

# **Why is translation interesting?**

**Kirsten Malmkjær**

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## **1. Introduction**

The title of this paper asks a leading question of the type that research students are routinely advised to avoid if and when designing questionnaires: to ask *why* translation is interesting assumes that translation is in fact interesting, and so it behoves me to substantiate that assumption; I need to show that translation is, indeed, interesting. Fortunately, a good deal of evidence points in that direction.

## **2. Indications that translation is interesting**

Over the past 30 years or so, translation studies has developed from a perceived lowly and theoretically rather uninteresting and uninspiring discipline, into an academic field of study that excites increasing numbers of people with backgrounds in many different disciplines. The long history of translation studies has been meticulously documented by e.g. Delisle and Woodworth (1995), Robinson (1997) and Venuti (2000). The phenomenon of translation has been approached from a number of different standpoints: Linguistic, functional, post-colonial, pragmatic, philosophical, psychological, political, ecological and from a gender oriented perspective. A number of distinct, though often overlapping schools have been identified: Descriptive, manipulation, deconstruction influenced, semiotic, Darwinian. And the discipline has borrowed prolifically from areas of study such as linguistics, literary critical theory, psychology, history, sociology, philosophy and the theory of evolution. A rich field indeed.

New technologies, from computers to brain scanners, have enabled translation studies scholars to develop new experimental methods and to sharpen up description. Using Translog (Lykke Jakobsen 1999), the physical aspects of the translation process can be tracked and replayed; using Think Aloud Protocol studies, the conscious thought processes of translators can be investigated; and using electronic text storage and manipulation, vast collections of spoken and written translations can be collected and examined. All this has meant that that common sense notions and general perceptions, as well as more carefully constructed theoretical edifices, have been tested with a rigour that was previously unthinkable. Against this background, traditional concerns have been reinterpreted, and concepts have developed or been rediscovered or re-described. It is true that in the process, theoretical rigour has occasionally been foregone in the effort to process the masses of data obtained by the new investigative means, as well as in justifying the methods used. Overall, however, enormous strides have been made in the discipline over the last twenty years or so, as speculation has largely given way to data collection and analysis. The amount of effort that has been expended in the process of achieving these advances seems to me to constitute good evidence that translation is, indeed, an interesting phenomenon. Let me therefore address the question of why this is so.

### **3. Why is translation interesting?**

Among the most moving and poetic statements about translation is the following, from the message written to their readers by the translators of the King James Bible, 1611, quoted here from Robinson (1997: 139):

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtaine, that we may looke into the most holy place; that remooveth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water.

There are four metaphors here for what translation brings about, each positive, each indicating that translation provides access to something central, even vital to human life, which would otherwise remain inaccessible to us: Light, which is let in through the window that translation opens for us; food in the form of the kernel of the nut whose shell translation can break open for us; spirituality behind the curtain that translation can move aside for us; and water within the well that translation can uncover for us. The metaphors imply that what is hidden from us within unknown languages is something we need.

In their original setting the metaphors referred to the translation of scripture, of course, which the translators thought of as having that kind of vital importance. But I think that it is not too fanciful to extend the metaphors to cover the translation of very many other text types. And I am clearly not alone in this belief that material available in languages that a person does not speak is nevertheless central to their development and well being and has to be made available to them in the form of translation if necessary: When I enrolled to read English at a university in England, the preparatory reading list contained a number of works which prospective students were encouraged to read before the course began, because of the strong influence that these works had had on the canon of English literature. The list included, for example, Homer, Cervantes and the Bible – all in translation into English, of course.

The paragraph above was written in 1611, which explains the rather odd notion that it is necessary to open a window to let the light in. This is not because 17<sup>th</sup> century window cleaning was inefficient; it is because the translators are thinking of the kind of window that is a hole in the wall or in the roof, covered with animal hide, cloth, or even wood. This reminds us that translation is not confined to occasions when different languages are involved: We must often translate from the past to the future within the same language. The logical conclusion of this phenomenon takes us to the centre of the everyday life of us all: Each conversation, each act of reading, speaking, listening and writing implies a faith that we can translate between idiolects, and since the middle of the last century the translational nature of all linguistic interaction has been keenly felt within analytical philosophy, where the question of translation remains central. As Davidson (1973/1984: 125) puts it:

The problem of interpretation is domestic as well as foreign: it surfaces for speakers of the same language in the form of the question, how can it be determined that the language is the same? Speakers of the same language can go on the assumption that for them the same expressions are to be interpreted in the same way, but this does not indicate what justifies the assumption.

This is one reason – and a centrally important reason -- why translation is interesting: Translation is involved in every linguistic encounter, but the paradigm case, the case where more than one language is involved, can teach us something about every case.

A second reason why translation is worthy of attention is its ubiquity. The paragraph from the Bible that we looked at above was written at a time when literacy was limited, and the mass production of reading material barely a dream. In today's very different world, printed texts as well as virtual text are all around us and many of those texts are translations: Most of us own objects from abroad that come with translated instruction for use or other kinds of written information; these can indeed be vital, since a mistake in the use of certain objects can have serious consequences. But even leaving aside the fact that translation may be employed to fend off death by misadventure, it plays an important part in most people's lives. Most of us have visited foreign countries and used translated visitor's guide. Most of us have read or listened to a translation of a news broadcast, seen a play or film in translation in the form of dubbing or with translation in the form of subtitles, and most of us have read translated books. And, of course, it is not only individuals in their daily lives who rely on translation. Translation is an essential aspect of the day-to-day life of international institutions like the United Nations and the European Community, and many organisations and companies with global interests share this dependence on the work of translators and interpreters.

So it is indeed easy, I think, to extend the Bible translators' beautiful metaphors beyond the translation of holy scripture to the translation of other text types. And we should remind ourselves often of the ubiquity of translation, and of the massive good that it does for us in enriching our lives, still, all these years after the translators of the Bible interpreted the outcome of their task so poetically for us.

A third reason why translation is interesting is that it poses a number of problems on a number of levels, as I would like to illustrate by way of an example that predates the passage from the Bible translators' preface by nearly 800 years.

The text that I want to consider is carved on a piece of wood which was found inside the Oseberg Ship, built between 815 and 820 AD, used to bury a highborn Viking woman, and excavated in 1904 on Oseberg farm in Vestfold, a county to the west of Oslo Fjord, Norway. The ship is exquisitely preserved and exhibited in the Viking Ship Museum in Bygdøy, Oslo, and the piece of wood is in the finds wing of the museum. To see the inscription clearly, though, it is helpful to visit <http://www.arild-hauge.com/innskripter1.htm>, which quotes Projektet Samnordisk runtextdatabas (2004: 163) and which also provides a transcription of the runes into letters of the Roman alphabet:



**litilúism**

The website gives the following information:

Tolkningen er usikker, men den mest vanlige er *litilvíss (er) maðr*. Den siste "m-runen" blir da tolket som *maðr* - "*mann, menneske*" - og "u-runen" blir lest som "v", og oversettes "*Lite vet mennesket*".

The interpretation is uncertain, but the most common is *litilvíss (er) maðr*. Here, the final "m-rune" is interpreted as *maðr* - "*man, human being*" – and the "u-

rune" is read as "v", and the text is translated as "*Lite vet mennesket*" [*Little knows the human being*] (my translation).

So, what is written is something like (in English translation) "littlewh", which is expanded interpretatively as "littlewisehuman", and the standard runological interpretation is a much further expansion into something like "Little knows the human being".

So far so straightforward. However, I became interested in this inscription before I knew of the interpretation just discussed, when I visited the museum on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June 2007, for the following reasons:

The translation of the runic inscription into modern Norwegian on the glass case where the piece of wood is displayed was "lite klokt menneske", the most obvious translation of which into English would be "little clever human". But whereas the translation into German, also provided on the case, was indeed "kleiner kluger Mensch" ("little clever human"), the translation into English was "unwise person". I thought that this illustrated an interesting case of ambiguity of the source having to be resolved in translation into languages that cannot preserve the ambiguity: The Norwegian here is indeed ambiguous between the two readings.

But of course neither of these translations matches the one suggested on the website in either sense or syntax:

The website translation provides a sentence in which a lack of wisdom is being predicated of humanity in general; it states that humanity is lacking in wisdom.

The translation into modern Norwegian and the translation into German provide noun phrases, rather than sentences, in which a term that refers to a particular human being is modified by terms that denote, respectively, small size and wisdom. Nothing is stated, but the NP could be appropriately predicated of a person who is small and wise.

The translation into English provides a noun phrase in which a term that refers to a particular human being is modified by a term that denotes lack of wisdom. Nothing is stated, but the NP could be appropriately predicated of a person who is unwise.

Each of the three translation selections is derivable from the runic inscription, yet the three are by no means variant formulation of the same message (in a sense of “the same message” to be left un-discussed). Rather, each has made a different decision about the relationship between the three concepts that they all share, namely, the concepts of limited quantity, wisdom, and humanity. It is now extremely interesting to wonder whether any considerations beyond the conceptual and linguistic might help us to decide what might be the best choice.

A GOOGLE search for examples of “lite klokt” yields numerous examples in contexts where something or someone is not very clever, as in the title, “Lite klokt vedtak” (“unwise resolution”), of an article by Gunnar Morsund, first published on 16 February 2009 and accessed on

<http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/distrikt/rogaland/1.6483393> on 2 April 2009. In the body of the article, this is explicitly paraphrased as “uklokt” (“unwise”). Similarly, Tina Oppen writes, on 8 April 2007 on <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/artikkel.php?artid=140082>, accessed on 2 April 2009, that “Utspillet fra Høyres Rune Aale-Hansen om å avskaffe påskeferien, er lite klokt”, paraphrased as “en dårlig idé” (“a bad idea”).

Examples like these support an understanding of the runic inscription as ascriptive of lack of wisdom; though as the runic inscription is in very old Norwegian, whereas the Googled examples are modern, it would be helpful if further support could be found. Besides, we also need to decide the most likely solution for the concept to which that ascription applies: Is it humanity in general, or is it one particular person?

It is not possible to determine this by looking at a corpus, because although a variation in the form of the noun would guide us in the case of Modern Norwegian, this would not be the case for the original runic inscription since all we have is the rune, not the word itself. In contrast, thinking about the context in which the original, runic text appeared might be helpful: The Oseberg ship was used as a grave for a highborn Viking woman, possibly a queen. It seems highly unlikely that anyone would want to place in the grave of such a person either the German, or the English inscription. Neither “small clever person” nor “unwise person” makes sense in the context. In contrast, the sense suggested by the web page makes perfect sense: In the context of the death of an important person, it seem highly appropriate to reflect on how little humanity knows and understands – a reflection on the human condition. In addition, the generic interpretation according to which the text represents a reflection on the

human condition, also presents quite a different picture of the Vikings than the other interpretations do: It shows them as people who reflect in the abstract on vast topics such as wisdom and humanity and the limitation of the former, wisdom, in examples of the latter, namely human beings in general, something which of course implies an ability to think beyond the immediate present to mysteries beyond human understanding.

Translation is interesting because it has this power to represent or misrepresent the nature of a people, the living as well as the dead. And it is interesting because it not only forces choices in most ambiguous cases; in addition to forcing this kind of choice, translation almost always invites choices, and translators' selections among these, if in any way systematic, can tell us a great deal about ourselves and our cultures. This stands out especially clearly in the case of translation of texts into for example dictatorships or, let us say, leaderships of power, where anything that might offend the state ideology is regularly edited out. For example, Chang (2008) shows how texts and text extracts that are directly or indirectly anti-Marxist or anti-Chinese are still censored in translations into Chinese today, so that, for example, Hillary Clinton's (2003: 298) memoirs are purged of stretches like the ones highlighted in the following (Chang 2008: 230-231):

The arrest of **a dissident is not unusual in China, and Harry Wu's imprisonment** might have received scant attention in the American media ... **Although he had a valid visa to China,** he was charged with espionage and thrown into jail to await trial.

But looking at more innocent examples, like that of the runic inscription, reminds us that choices are made in any linguistic encounter, whether in overt translation or in the less obvious case of translation between neighbours who share both language and context. It is this that has generated philosophical interest in translation; in my view, it is worthy of far wider and more general attention.

My argument here has been largely centred on language in translation because language is my particular passion. Among my colleagues are people with other passions, for example for history, sociology, psychology, philosophy and so on, and they would have identified quite different facets of our discipline to show that it is interesting. That in itself is another factor that makes our discipline interesting: Translation has something to say to almost anyone who takes the trouble to examine it. This is both its strength and a weakness. It is a strength because it makes for continuous renewal; it is a weakness because it often leads to theoretical confusion, for example when terms are imported from other disciplines without due care and attention to the vast theoretical network that the terms fit into. But to end on an optimistic note:

In the runic example, whatever translation we end up with, we retain the three concepts in the original little text: limited quantity, wisdom, and humanity. So all is rarely lost in translation – in fact, as the translators of the King James Bible remind us, what we gain from having translation is immeasurably valuable.

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