A Translator's Answer to *Meta*-Challenges

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Abstract: *This article will propose commentaries of metalinguistic interest on a variety of pieces in our own or other translators' rendition. Our approach will argue that 'beyond' (the very meaning of the 'meta' prefix) is a number of things particularizing the translator's undertaking: a change of perspectives, cultural diversity, reorganization of one's own thinking, a thin line on which a translator tries to walk.*
Key words: *meta-form and function, fidelity, projection of identity*

Résumé: *Cet article propose certains commentaires d'intérêt métalinguistique sur une variété de textes dans notre traduction ou dans celle d'autres traducteurs. Notre démarche soutiendra que AU-DELÀ (le sens propre du préfixe* méta-*) représente un nombre de choses qui particularisent la démarche du traducteur: une autre perspective, diversité culturelle, réorganisation de la pensée, une ligne fragile que le traducteur s'efforce d'affranchir.*
Mots-clés : *méta-forme et fonction, fidélité, diversité culturelle, identité*

We propose commentaries of metalinguistic interest on a variety of pieces in our own or other translators' rendition. Our approach will argue that 'beyond' (the very meaning of the 'meta' prefix) is a number of things particularizing the translator's undertaking and stressing the importance of consciously focusing on how form and function work.

Umberto Eco concludes his book entitled *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (tr. Rom. 2008: 367) with his own perception of the notion of 'fidelity'. He says that translations do not require fidelity as an acceptable criterion leading to uniqueness of solution. Besides, the critic and semanticist recommends the review of the sexist arrogance contained in the word (as long as translations are expected to be "beautiful yet disloyal"). He urges the reader to consult any dictionary and check the fact that 'fidelity' for a synonym does not get 'precision', but rather 'sincerity', 'honesty', 'respect' and so on. Not quite so, we should say. We look up in WEUD (528) and find out that, actually not number one but in the fifth place, the synonyms for fidelity are 'accuracy' and 'exactness'.

We will turn to a few discourse analysis examples. It has been important for the translator (any translator, for all that matters) at the outset to keep several things in mind. Firstly, be it fragmentary or a self-contained whole, every piece requires a formulation of hypotheses to be later confirmed or not by the text itself. Secondly, the movement of translating has two directions, from language to context and from context to language. Thirdly, the context has to be construed or interpreted by both speakers/writers and listeners/readers. Fourthly, significant or meaningful facts are almost always signaled and not only presupposed by textual and grammatical clues even if they leave the impression of being inferred by analysts. Fifthly, the translation should take over each time precisely those identities that the participating characters are trying to enact. Lastly, it is important to find out how translators are connecting/disconnecting things, making them relevant/not relevant to each other.

1. The first translating operation is from the Greek prefix and preposition into the English language, which produces the following cumulation of meanings: beyond, behind, among, after, along with (WEUD, 900). A *meta*infection occurs after the infection; *meta*bolism goes along with physical and chemical processes in an organism; a *meta*lepsis is the metonymic replacement of a word already used figuratively; *meta*physics is philosophy in its abstruse branches; to *meta*phrase means to translate; a *meta*protein is the water-insoluble derivative of protein; *meta*stasis is the transference of disease to other body parts; and so on. We shall deal with other meta-challenges in the course of translating the passages we have selected for further discussion. It is worth emphasizing that 'meta' is a very undemanding item since it goes untranslated in universal use, yet it seems successful in putting things in perspective when analytical approaches are required.

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2. The conversational joke below can reveal some cultural issues when attempting to reach a version in Romanian. Here it is in the two languages:

> CHILD: Mummy, can I go out and play?
> MOTHER: With those holes in your trousers?
> CHILD: No, with the girl next door.
>> COPILUL: Mami, pot să mă duc să mă joc?
>> MAMA: Cum, cu pantalonii rupți?
>> COPILUL: Nuuu, cu copiii din vecini (our translation).

We presume the child's expectations were that the mother gave a small laugh and allowed the child's plan for playing. The effect in the original language is obtained from the apparent intention of the child (a boy? a girl?) to correct the idea behind the words of the mother, in order to cover his/her fears of rejection. The child is not a deceiver or jester: better say, this is the presence of a resourceful manipulator. Fun is built on the way a preposition is reused with shifted meaning. First the mother used 'with' to describe the situation circumstantially, the threat coming indirectly to her interlocutor from the succession question-to-question, the second interrogative pattern hinting at an anticipated denial. It means to insinuate that there could be a loss of dignity due to improper clothing. The child skillfully picks up the preposition 'with' to create a link with what has been uttered (an indirect plea through perfect cohesion), yet with the grammatical function of instrumental object instead of circumstantial object. Rhetorically, this is an inspired moment, because it can solve a conflict: the young participant wants to go out and the older participant is against the idea, wishing the other one in, because of inadequate physical details. The child must prove that a likely generalization of the case spells out that a sense of humor is apt to get someone out of the mess of unfulfilled wishes. After the punch-line, no joke continues, but we can continue speculation about the conflictive situation being solved in the near future, owing to the argumentation already made above. During the activity of translating, the linguist improves on the text due to the handiness of two plurals (pantalonii & copiii) versus a plural defective of the singular & a singular (trousers & girl). Moreover, the translator has maximized the orality of the text with simple adjoining meta-forms, two emphatic exclamatory additions (cum & nuuu). Thus, the child paves his way to pragmatic success by admitting before his mother one pattern from his experience of the world (he must have toys to play with) while knowing about the pattern of his mother's experience of the world (he must show decorum in the way he is dressed).

3. Let us split hairs, discursively and *meta-discursively*, about the following generalizing remark coming from an ex-president of our country:

> *Beția puterii te duce prin toate etapele: la început ești cocoș, după aia te transformi în maimuță, treci apoi prin faza de leu, iar la sfârșit ajungi porc.*
> *Power intoxication takes you through all stages: you start like a cock, then you become a monkey, next a lion, and you end up like a pig* (our translation).

The former president's opinion is a piece of criticism from someone angry, disagreeing with the direction of a political career in our day (or perhaps in all times). To this effect, the speaker chooses a number of animals stereotypically communicating attributes that can be applied to humans likewise: thoughtless aggressiveness (the cock); a drive for imitation in order to enjoy popularity (the monkey); proud uniqueness or royalty of a power-holder (the lion); last but not least, decay in morals (the pig). Part of the message can be read as referring to instability of conduct in politics, perhaps a more general instability in human nature, as long as a man crosses stages in life that are dissimilar and mostly discourteous. The problem here is in the grammar of the pronoun: the second person *tu/you* is understood as replaceable in the mind of an audience by the first person *eu/I*, because the historical truth is that the speaker used to be in power, he used to be a leader, and as such could be surmised to speak from experience. If he is presumed to have followed the same direction as described in the statement above, he unawares proclaims himself the disgraced animal that concludes the 'fable'.

We have been concerned with a piece of *metadiscourse* abounding in *metamorphoses*, in other words, those complete changes that look like magic or witchcraft, in order to show adaptation to a special environmental setting in the most convincing critical procedure. It is a matter of

discussing a different culture and a different function at the same time. Every ethnic will project their own identity schematization when dealing with the animal fable. To a Romanian, *cocoş* points to male sexuality and a fighting spirit for securing the female. To an Englishman, *cock* is, first of all, the male of any bird; *cockerel* is the young domestic bird, so a tame young age is better suggested; *rooster* is the cocky one among fowl and capable of conceited self-assertion in man's world. To a Romanian, *maimuţă* is the species inferior to man and consequently hanging from a tree branch, whereas *a fi maimuţă* is the inferior man incapable of original behavior and personal decisions. To an Englishman, the *monkey*, if not the mammal, can be a mischievous child or a mimic; the anthropoid *ape* again is an imitator par excellence, and its tail is short, so it cannot suggest so well the primitivism of not climbing down trees yet. To a Romanian, *lion* is never a bad suggestion, never a coward, never a weakling. To an Englishman, it is the very emblem of Great Britain, it acquires strong connotations of celebrity besides physical strength and courage. To a Romanian, *porc* is one of the most unliked, unlovable, unaccepted conditions that cannot be mitigated in any way. To an Englishman, the similar notions of coarseness and shamelessness are contained in *pig, swine* and *hog*, the last in the series with a higher reputation for gluttony and filth. In our translation of the politician's statement, we have attempted a sort of universal projection of the symbolic side. For the English interpretation, we testify with WEUD for the statements above.

4. It is very handy for us to illustrate what is important to grasp from discourse by making use of conversations. Here is a conversational scrap from a romance book of no particular literary prominence:

> *'Do you love me?'* [turn 1] [speaker 1]
> *'Yes, infinitely.'* [T 2] [S 2]
> *'Not infinitely,'* said Georgie. *'Let us be exact. Your love is a great but finite quantity.'* [T 3] [S 1]
> - *Mă iubeşti?* [intervenţia 1] [emiţătorul 1]
> - *Da, enorm.* [intervenţia 2] [emiţătorul 2]
> - *Nu enorm, zise Georgie. Să vorbim exact. Iubirea ta e mare, dar într-o anume cantitate.*
>   [intervenţia 3] [emiţătorul 1]   (our translation).

In conversational exchanges, there is an active process (which conversationalists make up on the spot) and a social process (which pushes forward parameters dictated by the affiliation with various social groups).

The semantic choices to be noted above move around an intention of pinning down quantities, of measuring things that are known to be impossible to measure. Love is, by definition, immeasurable. What must be clearly transmitted is somebody's (to be more precise, a female's) need to obtain a statement of love. Georgie's partner gives signs of reservation in commitment, yet without denying his love. The difference in nature between the two lovers is obvious: their dialogue may seem to misfire, yet, if they contradict each other in this exchange, one does not get the feeling that they have raised any obstacle against an emotional fulfillment. Practically, their dialogue may open the path towards a happy complementation, since people in life need both the romanticism of S2 and a strong sense of realities characterizing S1 in T3, the speaker who is not in quest of 'sweet nothings'.

In ordinary terms, S1 takes credit for not admitting 'lies' in her romantic tie. In semantic terms, she is opposed to 'falsehood'. In stylistic terms, she courts terminological precision, discouraging 'overstatements'. In pragmatic terms, she cannot comply with 'untruth': by her urgency that both communicators should be exact, she tries to look for Gricean cooperativeness from her partner, which reminds one of the quantity-quality maxim plus the maxim of manner.

The way people converse here is deprived of any trace of *metalinguistic* props; there is no clue as to the likely features that incidentally accompanied the speech production, such as a facial expression or a gesture. Thus the reader does not receive a meta-description. [1] From linguistic scarcity, we derive the impression that, at least for the character called Georgie, that was not the day for amenities. We may also have the feeling that thanks to a history of routine interaction between S1and S2, they rely on 'guessing' meanings without much spoken stuff and without 'breaking rules' in Grice's fashion for innovating new forms and functions.

5. Here is a conversation that bets on a semantic surprise, a non-conventional association of two words (a noun and a verb), homophones capable of producing a case of folk etymology.

> *'Ten hours the first day,' said the Mock Turtle, 'nine the next, and so on.'*
> *'What a curious plan!' exclaimed Alice.*
> *'That's the reason they are called lessons,' the Gryphon remarked, 'because they lessen from day to day.'* (Lewis Carroll, **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**)
> - *Şi cât învăţaţi pe zi? întrebă Alice, grăbindu-se să schimbe vorba.*
> - *Pe zi ce trecea, tot mai puţin, spuse imitaţia de broască ţestoasă.*
> - *Ce program ciudat ! exclamă Alice.*
> - *Păi de aceea se şi numeşte **pro**-gram – se amestecă zgripţorul – că învăţam tot mai puţin, pînă ajungeam la un gram de minte. Cap. IX [2].*

The invention of the play upon words (lesson-lessen) is the rhetorical decision of a writer (Lewis Carroll) whose fame has grown from these witticisms. On the level of interaction in fiction, domineeringness is worth noting, as it causes the asymmetry between a knowledgeable person and a gullible one. We fully appreciate the inspiration of the translator (Elisabeta Gălăţeanu) who could catch the spirit of the English original, not exclusively in a graphic deviation (the metagraph), but in a phonic plus graphic (through the use of syllabication) ingenious formula made obvious in subsequent word repetition. Extending the area, one can consider that finding about how literature exploits the possibilities of linguistic communication is a meta-contribution.

Some other striking solutions for translating the pun can be found in the translator's range of personal experiences of the world. Here are two other felicitous presentations: (2) *Păi de aceea se şi numesc **lecţii**, că pe zi ce trece înveţi tot mai puţin pînă nu le mai **ţii***, and (3) *Păi de aceea se şi numeşte **curs**, că, pe zi ce trece, timpul s-a **scurs** şi cursul s-a **dus***. They fit the following experience: children love that sort of school which provides ever shorter periods for schooling. That is why the situated meaning of 'lesson' here may open a variety of directions for re-creating an accepted discourse model.

6. Again an excerpt from a book for children, even if not of note like "Alice", the following spoken line is a manifestation of mock politeness, the very foundation of irony:

> *'I think Mrs. H. would have been much happier if, instead of being a teacher, she worked in a mortuary, where no one talks back!'*
> - *Eu cred că doamna învăţătoare ar fi fost mult mai fericită dacă, în loc să fie la şcoală, lucra la morgă; păi acolo nu-ţi mai vorbeşte nimeni!* (our translation).

The line is insulting for that part of the audience that is not presumed to hear, but could easily be the over-hearer, namely the schoolmistress. She should be listening so as to understand the message correctly, as an indirect piece of criticism taking the form of an ironic shaft. The speech act is, therefore, a protest against the canonical interdiction in the classroom for students not to speak unasked. Hence, the rhetorical figure of a parallel between the classroom and the mortuary.

Utterances postulate a double audience, consisting of one party that, upon hearing, will understand, and another party that is not aware of illocutionary forces and thus will not understand the message as intended by the speaker. If the situation of communication is ironical, analysts consider that the delight of irony is a secret intimacy set up between the initiated who understand and the author of the ironic shaft. The non-factual meaning existing in the *if*-construction above is the rhetorical option in the exchange between peers, the students not inclined to tolerate the much-too-frequent request for silence.

We certainly have no evidence that the teacher would have heard the criticism of herself. The critical issue raised by the schoolchildren in the fragment would acquire substantive institutional force of a barrier to remove in future.

Anyway, the audience of this line as a whole (auditors, eavesdroppers, overhearers) will decode along the lines of a low-context communication (which means attention turned more to the literal meanings), as well as a high-context communication (attention turned more to relational cues and shared understandings via inferences).

We look behind us at the non-literary fragments, and we remember that there are innumerable discourses in any modern, technological, urban society. Our fragments and our

translations have proposed people being something with a degree of generality of reference: children in love with playing games; watchful mothers; politicians who felt the power intoxication; possessive lovers; noisy schoolchildren; exacting teachers. We recognized them through language, action and interaction, beliefs, symbols, objects. Due to the shortness of our selections, our dealing with props was limited, although they do carry meanings into any discourse. The classroom, for instance, is such a prop or the hole in one's trousers.

All meta-words needed for scholarship and explanation have covered the area of 'figures' in the comprehension offered by rhetoric (see TPR, p. 110). Metaplasms and metasememes look at the word or look inside the word, whereas metataxes and metalogisms concern superior units of analysis such as utterances. The force of a meta-word is generated by the degree of abnormality it proposes: the amplitude of its deviation and the variability dictated by the fixity of the material used at the starting point.

7. Instead of conclusions: What is beyond

The translator's work is founded on "the deeper meanings we are coming to believe and argue that the [source] text has" (Gee, 2005: 136), because the source-text is the basic and foremost guideline in this endeavour. We shall revert to the way we began, namely the unnecessary-now translation of 'meta' into English: basically 'meta' means 'beyond' something. What is beyond a translator's undertaking?

Beyond is always a change of perspectives. The area where this is to be found out is designated by the second term in a compound word headed by 'meta'.

Beyond is cultural diversity. Consequently, a translator's main project is that of understanding another communicator, culture, ideology, and so on – actually a never-finished project as long as its endpoints change constantly.

Beyond is a re-organization of one's own thinking. It happens like in optics. In order to "see" (or understand, or interpret, for all that matters), one re-focuses the pair of "lenses" that give shape to what is to be seen. Good tools develop awareness, in all certainty.

Beyond is the thin line on which a translator tries to walk so as not to be encaged by some tight restrictions of the source and yet to be faithful to the source in the culturally induced decisions he feels compelled to make. This last reflection is a perfect fit for a perfect piece of work carried out by Mihail Nasta [3] who answered the challenge launched by John Stuart Mill. The Englishman's quote, "eloquence is **heard**, poetry is **over**heard", has become, with hard-to-match inspiration (the emphasis is ours), "elocinţa este **auzită**, poezia este **interceptată** de auz".

Notes
[1] To Nigel Fabb (Aronoff & Rees-Miller, 2003: 461) a meta-description is the use of linguistic forms so as to communicate a description *about the narrative*. One illustration is the form(s) adopted in order to divide the narrative into episodes. We enumerate some of the possible solutions: a variety of stylistic options; constituents moved within a sentence without significantly affecting the propositional meaning; the option for a nominal or a verbal projection; topicalization of an entity; the active or passive syntactic valency; the salience of noun phrases in clauses, and so on.
[2] The splendid Romanian version is signed by Elisabeta Gălăţeanu (Ed. Tineretului, 1958) and is prefaced by S. Alexandru, who concludes with a confession to his young readers: ... *vă invidiez căci eu am terminat cartea pe când voi de-abia o începeţi*.
[3] See Mihail Nasta &Sorin Alexandrescu, *Poetică şi stilistică. Orientări moderne*, Editura Univers, Bucureşti, 1972, p. 312.

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