

Review of Lynne Long (ed.), Translation and Religion (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2005), in LINGUIST LIST 16.2711

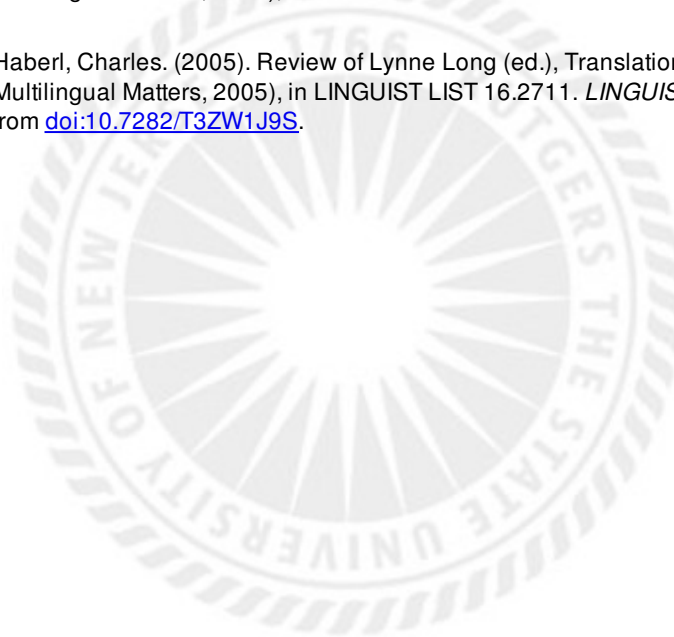
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LINGUIST List 16.2711

Wed Sep 21 2005

Review: Translation: Long (2005)

Editor for this issue: Lindsay Butler <lindsay@linguistlist.org>

What follows is a review or discussion note contributed to our Book Discussion Forum. We expect discussions to be informal and interactive; and the author of the book discussed is cordially invited to join in. If you are interested in leading a book discussion, look for books announced on LINGUIST as "available for review." Then contact Sheila Dooley at dooley@linguistlist.org.

Directory

1. Charles Häberl, Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable?

Message 1: Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable?

Date: 13-Sep-2005

From: Charles Häberl <haber@fas.harvard.edu>

Subject: Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable?

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From the perspective of an outsider, it would seem only natural that translation theory and the study of religious texts would be intimately connected, as the sacred texts of various religious traditions comprise some of the earliest corpora to be translated, as well as some of the largest corpora, and the translations of religious texts are often broadly distributed and prove to have a lasting value of their own. For these reasons, religious texts (and their translations) provide scholars with a wealth of information into the process of translation and the

factors which influence this process and its end results. Furthermore, as Hussein Abdul-Raof remarks in the final essay of the volume, the language of "the religious aspects of a culture are usually the most difficult, both in analysis of the source vocabulary and in finding the best receptor language equivalents" (p. 171). It is in the translation of religious texts that the translator encounters his most difficult challenges, to the extent that many claim that religious texts (such as the Qur'an) defy translation, and yet, paradoxically, religious texts are the texts most likely to be translated, repeatedly and continuously according to the needs of the community.

SUMMARY

Lynne Long remarks in her introduction to the volume, "it would not be overstating the case to say that scriptural movement between cultures has been a major source of development in translation theory." Many of the challenges discussed by today's translators and translation theorists were prefigured by the original agents of this scriptural movement. As a result, there exists an enormous wealth of literature on the translation of religious texts, just as the years since 1923—the year in which Walter Benjamin's translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens* was first published, prefaced by his seminal essay *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (English title "The task of the translator," Benjamin, 1968)—have seen the production of a considerable amount of material on translation theory. The introduction makes it clear that one of the manifest goals of this book was to introduce both the general reader and the scholar interested in translation theory to this body of literature, which constitutes a mine of information for the field.

The book is divided into two sections, each composed of seven essays. The first deals with the issues of translating religious texts on a broad scale, both cross-culturally and within specific traditions, and the second deals with case studies relating to a particular problem in translation.

The list of contributors is a miscellany of scholars in the fields of Theology, Literature, Linguistics, and Area Studies of various sorts. Consequently, the book provides an introduction to the methodologies used in the study of major religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, and touches upon "broad issues such as historicity, linguistics, cultural theory, sociology, theology, and philosophy as well as more specific cases of gender, art, metaphor, humour, status, editing, patronage, and interpretation" (p. 15). The blurb on the back of the book advertises the range of texts treated within it as "ambitious," and in this it does not deceive.

The volume begins with Christopher Shackle's extremely personal excursus into highlights from the recent (post 19th-century) translation history of three religious texts, the Bible, the *Masnavi* of Rumi, and the Sikh scriptures, the *Adi Granth* ("From Gentleman's Outfitters to Hyperbazaar: A Personal Approach to Translating the Sacred," pp. 19-32). Despite the fact that Shackle's essay is indeed personal (thanks to his inclusion of various vignettes from his own education and academic career), the term "personal" in the title of his essay

should not necessarily be taken as an endorsement of any such approach. At one point, he inveighs against the "New Age typographic layouts," apparently inspired by Japanese haiku, which characterize many recent (and, in his opinion, unsatisfactory) translations of religious texts. Shackle concludes that "context rather than content makes the holy untranslatable," implying that it is not so much the content of a given text that renders it untranslatable, but its religious context within the community, and the struggle for control over that text's interpretation.

K. Onur Toker ("Prophecy and Tongues: St. Paul, Prophecy, and Building the House," pp. 33-40) focuses instead upon the Christian tradition at the beginning of the Common Era. In this context, his essay offers a much more theological approach to the issue of translation, concerning the central importance of hermeneutics to Paul and the formation of the early church. He takes up once again the topic of the "impossible necessity" of translation after Babel first identified by Derrida in his essay "Des Tours de Babel" (1985). Toker concludes that, if the confusion of tongues at Babel rendered translation both necessary and impossible, Pentecost marked the conclusion of the punishment upon the Semites, by stripping Hebrew and Aramaic of their privileged status as sacred languages and essentially rendering them irrelevant. To Paul, according to Toker, the act of translation was nothing less than prophetic, rendering the "univocal signified or spirit of the Bible in different, more common and intelligible, words or letters, that is to say, signifiers" (p. 40).

It is only natural that Buddhism, a tradition which spans the continent of Asia and has become one of the fastest growing religions in the rest of the world, should be represented here. Kate Crosby ("What Does Not Get Translated in Buddhist Studies and the Impact on Teaching," pp. 41-53) discusses one of the problems faced by scholars of Buddhism, particularly Theravada Buddhism. While she makes a convincing case for her thesis—namely, that the absence of certain texts in translation may play as important a role as the presence of others in shaping in the outsider's perception of a religion—certain statements detract from the credibility of her essay. For example, she casually mentions the adoption of a form of Buddhism by early Christian monastics (p. 41), or the influence of Korean printing methods used for the Buddhist canon on the development of the Gutenberg press (p. 42), as if they were conventional wisdom and gives absolutely no citations. Incredibly, she admits that these sensationalist claims have absolutely nothing to do with her argument, which leaves one wondering why she included them in the first place; certainly they have no relevance to the subject matter. The rest of the article is thankfully free of such embellishments, save for one oblique reference to "pre-modern world Buddhism [stretching] to the Danube in the West."

Leonard Greenspoon's essay ("Texts and Contexts: Perspectives on Jewish Translations of the Hebrew Bible," pp. 54-64) takes a different approach to the issue of translation by examining a series of translations of a single work (the Tanakh, or Jewish scriptures) within the context of a single community (the Jews) over an extended period

of time. Greenspoon notes that Jewish translations, as a general rule, tend to privilege the source language. In his view, Jewish translations of their holy literature are "intended to supplement, not supplant; complement, not replace, the original." The Jewish commitment to the Hebrew language has resulted in the adoption of what he terms "sensible or comprehensible literalism." It was not until the 18th century that Jewish translations began to depart from "sensible literalism" to what has come to be termed "functional equivalence" (De Waard and Nida, 1986)—largely in the context of the Jews' assimilation to the societies in which they found themselves in diaspora. Indeed, the German translation produced by Moses Mendelssohn and the English translation produced by the Jewish Publication Society looked to preexisting gentile translations as a model—the Luther Bible in the case of the former and the 1885 Revised Version of the King James Bible in the case of the latter.

The central texts of Hinduism are examined within the next essay, "Making Sanskritic or Making Strange? How Should We Translate Classical Hindu Texts?" by W.J. Johnson (pp. 65-74). The title of his essay suggests two major strategies for translating Hindu texts (anticipated by Friedrich Schleiermacher already in the 18th century): "domesticating" the translation, thereby privileging the target language, and "foreignizing" it, which makes it appear strange to speakers of the target language. Johnson notes that a compelling translation of any of the Classical Hindu texts has yet to be written, unlike, say, the Classical texts of the Greek and Latin traditions. For this reason, he says, Hindu texts such as the Bhagavad Gita have not yet become part of the target tradition (by which he presumably means the Anglophone world) in the same way that the Iliad and the Odyssey have. Johnson therefore calls for a new purpose in translation - namely, to produce an enduring literary classic, not a religious one. Much like Shackle, he condemns translations conforming too closely to both "New Age" and "King James" style language as insufficient for this purpose, due to the effect that the language used in writing a translation has upon our understanding of its content.

Adriana Serban offers an excellent analysis of the limitations upon translators of religious texts in her essay on "Archaising versus Modernising in English Translations of the Orthodox Liturgy: St. John Chrysostomos in the 20th Century" (pp. 75-88). Much like Shackle, she notes that translators of sacred texts are seldom free to do as they please. Most liturgical translations are deliberately retrospective (at one point, in reference to the much maligned use of King James language in these types of translations, she describes the process as one of "colonising the past") and governed by the translator's expectations of his audience. The use of archaic language cannot necessarily be attributed to the date of the translation's publication. In fact, one of the more recent translations of the liturgy, the 1982 version based upon Old Church Slavonic manuscripts, is much more archaizing than the translation prepared by Archbishop Athenagoras Kokkinakis, which preceded it. Serban concludes that the language adopted by translators of the liturgy owes much to the intended audience and purpose of the translation, following Hans Vermeer's

skopos theory of translation (1996).

The first part of the book concludes with Peter Kirk's essay "Holy Communicative? Current Approaches to Bible Translation Worldwide" (p. 89-101). Much like Toker, Kirk takes up the central significance of translation to the Christian tradition, claiming that "it was in Christianity, and from its very start, that the principle was clearly established that the Holy Scriptures, even the words of God and of Christ, could and should be translated" (p. 89). While some of his claims are dubious (such as his statement that the New Testament was being translated into Latin, Syriac, and Coptic by the 2nd century, p. 89), and his frequent reliance upon online sources may raise some eyebrows, what follows is, for the most part, a highly thoughtful history of scholarship on Bible translation. He notes that many of the issues currently debated by translation theorists were already foreseen by Jerome, author of the Vulgate translation of the Bible, who sought to find a middle road between the slavishly literal and anarchy of uncontrolled freedom. Much like Johnson, he notes that religious translations are judged according to their relevance as well as their perceived legitimacy, without which they run the risk of being unread. Like Shackle and Serban, however, he concludes that the chief obstacle faced by the translator of religious texts lies in the expectations made of their interpretation rather than their actual content.

In the second portion of the volume, we are introduced to seven specific case studies in translation theory. David Jasper, author of "Settling Hoti's Business: The Impossible Necessity of Biblical Translation," (pp. 105-114) takes the philologists and New Testament scholars to task for what he perceives as their interminable focus upon the minutiae of grammar and their unwillingness to let the text itself stand as "its own best interpreter." He makes particular reference to the Gospel of Mark, a close study of which leaves the reader with more questions than answers. A good translation, in his opinion, is far more valuable than any detailed philological treatment of the text—for a good translator accepts that there is nothing outside of the text itself (according to Derrida's celebrated aphorism, "il n'y a pas de hors texte"). In his view, at the heart of the "impossible necessity of Biblical translation is a religious imperative and a mystery" - namely, that the work of translation is absolutely necessary, but can only take our understanding of the text so far. At some point we will reach the limits of translation, and beyond that lies the mystery.

Johnathan Gold ("Guardian of the Translated Dharma: Sakya Pandita on the Role of the Tibetan Scholar", pp. 115-128) focuses upon a single work on translation, Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen's *Entryway into Scholarship*, which details the issues faced by Tibetan Buddhists working from translations of Buddhist scriptures in the 13th century. Sakya Pandita identifies four areas of scholarship necessary for safeguarding the interpretation of translated texts - obscure vocabulary, translation techniques, common translation mistakes, and unclear (literary) contexts - while at the same time assuming in his audience a high degree of literacy in both the source and the target

languages. Gold argues that while Sakya Pandita ultimately places his faith in the translatability of sacred texts, he is preoccupied with preserving the interpretation of these texts within an elite community of literate scholars.

While Jasper and Gold concern themselves with a single author, David Burke ("The Translation of the Hebrew Word 'ish: A Brief Historical Comparison", pp.129-140) concerns himself with a single word. Burke recounts the criticism that the redactors of the latest edition of the New International Version faced after introducing gender-inclusive language. The leaders of the Religious Right in America, chief among them James Dobson (more recently in the news for his crusade against Spongebob Squarepants), identified the new translation as a capitulation to a "radical feminist agenda." Among the guidelines hastily established by Dobson and his peers for future Bible translations was the demand that the Hebrew word 'ish be translated as "man" wherever it occurred. Burke scans the translation of this particular word in translations from the Septuagint to the modern day and concludes that Dobson's guidelines fail to take into consideration the semantic range of the word, impose an artificial consistency where one had never existed before, and might actually hinder the public's comprehension of the text.

The problems inherent in translating a living oral tradition into an appropriate written form, particularly in a literate culture, are the topic of Nile Green's essay, "Translating the Spoken Words of the Saints: Oral Literature and the Sufis of Aurangabad" (pp. 141-150). Green focuses upon a genre of Muslim South Asian literature—the malfuzat, or recorded conversations of Sufi saints, which are sacred in their own right, if not possessing the same degree of prestige as the Qur'an and the Hadith. In fact, the sacred status of these oral traditions vis-à-vis the much better-established claims of the primary written texts is one of the chief concerns that preoccupies Green. Green concludes that, despite their claims to authenticity, the original conversations of the Sufi saints have been "translated" to conform to the prevailing literary standard, so as to ensure their claims to the sacred and their place in the preexisting hagiographic tradition of Muslim South Asia.

Sue Niebrzydowski ("From Scriptorium to Internet: The Implication of Audience on the Translation of the Psalms of the St Albans Psalter", pp. 151-161) examines a recent online publication of a single illustrated manuscript, and the translation that accompanies it. She identifies this translation as a working example of a skopos-driven translation (following Munday's, 2001) of a frequently translated religious text, one made with a variety of concerns in mind that make it differ from a general translation. Chief amongst these concerns are a desire to make the text reflect its interpretation during the 12th century, the time of its authorship, and particularly to reflect the text as it stood (and was understood) by the illustrator himself, rather than the contemporary interpretation of the Psalms. As a result, the translation conforms to the source text in terms of its punctuation and orthography of place names. At the same time, the spiritual significance of this religious text to the modern reader is not the concern of the translator, which liberates the translator from the

constraints imposed by contemporary interpretations of the text. These are the limitations and benefits of the skopos-driven approach.

Hussein Abdul-Raof begins his essay on "Cultural Aspects in Qur'an Translation" (pp. 162-172) arguing for the traditional view that the Qur'an defies attempts at translating it. In his view, the Qur'an differs from other religious texts in that it was "revealed in an Arab context of culture that is entirely alien to a target language audience outside the Arab peninsula" (p. 162). In his opinion, the liturgical, emotive, and cultural associations of the expressions found in the Qur'an pose the greatest obstacle to a translator. He makes several interesting points (such as his claim that the context of culture—what he calls the "natural habitat of words"—needs to be preserved for a translation to be successful, in contrast to some of the approaches, such as relevance theory, described by Peter Kirk, pp. 96 ff.) and several other points that fall short in their execution. For example, he explains at great length that the word "donkey" has negative connotations in Arabic (including, among others, stubbornness and stupidity) which, in his opinion, do not exist in English (even going so far as to produce evidence in the form of a brochure claiming that donkeys have "a distinctly calming influence", p. 164). In an equally bizarre vein, he counsels the English speaking reader not to call an Arab "an owl," as this would constitute an insult in the Arab's native language.

The volume concludes with an engaging essay by Manuela Foiera on Buddhist terminology in Italy. Italy is home to a burgeoning community of recent converts to Buddhism, particularly the international Soka Gakkai sect, which originated in Japan. Foiera notes that most of the terms used by Italian adherents to this sect are borrowed directly from Japanese, the (primarily Roman Catholic) Italians being unable (and perhaps even unwilling) to press their traditional religious vocabulary into the service of a new religion, largely because many of the converts to Buddhism did so out of dissatisfaction with the religion of their birth. Nonetheless, the Italian religious sphere bears the imprint of Roman Catholicism so strongly that Italian Buddhists find themselves faced with a dilemma; either they find themselves adopting purely Japanese vocabulary and even social conventions, or approach the new religion encumbered with baggage from Roman Catholicism. Neither approach is entirely satisfactory, but a third way, somewhere between the Scylla of turning Japanese and the Charybdis of aping Roman Catholicism, has not yet arisen.

CONCLUSION

Volumes such as these generally trend towards the eclectic, and Translation and Religion is no different in this regard. Most scholarship on translations of religious texts tends to be restricted to a single tradition, with little discussion of methodological considerations transcending discrete corpora. The exception which proves the rule is, of course, the Bible, shared as it is by Judaism and Christianity. Bible studies have engendered a lively debate upon translations and hermeneutics within and across these two traditions precisely because they share the same text, and for this reason the discussion is rarely broadened to encompass other traditions, except insofar as they

reflect the Biblical tradition (such as Mesopotamian cosmologies, relevant to those found in the book of Genesis, or the texts from Ugarit, which betray a remarkable similarity to the earliest Biblical poetry). For this reason, a volume such as this, in which material is brought together from the disparate religious traditions of the world, is a welcome addition to the scholarship.

Conspicuous in their absence, of course, are the traditional philologists, who have produced (and continue to produce) the bulk of the research on religious texts from these traditions. Of all the essays in this volume, Abdul-Raof's is the most philological; the other essays range from wistful nostalgia (Shackle) to dismissiveness (Jasper) in their attitudes towards the philologists, the balance ignoring them entirely. As most such scholars have not availed themselves of the growing body of work on translation theory, choosing instead to rely upon more traditional approaches to the translation of sacred texts, this should not surprise us. Nonetheless, it seems odd that the input of these scholars, who are so central to the translation of religious texts even today, would not be represented.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Charles G. Häberl is a PhD candidate at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations of Harvard University. He is currently engaged in fieldwork with speakers of Neo-Mandaic and is in the process of writing a descriptive grammar of the dialect of Khorramshahr (Iran). Neo-Mandaic is the modern reflex of the liturgical language of the Mandaean community, the last surviving Gnostic community from late antiquity. It is the most conservative of the eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects and the only surviving Neo-Aramaic dialect with a continuous textual tradition, spanning nearly two thousand years. Charles is interested in the phenomena of language death and language contact.

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