

Translation, Adaptation, or Something in between? Some Thoughts on Making and Teaching
Classics in Translation

As a classics professor who translates poetic texts and has for many years taught classics in translation, as well as a seminar on theory and practice of literary translation, I am keenly aware of the need for both translators and teachers to be as conscious and clear-eyed as they can about the nature of translation. This paper will draw attention to some ways of thinking about the question of translation and will, I hope, be useful both to ‘producers’ (classicists who translate) and ‘consumers’ (teachers, their students, and with any luck readers at large).

In an ideal (but counterfactual) understanding, translation is the process of converting words from one language to another by using the exactly equivalent words in that language. Adaptation, on the other hand, is the process of change by which elements (words, phrases, tropes, even situations) are changed to suit the target environment. Hence, adaptation proposes to convey something essential about a text while communicating it in a deliberately altered linguistic/cultural context, or even a different medium.

Described in this way, these things sound quite different, but only in the abstract are they completely separable. Both depend upon notions of equivalence (though in different ways and perhaps on different scales), and both ask to be measured by (often quite distinct) standards of fidelity to a source text. Classicists tend to produce and use translations that offer a high standard of semantic equivalence, but it is not hard to show that, figuring in connotations, associations, register, usage, etc., there really aren’t any exact equivalent words between languages, so the ideal can never be achieved. Similarly, grammatical structures do not always map one-to-one-between even loosely related languages. Some adaptive accommodations will be unavoidable.

As regards fidelity, translations of classics are judged, by classicists at least, primarily in terms of semantic correctness, whereas other forms of fidelity (in terms, e.g., of form, register, musicality, and so on) are often honored in the breach. The problems involved are suggested by asking the simple question, how faithful is translation of a comedy if it isn't funny? Adaptive strategies of many kinds are going to be essential if the goal is not simply to produce a literal word-for-word version.

The very act of moving a literary work across linguistic and cultural barriers results in inevitable changes that are different in form and scale, but conceptually very similar to those needed when a novel is adapted into a screenplay, or a stage play brought to the operatic stage or television screen. Both "straight" translation and adaptation are designed to bring the original work to an audience whose linguistic and cultural assumptions are not those of the original text. The difference is one of degree, along a spectrum of which one pole strives to bring the reader as close as possible to the text by insisting on its foreignness and the need to accommodate oneself to it, while the other pole strives to bring the text as close as possible to the reader by domesticating it, adapting it to the language usage, social environment, customary practices, etc. familiar to the intended audience.

The notion of a translation-adaptation spectrum is useful in part because it emphasizes the existence of multiple valid possibilities closer to one or the other pole, and also because it emphasizes the need for conscious and coherent choices on the part of the translator/adaptor. There is always a need for plain prose translation of the kind that the Loeb Library offers. Classicists should also familiarize themselves with versions of classical texts translated or adapted by writers of the caliber, in recent times, of a Seamus Heaney or a W. S. Merwin—not to look Beckmesser-like for howlers, but to learn from the creative strategies they have employed.

As translators, classicists should be very clear about their target audiences and the use to which they hope their translations will be put. It is this that will permit them to stake out their own place on the spectrum, and suggest the kinds of techniques that will help them reach their goals.

As teachers, they should choose translations to fit the goals of the particular course in which they will use them. They should not be shy about talking about reading texts in translation and about their choice of translations. Students will be wary if the teacher continually “corrects” the text they are reading, but they will benefit from samples of comparative versions and discussion of what is involved in the process of bringing an ancient text to a contemporary classroom.

In the paper I propose to deliver, this conceptual framework will be illustrated throughout with examples taken primarily from translations of Greek, and to a lesser extent, Roman poetic texts.