

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD – But the Way is beyond Language

by Simon Prentis (talk delivered at IJET-18 on 24 June, 2007)

The inspiration – if that the right word – for the theme of my talk today derives from the experience of judging the J-Net translation competition earlier this year. It started me out thinking in a more serious way about what the difference is between a good translation and a bad one, and what makes the difference in particular between a good one and an excellent one. Obviously there is the basic level of competence – the translator has to understand the language of the original, and what is being said. At this level, of course, that should not really be the issue. But simply by virtue of the fact that the same thing can be said in different ways, even within the same language, the scope for choice in the final expression of that understanding is quite large. So I started thinking about my own experience as a translator, and insofar as I have improved over the years, what the nature of that improvement might be.

I remember the first serious translation I undertook as a freelancer. I'd just quit my job as a staff translator at an agency in Tokyo, and had somehow got the job of translating a government report, a feasibility study into the construction of a new harbour somewhere in Indonesia, I think. At the time I wasn't even completely sure what a feasibility study was, but with my trusty dictionaries (remember those?) in hand, I set about finding out. I thought I'd done a pretty good job, but I remember being taken to task by the client, an experienced civil servant with surprisingly good English, about the awkwardness of the language I'd used. He complained that it was too stiff and formal. I was rather taken aback: I thought I'd scrupulously reflected the careful bureaucratic wording of the original, and protested mildly about the need for formal language in such a report. But in hindsight I know that I'd been unable to break free from a dependence on subjectless passive formulations such as "it may be thought" or "it may be considered" for expressions such as 思われる and 考えらる, which, quite apart from being overly formal, even in written English, transmute what is merely a stylistic device in the original into the false impression of excessive caution. Apart from anything else it

was a question of tone; I'd allowed the forms of the original to seduce me into an inappropriate register.

And though none of the entries in our competition displayed such a crude level of over-literalness, I was mildly surprised at the overall lack of flair, by which I mean the ability to escape from the gravity field of the source language itself, which to me is such a vital element in creating the natural feel I believe we should all be aiming for. For if it walks like a translation, talks like a translation and squawks like translation, it's still a turkey no matter how accurate it may be. If the original is written in a flowing style without any "non-native" rhythms or expressions, our job should be to reproduce that natural fluency, whatever it takes. If there's any awkwardness in your translation, it means you haven't quite understood something. The usual problem is that we get hung up on the words, and become mesmerized by the forms and phrasings of the original. That's only natural; words are what we are dealing with, and when we first encounter the problem, that's all we see. As I watch my youngest son struggling with pre-GCSE French homework, I remember my own inability to think beyond the dictionary. But experience, improvement and the road to excellence in translation should be leading us in the opposite direction.

So precisely because we have such a tendency to get stuck on the words, I'd like to use this opportunity to take a more philosophical look at what words are, what they do, and why we should pay less attention to them. First of all, let us just remind ourselves what a uniquely slick trick language actually is. Because even if we grant the rudimentary use of word-like signals to species as varied as birds, dolphins and bees, there's no doubt that the level and sophistication of our use of language is exponentially different to that of any other creature on the face of our planet. There is no way, as far as we know at least, that any other member of any other animal species could communicate even a fraction of what I have just said to any other sentient being, even in the unlikely event of their having thought it. But merely by moving my mouth, tongue and larynx in a series of highly-choreographed movements which punctuate what is essentially just a very long vocalized sigh, I can convey to you the essence of an abstract point of view which you can nonetheless visualise, whether or not you agree with it, without the need

for additional pictures, gestures or other spurious audiovisual manoeuvres. For words, and in the broader sense, language, are none other than a mechanism for transferring a thought or idea from the inside of my head to the inside of yours without any physical connection between us. That is an extraordinary piece of magic. In that sense at least, the Bible has it right: In the Beginning was the Word. Because words are about the only thing that truly distinguish us from our nearest cousins in the ape family; without language, we'd still be scratching around in the woods, doomed to the limited horizons of fight or flight.

But words are a delivery mechanism; the medium, not the message. And what they deliver is a means of communication; triangulation points of sense, points of reference that allow us to start the process of building bridges between what would otherwise simply be dumb blocks of sensation circumscribed by skin. Every natural language implies a system of seeing things, the formal structure of the language encoding what is essentially a map of perception that all speakers of that language agree to recognise as the basis for their communication. But one of the greatest benefits of learning another language is that it alerts you to the fact that it is possible to have another mental map, and by the same token, to the possibility that the one you have grown up with is not necessarily an infallible guide. If you're lucky, in fact, it alerts you to the fact that all such maps are defective, and, as in the story of the blind men and the elephant, only ever offer a partial perspective on the problem of how to perceive reality.

As people who work professionally with and between two different languages, we are in a privileged position compared to our monolingual brethren and sistren. We are able to go backstage behind the deterministic constraints of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and see that whilst a particular culture may impose a particular way of dissecting reality, the overlap between intersecting linguistic grids offers the conceptual continuity that allows us to ply our trade. Japanese, for example, makes a fundamental distinction between animate and non-animate things in the form of the *いる/ある* choice that must be made when referring to something that is present, although English speakers understand full well that a chair is not alive even though the verb which governs it does not tell us so.

On the other hand, although English speakers feel uncomfortable unless the distinction between singular and plural is indicated by adding a marker to the noun, Japanese speakers clearly have no difficulty in understanding that there is more than one chair in the room without being given an additional grammatical leg-up. We are able to make this transition between conflicting models because words, and the mental maps themselves, are already translations of an external world which, coloured though it may be by cultural encrustations, is ultimately the common inheritance of mankind. Our ability to relate to reality in this way is apparently innate – this is the crux of Steven Pinker’s admirable tome *The Language Instinct* – but it also explains how people were able to learn other languages in the days before dictionaries or online resources. The encoding may be different, but what is being mapped is essentially the same.

At the level of words we can point to many examples: the single word *お客さん* in Japanese has to be rendered specifically as guest, visitor, customer, client, passenger, audience in English depending on the situation, although of course the specificities can be indicated if necessary in Japanese. Similarly as is often pointed out by the Japanese, there is only one way to express the first person singular in English, whereas Japanese has many different ways of saying it. By the same token, Japanese is remarkably free of the sexual and scatological terms of abuse so common to the repressed Anglo-Saxon races; but the nuances that these convey in the language can be expressed nonetheless by the correct choice of personal pronoun or form of the verb.

A couple of years ago I came out of my house which is on one of those annoying London streets where people park on both sides leaving not quite enough space for two cars to pass in the road in between; drivers have to judge the situation and let the person who enters the road first pass through. Frequently of course, usually in the morning rush-hour, there are disagreements about who should have priority, and people refuse to back down; sometimes this is simply because the person concerned it is unable to operate reverse gear with a sufficient degree of agility, but more often it is to do with pride and testosterone. On this particular occasion a driver of a Porsche was refusing to back down to the driver of a black cab who had several cars behind him and

was clearly not going to be able to back down, even if he had wanted to. After the obligatory interlude of hooting and gesticulation, the taxi driver finally jumped out of his cab, ran over to the open window of the other car and seemingly without the briefest pause for thought unleashed the following killer insult which immediately had the driver of the Porsche backing up the road (and those of you with gentler sensibilities please stop your ears now):

Don't be a cunt all your fucking life – have a holiday for once, you wanker!

It struck me that whilst the meaning and intent of this utterance would have been instantly clear to any native speaker, despite the convoluted categories, not to mention mixed metaphors involved, a passing alien with only a dictionary and grammatical knowledge of English would have been highly confused. This superb piece of invective cannot begin to be approached at the level of the words. In order to translate or interpret this effectively you have to withdraw to the inner core of the insult to find the words that express that feeling in the other language. So for example, if one was going to try to convey that sentiment in Japanese you would have to go something like:

キミ！どこまでアホでいたいんだ！たまには休めよ！

where the emphatic nuances of the English curses and all their implicit contempt are conveyed by making a judicious selection from the varied and intensely hierarchical range of personal pronouns and verb forms available in Japanese. There is, of course, a certain poetry that gets lost in the transition; but insofar as it is not conceptual, poetry, like comedy, is a somewhat onanistic pleasure that merely plays with the actual mechanisms of the language itself. To that extent it will always get lost in translation, but what concerns us here is the transmission of intent and register.

The point is, there's no one-to-one relationship with words and language and meaning; it's more like intersecting three-dimensional Venn diagrams, and the more independent the cultures, the greater the likely separation between them. Nor is it just a question of

a simple overlap; sometimes the whole concept is expressed differently. Those of us who laboured to learn Japanese the hard way (presuming there is an easy way!) will remember expressions like さすが and やっぱり and the convoluted hoops you pass through in trying to find the last common ancestor with links to an appropriate English phrase. I'd like to take the example of one particular word which troubled me greatly for a number of years, and is still the source of much nonsense about the mysteries of the East; the idea of 気. I was first introduced to the concept of 気 through a chance encounter, which later became a full-blown obsession, with aikido, a martial art which was at the time (in the mid-1970s) translated into English rather grandly as the Way of Spiritual Harmony. I used to attend classes in London with a very severe teacher who would berate us consistently about using too much strength to do our techniques, when we should only be using our 気. None of us had any idea what he was talking about, of course; it was a mysterious force that seemed as elusive as the Holy Grail which you apparently had to be in a state of grace to receive. Not that there seemed to be anything very gracious about Chiba Sensei as he hurled his students around the dojo, frequently knocking them out in the process. Nevertheless after a couple of years I started to get the hang of it, and began to sense that whatever 気 meant, it somehow involved learning to use one's body as a single unit, rather than relying on the muscular strength of the separate parts, keeping one's mind fully on the job, and becoming more sensitive to the dynamic between yourself and your partner.

And then I went to Japan. After a while I started to pick up the language and I began to realise that the word 気, far from being mysterious and exotic, was widely used in the ordinary speech of Japanese people. Feeling, for example was 気持ち, 'having 気'. I'd struggled for years to identify and have some 気 of my own, but in Japan this elevated and abstruse concept was apparently being used with casual abandon in everyday parlance! Was the entire Japanese population enlightened? My puzzlement was only increased by the discovery that, for example, the word 神経 for nerve meant 'god path', and that sickness was 病気 meaning 'illness of the mind', although, in fairness, many native speakers seemed bemused to have this pointed out to them. (I hadn't realised

yet that English contains similar types of folk-wisdom hidden in its vocabulary; notable examples being the idea of 'dis-ease' underlying disease and the 'busy-ness' of business. But this only reinforces Saussure's point that the signifier is ultimately devoid of meaning, referring only to what it signifies.) One day I decided to look up 気 in the Green Goddess and check for idioms. I discovered to my amazement that there appeared to be more idioms involving 気 than almost any other word in the language. It was, so to speak, a 'key' triangulation point. There had to be an equivalent locus in the English language, but the usual translation given, spirit, mind or heart doesn't help at all. These words mean very little in modern English, and have a very antiquated ring. True, an idea of 気 in the sense of 'mind' still lingers vestigially in such phrases as "Never mind" "I've got something on my mind" "it's all in your mind" or, more the more archaic "to be minded to do something" but if we're looking for a key word around which a cluster of idioms forms that correspond to the cluster of idioms around 気 we have to go somewhere else. And it turns out that it isn't a noun. It's a verb.

The easiest way to think of it is to 're-mind' yourself how the phrase 気が合う is best expressed in English. Though there may be a meeting of minds or a meeting of spirits involved, nobody would ever say it that way. But we recognize the feeling. And the most straightforward way of saying it is that you 'get on with' somebody. To me, the 'getting' part of it was the key. There are any number of idioms involving this sense of 'get' which are a fundamental part of English: to get into something, to get off on something, to get up to something, to get down to something; you 'get' the picture. Of course not every expression that uses 'get' can be matched with one that uses 気. But the question is, when you 'get' something, who or what is doing the getting? When you get down to something for example, there is a clear line between that and something that you aren't particularly taking seriously. There's a sense of 本気 about it. So the 気 is the thing that 'gets' whatever is got into, down to or whatever it is. The same, ordinary workaday 気 that is involved when we say 気がする、気になる、気に入る and so forth. It's the same notion, just expressed differently. I suspect the Japanese have an analogous difficulty with the concept of 'get' in all its idiomatic splendour, hence perhaps the recent

popularity of the katakanized version ゲット – albeit this is usually applied in much more materialistic contexts, such as the shamelessly venal war-cry of ゲッツゲット!

However, the Wikipedia article on Qi, the Chinese reading of 氣, says: *“Qi is a fundamental concept of traditional Chinese culture. Qi is believed to be part of every living thing that exists, as a kind of “life force” or “spiritual energy.” It is frequently translated as “energy flow,” or literally as “air” or “breath.” For example, tiānqì, literally “sky breath”, is the ordinary Chinese word for “weather.”*

It also notes in passing that “the Japanese language contains over 11,442 known usages of 'ki' as a compound” without seeming to suggest, in any way, that this vast number might possibly imply the need for a more prosaic understanding of the term. But they, like I before them, are being fooled by the apparent absence of a ‘proper’ English word corresponding to 氣 into thinking it is something mysterious and even supernatural, whereas in fact it simply refers to what we mean by mind or energy in the sense of focused attention, of alert mindfulness. So instead of describing aikido as the Way of Spiritual Harmony it would probably be much more accurate to describe it as the Art of Going with the Flow; but as this is far too West Coast for my taste, I think we’re better off sticking to Aikido, which has pretty much entered the language anyhow. Because that's the way words work, and is another argument against linguistic determinism; when there is a need to describe a new phenomenon, sooner or later a new word is coined to describe it. My current favourite is ‘wilfing’, a term popularised recently to describe the phenomenon of getting distracted onto other topics when searching for something on Google, that moment when you sit back and realise that you have forgotten your original starting point: it is simply an acronym of What was I Looking For? I don’t know how we managed without it.

The failure of word-based literalism in translation is nowhere better illustrated than in the lack of progress with machine translation, which despite the bright hopes initially advanced for it has made little real progress in the last 20 years. True, we now have online resources which are able to deliver successful gists of texts, especially between

culturally similar European languages. But if we were to apply the aforementioned taxi driver's utterance to Babelfish, for example, we couldn't expect to get more than a good belly laugh. As in fact we do. As I am sure you will have only expected me to, I have already tried it, with the following result:

すべてのあなたのととも生命 cunt があってはいけない- 今度ばかりは休日を、wanker 過しなさい!

It is interesting that the program has at least grasped that the f-word is merely being used as an intensifier here, even if the vocabulary does not stretch to the other two expletives. But even allowing for these lexical lacunae, the sense of the sentence is hopelessly mangled. If you back-translate that with Babelfish into English again you get:

All your very lives cunt there will continue to be – only this time wanker pass the holiday!

which, if you think about it, does sound remarkably like what a passing alien nerd might possibly come up with as an inspired guess using a dictionary, minimal grammatical knowledge, and a projection from his own sad life...

So what is going on here? Or rather, what is not going on here? It would seem that there are two main issues. The first is probably just raw computing power. Even though Deep Blue's defeat of Gary Kasparov just over a decade ago was hailed as a breakthrough for AI, the complexity of chess, which is essentially a closed problem, is dwarfed by the complexity of natural languages, which are theoretically open-ended systems. It has been calculated that for all its awesome ability, Deep Blue had only about 1/30 of the processing power of the human brain; it is estimated to be another two decades before computers will approach the capacity of our on-board wetware. But the other question is more conceptual. In his memorable introduction to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche mocks "the gruesome earnestness and clumsy importunity with which philosophers have hitherto been in the habit of approaching truth" – which he likens to a woman who will not allow herself to be seduced in such a fashion. No matter how

powerful the computer, the 'garbage in, garbage out' problem still applies. Despite early attempts to take a statistical approach, the most widely used MT programmes are still grammar and rule-based systems that rely ultimately on analyses by human linguists which are essentially prescriptive, and do not necessarily correspond to anything better than a best guess as to how language works. And if you are prescribing the wrong (or inadequate) information based on the manipulation of words, you can't expect to get the right answer.

On the other hand, if you take the approach that all natural languages are essentially different ways of trying to solve the same problem, with enough computing power and sufficient input we can start to back-engineer the similarities by looking for common clusters, and a statistical approach is more likely to bear fruit. This indeed seems to be the case, with Google, for example, now switching its online translation services from SYSTRAN to statistical-based systems. That is, after all, closer to the pattern-recognition process which is part of what allows us to do our job. A friend of mine once told me a story of how he had attended a rock concert in Shanghai, at the end of which the audience continued to shout what sounded like 'newbie, newbie' (牛屌). Thinking that they might be insulting the performers, casting aspersions on their lack of experience, he asked what it meant and was told that it literally meant the cow's fanny, which is the slang term in Shanghai for the height of cool. He told me a story from the point of view of how weird the Chinese were, and continued in that vein until I reminded him that we had a term in English that, seen from the Chinese perspective, would seem just as odd: the dog's bollocks. I'm sure that there's a rationale for both of these expressions, although I'm not sure we want to go there just at this juncture; but the point is that whether you say the dog's bollocks, the cow's fanny or just simply 'totally cool', you essentially mean the same thing, so statistically speaking (and averaging out for the individual variations) there is going to be a frequency across cultures and languages with which the notion that gives rise to an expression of this nature occurs. We may eventually be able to track it in the brain, like those experiments with macaque monkeys at Duke University where they are able to predict from brainwave functions what object a monkey is going to pick up.

As professionals in the business of manipulating these codes, we ought to be very interested in the likely progress of AI. For although we can still afford to snicker smugly at the manifestly woeful inadequacies of online translation engines such as Babelfish, and comfort ourselves with the thought that state-of-the-art translation aids such as Trados are little more than glorified dishwashers – taking much of the dirty work out of the washing up, perhaps, but still no closer to solving the more important human problem of how to stack the dishes, and, more importantly, how to put them back on the shelf again in the right order – at the end of what still may be a very long day, all translators and interpreters are really no more than mechanics, very skilled, even artful, and highly paid professionals though we may be; and in theory at least what we do can eventually be replicated by a machine. For the idea that there is something particularly special about our vaunted intelligence is coming increasingly under assault; the success that psychiatry has seen in controlling bipolar disorder with targeted medication should clue us further in to the notion that consciousness is primarily chemical, not cosmic. If the wondrous complexity of human vision, itself one of some 40 different ways that the eye has emerged separately in the course of evolution, can be conjured out of just three colour components (with taste, too, the entire gourmet range of the human palate, being essentially derived from just four or five parameters) then it is not too far a stretch to imagine that our apparently multi-layered mind is itself simply a complex function of a small number of inputs. And if we admit that possibility, then it is just a question of knowing what the parameters are. Then it's just a number crunch. The phenomenal success of fractal mathematics in replicating the most complex of natural patterns from relatively simple algorithms is a case in point. Whether or not such a complex calculation is doable in the foreseeable future, it is at least in principle knowable. It's a number. And with that, OUR number will be up – although hopefully those of us here will long since be marinating the daisies. And maybe one day, to outpredict McLuhan, words themselves will become irrelevant, and we will all be able to communicate telepathically with the aid of an electronic skull-cap that monitors and communicates brain function directly.

Well, what has this extended speculation got to do with the practicalities of translation and interpreting right here and now? Probably nothing much more than a harmless diversion from the dreary business of making a living. But if our stock-in-trade is ultimately under threat from machines, then in the meantime, whilst we still have a head start over our silicon siblings, the least we can do is try to stay ahead in the area in which our greater endowments currently give us an advantage. Even though it too may turn out to be a calculation, humans have the capacity to feel and intuit our way through translation problems that can deliver far more elegant solutions than MT is likely to come up with for some time. And the key to this is working more at the conceptual level.

I have noticed two main ways which have helped my translation improve over the years. The first is to do more interpreting. I've argued this case before, but it's still valid; there is a virtuous circle of feedback between the two disciplines as they each offer the opportunity to work on the potential weaknesses of the other. Interpreting is an 'on-line' task – it requires you to perform on the spot, to think on your feet, to get across the main point even if some of the detail goes AWOL. This is precisely what generally scares translators off from doing it, of course. On the other hand, translation is an 'off-line' activity – you have time – too much, sometimes – to work on absolute accuracy, but there is the extra problem that you are focussed entirely on the written word, which puts you at an additional remove from the mind of the person who conceived it.

When you interpret, and especially when you do simultaneous interpreting, you don't have the time to think. You have to short-circuit the medium and go straight for the message. You have to try to get into the mind of the speaker – at least, you are much more likely to do a good job if you do. As with the taxi-driver's language, there are things that can't be interpreted at the level of words – we will all be familiar with our old friend よろしくお願ひします. But though there's rarely an adequate dictionary entry for this culturally loaded phrase, in context there is always something that is appropriate, because it is a human response in a human situation. You just have to put yourself mentally in that situation, see what the speaker's intent is, and say what is appropriate

in that context in the other culture and language – even if it’s something as far removed from the actual words as “I look forward to working with you.”

Because it has to be natural – and that’s where I come back to translation. The ability to think on your feet, and especially, the experience of being forced to think on your feet – allows you to develop the intuitive side that helps you break away from the awkwardness that an over-dependence on words can foster. The second way I’ve recently found that improves the fluency of my translation is to reverse my long-standing practice and do my second draft without referring to the source text at all, and edit it as if it were a piece of creative writing. Only once I’m happy with the flow of the text do I check it against the source for errors and omissions on a final read through. This has the effect making me focus more on the internal consistency of the source text, of looking at the big picture rather than simply checking for accuracy at the sentence level. There’s a risk that you run here, of course – of departing too much from the source text, and inadvertently improving on the deficiencies of the original. But in terms of a direction to move in to improve one’s translation skills, I think it’s the right one. It’s also faster, by the way.

We need to constantly bear in mind that what we are communicating is worlds, not words. Words may be the means by which we communicate those worlds, but, to paraphrase the wise words of Thomas Hobbes, they are but counters, useful for the purpose of reckoning with, but ultimately the money of fools. Like the broader cultural hinterlands that stretch out behind them, words may be the means of our original enlightenment, but they also threaten to ensnare us in the very categories that allow us to communicate in the first place. I’d like to close with a quote from the venerable zen classic the Hsing Hsing Ming, which closes its pithy analysis of the pitfalls of the mind with the cryptic observation: *“Words! The way is beyond language, for in it there is no yesterday, no tomorrow and no today.”*

As translators, and also as people, I believe it is that sense of immediacy we should be aiming to stay in touch with, both as a means and even as an end.