

Translation and the Space Between: Operative Parameters of an Enterprise

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As much as translation is a process, “a series of actions or operations conducing to an end,” the act/art/craft/science of translation is an enterprise, “a project or undertaking that is especially difficult, complicated, or risky,” and as such often requires a “readiness to engage in daring action.” As a process, translation is an imaginative and disciplined exercise in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural reiteration, a search for the most suitable synonymy—a subjective will-to-equivalence—in which what must remain virtually the “same” as the original finds its expression in an “other” that strives self-consciously but impossibly to be none other than the same. The process is an act of applied, inevitably idiosyncratic, critical reading (“applied” in the sense that the reading leads to a writing grounded in what has been read). It is inter-idiomatic reading of and between two languages, a semiotic decoding of a given discourse, with the goal of active and felicitous recoding in a target or second language, the desired cross-idiomatic result. Thus one arrives at the strabismus so characteristic of the translator at work: one eye focused on the text-that-is, the other on the text-to-be. This process of translation is always risky business; hence the additional qualifier of “enterprise.” As in any type of discourse, ranging from the concrete, referential, and informative to the abstract, symbolic, and suggestive, calculated choices must be made by the transreader *qua* transwriter regarding the recasting of the original text into an “other” language with a different culturally programmed readership.

The notions of strabismus and enterprise lead, respectively, toward a consideration of two heuristic devices which may assist in achieving a better understanding of some of the complexity involved in and flexibility required for felicitous translation. The duality characteristic of a strabismus

points toward the importance of binary relationships and/or oppositions; the notion of enterprise points toward a cline representing the choices made and the risks taken by the translator while working from one language toward and into another. The choice is either right/more appropriate/felicitous or wrong/less appropriate/infelicitous.

Binary relations and spectra, as we shall see, delimit much of the work of the translator, constituting parameters for the space in which the enterprise is undertaken. Further, as structural considerations, they lend themselves to schematic depictions—still photographs or blueprints¹—of the dynamics intimately bound together in translation, as the translator’s will-to-equivalence conjoins strategic imperatives and textual (linguistic and cultural) considerations with the translator’s own baggage, the personality, attitudes, and experience which a given translator brings to bear on any translation project.

The *sine qua non* of translation, the moral and operative heart of the enterprise, is the notion of fidelity. The translator’s fundamental commitment to faithfulness is the strategic imperative which underlies translation as the will-to-equivalence that it must be by definition. Yet the translator’s requisite strabismus—the eyes incessantly focusing on both the text-that-is and the text-to-be—makes adherence to fidelity no simple matter for, as Barbara Johnson has so aptly described it, the translator cannot help but be a “faithful bigamist.” On the one hand, the translator must demonstrate fidelity toward what is given in the source-language text (SL); on the other, the translator must also be faithful to the cross-idiomatic possibilities for re-expression in the target language (TL). (See figure 1.)

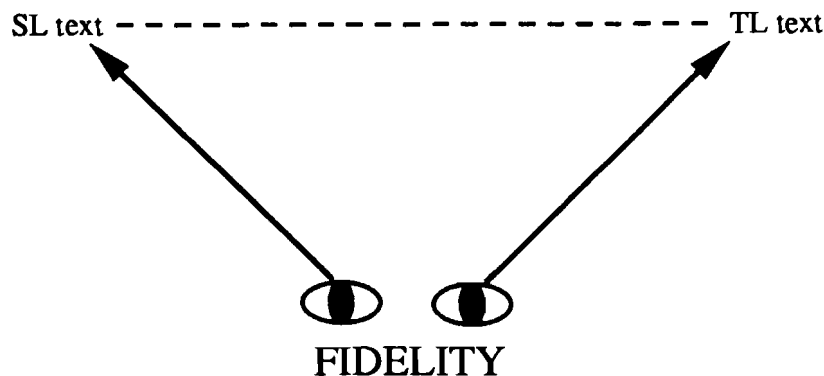


Figure 1.

It is a difficult double devotion, this movement of eyes and mind back and forth between texts, representative of the shifts of privileging that occur between source and target texts as the translator performs a tight-rope act, balancing faithfulness to the original against the inevitable idiomatic demands imposed by the second language. Another way of viewing it is that the translator is always working within a double gravitational field, with a strong centripetal pull on the one hand toward a source text, and on the other an equally strong centrifugal pull toward the target text. Although in the end the goal of translation is to produce an equivalent readable text in the target language, this centrifugal result must always be tied to—delimited and dictated by—the content, form, and manner of expression of the source language text. The requisite and natural movement away from the source language must always be grounded by that very source language if the will-to-equivalence is to remain operative. (See figure 2.)

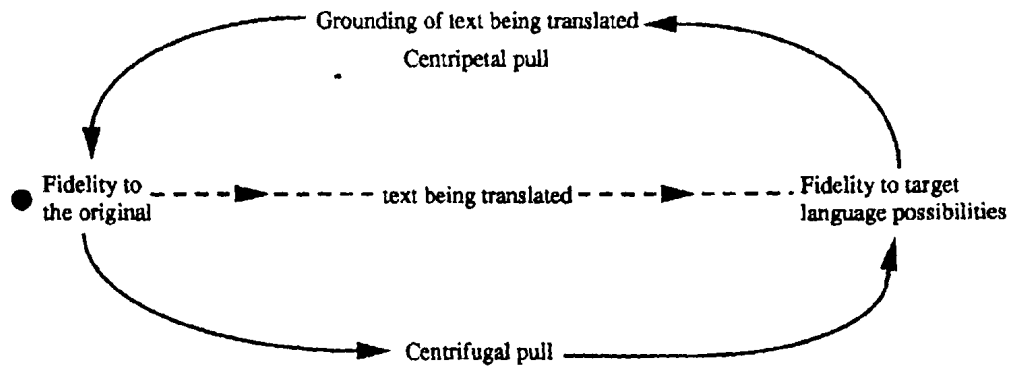


Figure 2.

Within these initial schematic frameworks, the translator focuses his or her interpretative and recreative (decoding-recoding) faculties on several synonymic sets of binary considerations. (See figure 3.)

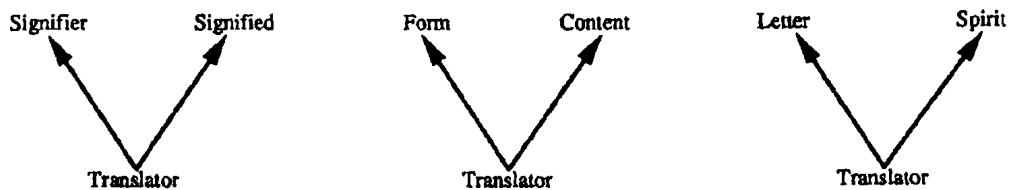


Figure 3.

As the translator works in the space between both languages in a movement from the source-language text toward and into the target language, measuring the given against what might best reappear in the second language, the enterprise of accurate and felicitous decoding and recoding may be summarized as in figure 4.

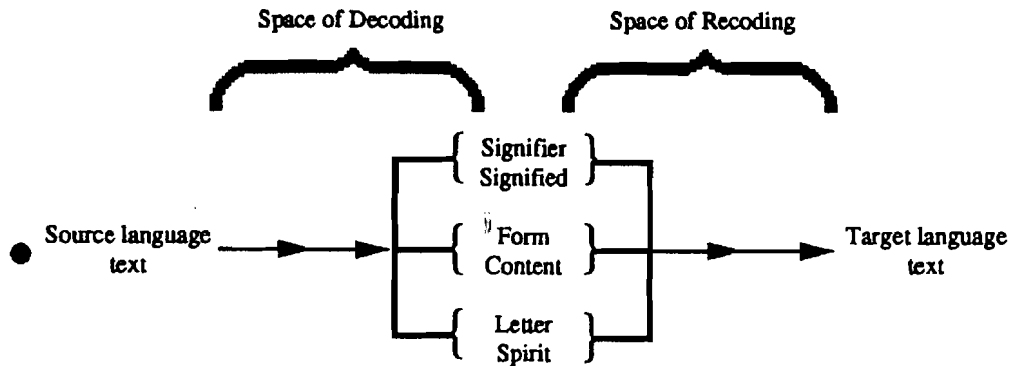


Figure 4.

While working in the space of recoding—the terrain in which privileging one translation option (word/phrasing) over another takes place—the possibilities of recoding are to be found along yet another cline demarcated by the Roman (Horatian and Ciceronian) binary opposition of literal (word for word) vs. liberal (sense for sense) rendition.² It has traditionally been held that a literal translation represents a greater adherence to the tenet of fidelity, as “literal” denotes the closest proximity possible to the source language in fulfillment of the centripetal obligation. Liberal translation, on the other hand, by moving farther away from the source language toward a privileging of the re-expressive possibilities in the target language, has been considered a flirtation with infidelity and betrayal, *traduttore*, *traditore*, as the translator may, either wittingly or unwittingly, move beyond translation proper (wherein a second text can be traced back centripetally to a source language text) into the production of something quite different in both letter and spirit from the original text. When this occurs the centrifugal pull of the target text has been overdetermined.

Problems may arise from working at one extreme or other of this literal/liberal spectrum: (1) A centripetal translation parallels the source language so closely and inauthentically that the result is an unreadable text

in the target language. For example, the individual words of the translation may be understandable in isolation in English, but their structuring and phrasing (grammar, syntax, idiom) instead correspond more to the language of the source text, making the read in English odd and arduous. (2) A centrifugal rendition may stray so far from the original that it can no longer be considered a translation, but rather an exercise in creative writing, another original. Both dangers, the unreadable and the untraceable, are hazards to be avoided by a constant cross-referencing between source and target language texts. (See figure 5.)

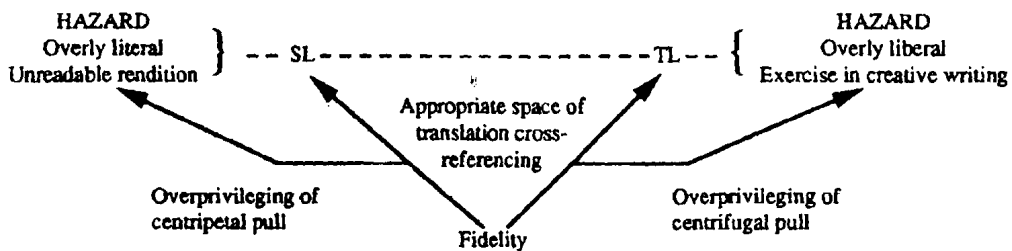


Figure 5.

Although there are moments, facilitated by the occasional similarities between the source and target languages, when what appeared in the first language may be carried over quite literally into the language of the translation, the fact that no two languages are the same³ suggests that the translator, in order to achieve an idiomatic reading in the target language, will be working more in the re-expressive space demarcated by the target language. Words, concepts, and cultural denotations and connotations that are similar in sense between two languages can and *should* be incorporated literally or near-literally in the translation whenever possible, as there is no real need for tampering; those which are not similar will require greater recoding in the target language as an adjustment to its normative discursive parameters. (See figure 6.)

The amount of linguistic and cultural similarity between certain language combinations will be greater than between others, suggesting that some translation projects will be able to rely more on a literal carrying-across than others, as in the following progression which pairs (1) the more similar Spanish and Portuguese, (2) the less similar Spanish and English, and (3) the dissimilar Spanish and Japanese. (See figure 7.)

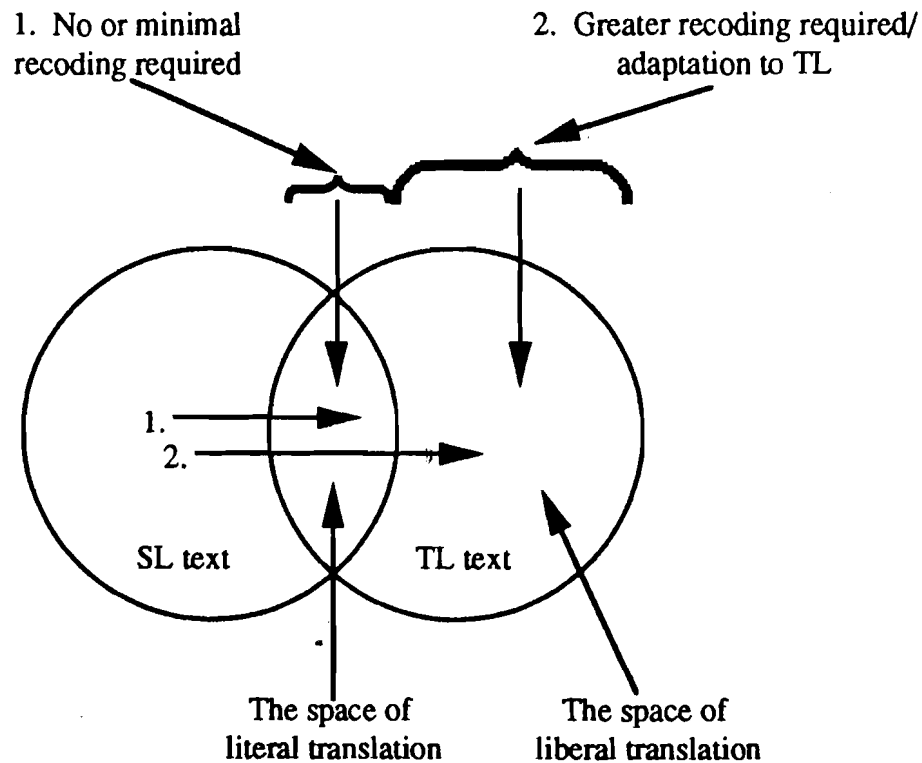


Figure 6.

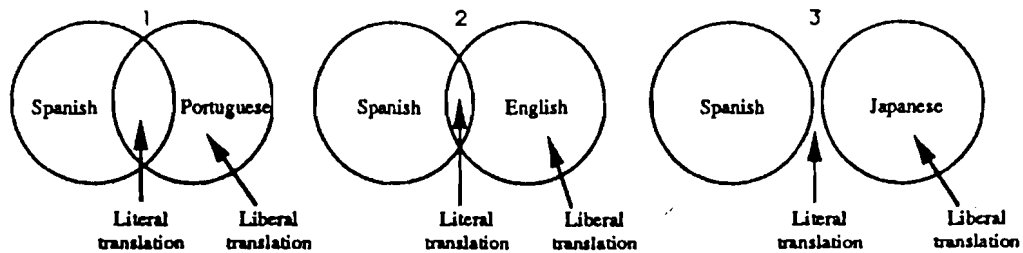


Figure 7.

Fidelity as the will-to-equivalence in translation—equivalence in form, meaning, manner, and especially impact on the reader—must be viewed functionally. This means that the translator will render literally or near-literally when able and liberally when the circumstances dictate so doing. If the target language and culture require a greater amount of recoding for

equivalent sense and form of expression and effect of reception, then following this particular map or routing of translation strategy should not be misinterpreted as an abandoning of the original text, or a betrayal of fidelity. As long as the translation remains grounded in the source-language text, fidelity remains operative throughout the spectrum bounded by literal vs. liberal rendition, regardless of whether adherence to the letter or the spirit of the original text has been privileged. (See figure 8).

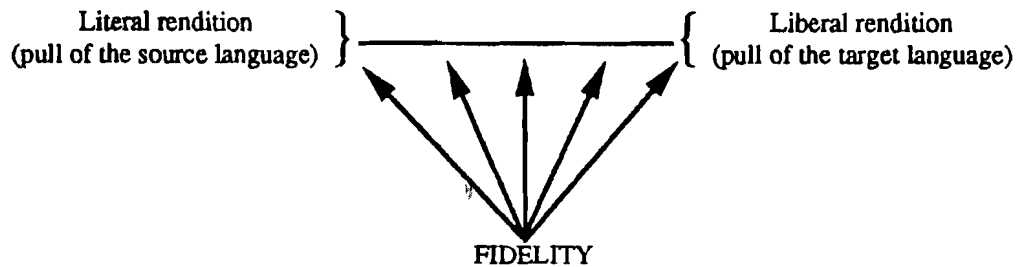


Figure 8.

Indeed, in the attempt to reproduce an equivalent readable text in the target language, liberal rendition is often the better, and the *only*, viable expression of adherence to fidelity in translation. Although it is a risky business—when to recode or not recode a text in translation, how much or how little recoding is required—the calculated decision to resort to a liberal translation, privileging the target language and readership, is in the end what actually redeems the notion of fidelity toward the original author and text, as it represents the translator’s attempt (Romantic hermeneutics) to write in the target language what the original author might well have written had that been the language of the original writing. Often this is the only map to follow in order to salvage the spirit of the original. When such a strategy is implemented along the binary opposition construct delimited by fidelity vs. license, the two extremes collapse into one another and switch places such that license, when required as the optimal idiomatic strategy, becomes fidelity’s most faithful expression. (See figure 9.)

Two distinguished theorists of translation, Nabokov and Levine, represent eloquent voices at either end of this particular schematic depiction. Nabokov (1955:512), with his prescribed “copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page,” advocates fidelity as literal rendition at all costs, even when the translation risks unreadability. Nabokov’s contention is that translation, especially of

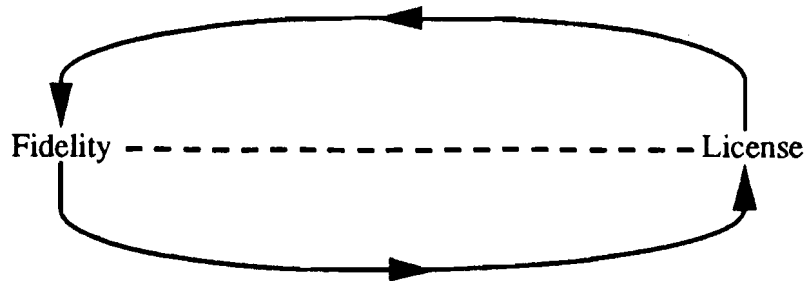


Figure 9.

literary classics, should retain the flavor and strangeness of the original and not water down these effects for the new readership. The inherent foreignness of the original text should shine through the translation, such that the reader feels the genius of this otherness at work. This may be interpreted as the creative writer's resistance to translation as naturalization, a gesture of empathetic self-preservation on behalf of the original, echoed by Spanish writer Ana María Matute when she says that translators should resist the tendency to want to turn foreign wine into Coca-Cola.⁴ Such statements argue for a certain "theological" hermeneutics in translation, privileging the original author and text as if they were sacred.

Levine (1989), on the other hand, illustrates in practice her theory that a translation should strive for an equivalent readable effect in the second language. This approach, less nostalgic than that of the creative writer anxious to preserve the word (and its original cultural connotation) as it was in the beginning, argues more for a "romantic" hermeneutics in translation: an attempt to double as the original writer now writing the same text again in a different language and for a different reader. It is an argument for calculated linguistic and cultural code switching in the name of idiomaticness in lieu of code retention which too often results in an awkward, inauthentic read.⁵ Again, praxis is situated along a cline representative of the translator's inevitable operative strabismus, characterized now by the various tropes of double focus. (See figure 10.)

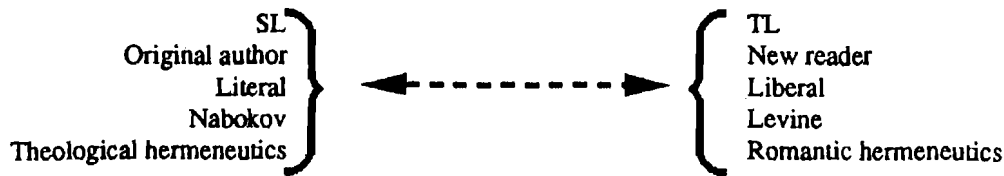


Figure 10.

Most translation, however, seems to operate more comfortably in the space between the extremes. It is a performance of faithful bigamy—the privileging of now one extreme, now the other, always somehow accounting for both. That is, it draws strategically from the spectrum between the extremes, blending literal and liberal solutions in the search for equivalence. (See figure 11.)

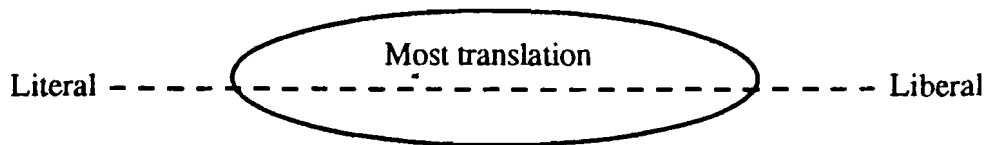


Figure 11.

Often it is the type of discourse being translated which shapes the translation strategy. In dealing with concrete, informational discourse (nonliterary such as commercial, legal, and medical texts), for instance, the referential straightforwardness and universality of the language used makes it possible for the translator to attain a fidelity which results in idiomatic rendition by working more closely to the literal or centripetal side of the cline. On the other hand, when the text is literary (subjective, lyrical, musical, structurally and contextually dense with many figurative and idiomatic expressions), the translator must have greater license to work more toward the liberal or centrifugal side of the spectrum in order to achieve a suitable idiomatic literary equivalent. Of course, nonliterary and literary discourses are not absolute in their distinction from one another—the commercial subgenre of advertising may contain numerous literary devices (e.g. the Bushmills Irish Whiskey ad which begins with the alliterative “Occasionally Dewars does do ours”) and fiction may be quite technical at times (e.g. Juan Benet’s [1985:29–31] geologic descriptions⁶ in the novel *Return to Región*, “folds of the Hercynian cycle . . . massifs that

functioned during the paroxysm as ridges of the geosyncline ... those long, deep, and shadowy Silurian and Devonian immersions"). There is also a certain overlap between these two fundamental categories of discourse, which may be illustrated as in figure 12.

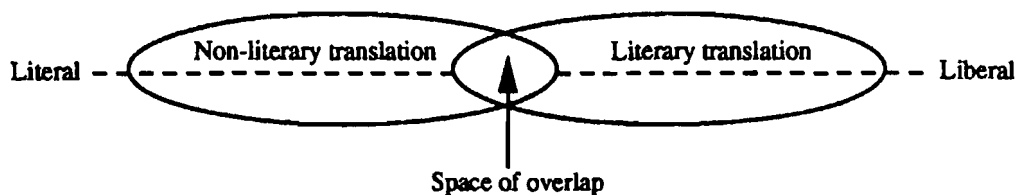


Figure 12.

Discourse typologies are not monolithic in their distinctions from one another. While a nonliterary text, for example, does indeed lend itself to a greater degree of literalness or near-literalness in translation, the student should remain alert for those moments when such a prescription should be abandoned in favor of a more flexible and appropriate nonliteral solution.

The student should also be aware that every translator brings a certain amount of baggage (a personality, an attitude, a track record) to each project. This baggage is as fundamental to the outcome of a translation project as the translator's linguistic and discursive knowledge, performative capacity, and cross-cultural sensitivity. The personality and attitude of the translator shape the entire spirit of endeavor. Again, it is useful to view these elements as binary oppositions which further qualify the parameters of the cline established between literal and liberal rendition. The translation personality of a translator who operates more closely to the literal end of the spectrum may be described in positive terms as respectful, modest, cautious, acquiescent, humble, deferential, self-effacing, selfless, transparent, proper in the extreme. The translator who works more closely to the liberal end of cross-idiomatic renewal may also be described in positive terms: confident, courageous, adventurous, bold, active, resourceful, and proper within justifiable limits. Since translation tends to operate between the extremes, privileging now one, now the other for the sake of achieving the most felicitous result—one which is both accurate and idiomatic—the translator at work will be, in a calculated manner, both respectful and confident, modest and courageous,⁷ deferential and resourceful. If an overprivileging of one or the other extremes occurs, then the positive

connotations of the translator's operative strabismus, now an attitudinal dialectic, may be corrupted by either deficiency or excess: Fearful, cowardly, sycophantic, slavish, paralytic, and on the other hand, impudent, arrogant, and rebellious. It is not difficult for the requisite subservience in translation to slide into detrimental fawning upon the original text, that is, undertranslation. Nor is it difficult to slide from confidence and calculated risk-taking into presumptuousness, that is, overtranslation, rendering in too liberal a manner that which does not call for it. Translation does not call for a textual bootlicking of the source text, nor can it tolerate a cavalier approach to cross-idiomatic equivalence. These extremes must be joined together in such a way that their synthesis yields an equilibrium between respect for the original and respect for the new readership: a prudent balance emblematic of the maturity of a dialectic of attitudinal adjustment. (See figure 13.)

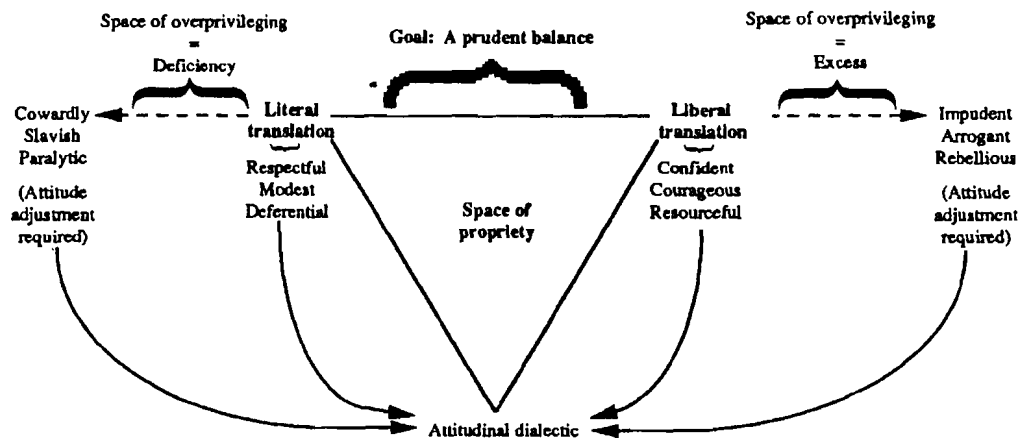


Figure 13.

This sense of prudent balance is attained over time; it is a function of trial and error and experience. Beginning translators are often overly literal in their efforts, cranking out cribs and trotting them before the reader. There is very little enterprise in this process, as modesty and caution lead to paralysis in the face of the source text's centripetal pull. They are afraid that they will traduce rather than translate, so they fall short in the performance of "the narrow act"⁸ that translation must be by definition. Then, as they learn to look more actively and courageously for cross-idiomatic equivalence, an ever-widening act that Hugh Kenner has characterized as the translator's confidence, built up over time,⁹ they often move from the

“over-literal” to the “over-liberal,” such that the original text becomes a pretext for their own creative writing. Their sense of newly found freedom from slavishness leads to an excessive privileging of the centrifugal element of translation, a celebration of independence which too often leaves the source text behind. In time, and with proper feedback, they learn to temper both extremes, viewing the “ever-widening act” as a function of the “narrow act,” that is, as confidence centripetally grounded. (See figure 14.)

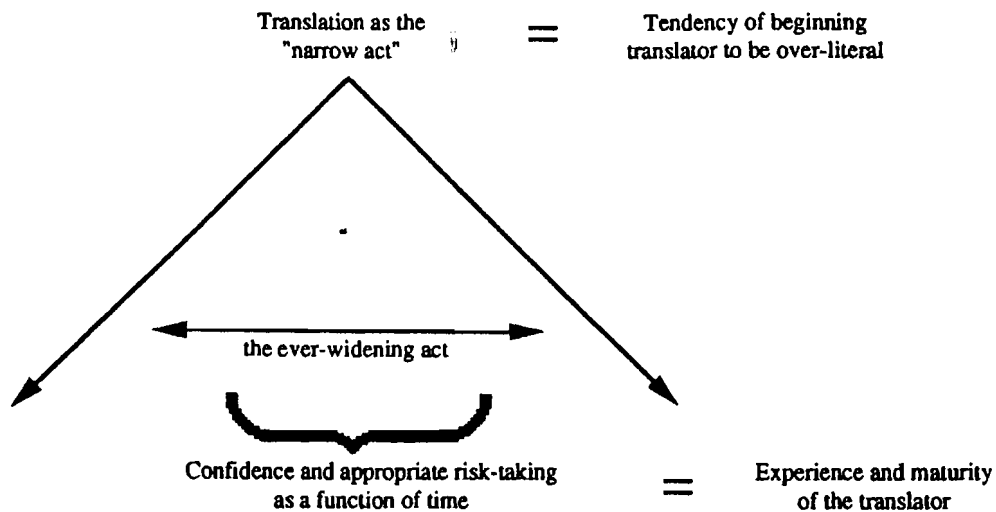


Figure 14.

The outcome of any translation project owes itself in no small measure to the factors summarized in the figures which have been presented: fidelity as the moral and operative imperative, the strabismic attention to both the centripetal and centrifugal pulls of source and target texts, the requirements and possibilities for a literal vs. liberal carrying-across, and the roles of personality, attitude, and experience in the enterprise. The product will vary according to the configuration of these elements within each translator and according to how the dynamics of structural concerns—binary relations and spectra—are harnessed. As a heuristic device for translation pedagogy, the schematic depictions of such structural consider-

ations can serve as blueprints which highlight fundamental parameters of the translation process as a restrained or restricted freedom. It is within such operative parameters that the work of the translator takes place, yielding renditions that are more or less literal, more or less liberal, yet always grounded by the source text. As the translator's will-to-equivalence struggles toward a fitting cross-idiomatic reproduction of the original text, it is the dialectic between the extremes—the space between—which shapes the process as enterprise, for this is the space of possibilities en route to the anticipated felicitous final product.

NOTES

1. The schematic depictions used are heuristic devices which I have found effective in courses on translation in recent years. They serve to clarify and simplify some of the complex dynamics involved in translation.

2. For more on this, see Bassnett-McGuire 1980:39, 43-54.

3. For more on the dissimilarities between languages, see Burton Raffel's (1988) *The Art of Translating Poetry*.

4. An observation made to me by Matute while working with her on my translation of her short stories, *Historias de la Artámila* (*Tales of the Artámila*, in progress). I have also heard Austrian writer Erich Wolfgang Skwara suggest the same, that idiomaticness in translation should not take the form of translating away the naturally foreign elements which inform the source-language text. Matute, I hasten to add, believes that the resistance to translation as total naturalization is secondary to the translator's ability to recreate a faithful idiomatic read in the target language. In this priority she is in agreement with translator Anthony Kerrigan that "a good translator is really a writer" (in Doyle 1987:138).

5. Levine has received considerable support in what I have characterized as her romantic hermeneutics in translation. See her article "From 'Little Painted Lips' to *Heartbreak Tango*" concerning the collaborative venture with Argentine author Manuel Puig.

6. For more on this example of technical discourse embedded in fiction, see pp. 28-33 of Benet's novel.

7. Minas Savvas (1988:244) advocates that "the translator's modesty should be surrounded by a certain amount of courage, the willingness to take risks."

8. From Gregory Rabassa (1984:22), who writes that the translator's "craft is what Ronald Christ might call 'the narrow act.'"

9. An observation made by translator Hugh Kenner on July 28, 1987, in a discussion with the participants at the NEH Literary Translation Institute (University of California at Santa Cruz).

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