chosen among thousands to translate for an institution of authority such as the Turkish Atatürk Supreme Council for Culture, Language and History? Askoy's case will illustrate this.

The Turkish translator Berrin Askoy was indeed chosen amongst a host of translators to translate a major work, namely *The History of the Turkish States in Eastern Anatolia*, of the eminent historian, the late Professor Osman Turan. About this, Askoy says: 'I was commissioned by the *Atatürk Supreme Council for Culture, Language and History* in Turkey to translate into English the history book.' (2001: 193). He farther adds:

'Professor Turan's book stands
out as *unique* in its informative
capacity, and still remains the
most trustworthy source in its field.'
(op cit. p193. Italics mine)

Still farther down, he noted that the importance of the book was such that the government wanted to make it available for researchers in the USA and in Britain.

With a tug of luck, it was Askoy who was asked to do the translation and not somebody else. For Askoy, such an opportunity is, we take, is an example of a thorough manifestation of luck.

Askoy's '*I*', '*unique*', and '*most trustworthy*' fuel our idea that *luck* is truly a dimension of translation which allows the translator to shine, and his work to be worthwhile. A moment's reflection on his case reveals that *luck* did play an amazingly important role in his career. He can, in all likelihood inscribe his name on the walls of the translators' hall of fame!

3.1.2. SHEER HAPPENSTANCE?

On a different scale, luck can have another guise as what happened to Somerset Maugham, the late great English writer and critic author of the masterwork: Ten Novels and Their Authors. In this book, as a matter of fact, he wrote the abridged forms and the criticism of ten novels, including three French novels, namely Stendhal's Le rouge et le noir; Balzac's Le père Goriot; and Flaubert's Madame Bovary, of our interest in this article which he read these books in French. Maugham had a perfect command of French

language probably for his long friction and contact with this language. Indeed, his biography informs us that he was reared up in Paris till the age of 10; and later in 1929, he went back and settled in the south of France until his death in 1965 at the age of 91.

He was lucky to be British and understand French. One day, he met by sheer happenstance [?] an American publisher in New York who put before him the suggestion to reissue the novels (in question) with a preface. On that he said:

‘I was first taken aback(...)then
I welcomed the idea of writing
the prefaces to the novels in
question.’
(Maugham. 1978:09)

We consider that Maugham was lucky because he could understand French with its intrinsic constructions and structures, its strong meaning-carrying words, its brainstorming grammar, its lyrical and stylistic *grandeur*, of the above mentioned French writers, especially. Such a thing allowed him and not another writer to handle these great works of French literature.

3.2. Pluck:

3.2.1. Necessary or ancillary ?

Pluck is altogether what a translator needs! No translator is a translator if he not loaded with the magical force of pluck. When someone sets to translate something, this means that he endeavors to translate and this is pluck. It goes without saying, though, that pluck has nothing to do with vanity which most certainly weakens, sooner or later, the very personality of the translator. (vanity is not of our concerns in the present article and thus we will not discuss it any further).

3.2.2. PLUCK AND SELF-CONTROL:

Self-control bearing, Maugham, again, shows us how should a translator behave with a text. About Stendhal's *De l'Amour*, for example, he wrote: ‘I have felt *l'amour goût* in French because I do not know how to translate it’ (1978:90. Our emphasis). Such a confession about *not being able to translate* tells us about pluck and self-control. Maugham knew where to stop. He could control his pluck, and avoided to venture a translation. It is worth noting, however, that if he attempted any translation, it could have been considered without a headache to be an effective translation simply because done by a writer and literary critic of a renowned authority such as Maugham.

Maugham certainly wanted to tell us that the true

grandeur is to know when to stop, giving us a brilliant illustration of self-control.

3.2.3. PLUCK AND UNCONSCIOUS BLUNDER

According to the old adage “haste makes waste”, the following example about Kennedy’s translator illustrates what happens when pluck is not controlled.

In 1962, in the hub of the Cold War, the late President Kennedy went to West Berlin to deliver a speech to release pressure that was building up. Kennedy hit the world with his rhetorical acme when, near the then Berlin Wall, he gave his historical speech, making his strong boast:

‘all free men(...)are citizens of
Berlin, and, therefore, as a free
man, I take pride in the words
“Ich bin *ein* Berliner”.’
(Sorenson. 1965:601. Italics mine)

While boarding Air Force One back home, the President, with a look of pride said: ‘we will never have another day like this as long as we live.’ (op cit. p.601). But what Kennedy did not know is that his translator made him make a great grammatical and a socio-cultural blunder!

3.2.3.1 The grammatical blunder:

In translating ‘I am a Berliner’ into ‘Ich bin ein Berliner’, the President’s translator used the feature [V+S + article + adjective], when a null article should have been used especially in designating professions, nationalities mainly in S.V.O constructions as:

Er ist Bürgermeister	(he is the mayor)
Er wird Lehrer	(He will be a teacher)

“Bürgermeister” and “Lehrer” or “Berliner” (the example of our discussion) are employed without the indefinite article ‘ein’ (or the definite article ‘der’) (cf. Helbig. 1975:337). In other words, the article is not used when we only mention the substantive noun as in:

Wie heißt hammer auf russisch? (How do we call a hammer in Russian?)

(Jung.1973:276)

but not: Wie heißt ein hammer auf russisch?

3.2.3.2 The socio-cultural blunder:

The city of Berlin is known for its particular sandwich commonly known as *berliner*, (just like the city of Hamburg is known for its *hamburger*).

Had the President's translator known about German grammar and culinary traditions, he wouldn't have made his President's words jar. 'Ich bin *ein* Berliner', following the feature [V + S + article + adjective] gives thus the meaning

"I am a *berliner*' (meaning I am a sandwich!)

The Berliners, we reckon, have certainly understood what JFK wanted to say to them, and they could certainly not repress a laugh for they understood the grammatical and the socio-cultural blunder that the Yankee president has made.

3.2.3.3 Justification of the blunder (?):

At any rate, and from a linguistic and political perspective, things can be understood otherwise. The president's translator in a glow of patriotism wanted to make his President have a language ' that takes the form of a response to a clearly identifiable external stimulus' (Wilkins. 1976:04). The then strong pressure of the Cold War was a good argument for such a justified external political stimulus. Moreover, such an uncontrolled pluck could also be justified by Cold War 'sheer exigencies of power' (Pool. 1991:495) which was those days a significant demand.

In the same line of thought, such 'exigencies of power' let the President's translator look for analogies which we think he thought they existed between English and German.

We believe that such a fact was overlooked by the President's translator which led him into making his 'historical' unconscious blunder. In this respect, Sternberg contends that:

'In looking for analogies, we need

to be careful not to be misled by
associations between two things

that are analogically irrelevant.'

(Sternberg. 1995:344)

The right feature is then [S + V + adjective] which functions in the syntactic selection and which determines the semantic distinction proper to the German language.

The case in point here is precisely 'how' to translate *articles*.. On that, McCowley (1976) precisely argues that nothing of significance was done about articles except 'summarizing some obvious facts about surface cooccurrence' (p.339).

Again, such a surface co-occurrence is what might have misled the President's translator to think that the German language functions just as the English language, and that probably blinded by an overflow of pluck, he used the feature [S+V+article +adjective] thinking that the two languages had this feature in common.

4. CONCLUSION:

Neruda's boast, Askoy's case, Maugham's self-control, and the historical Kennedy translator's blunder have given us to understand that the job of a translator is a cocktail of luck, savoir-faire, pluck, with a zest of self-control. But the question is still on: should we consider *luck* and *pluck* as two trustworthy dimensions to psyche the translator up for his task; or should we simply consider them as ancillary supports to an able but diffident translator?

I have attempted in this article to tentatively shed some light on the role *luck* and *pluck* play in the activity of the translator.

I also tried to show that a translator should rather have a practical and hard-headed approach to his activity relying neither entirely on luck, nor on pluck alone.

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