

In other words

Translating truth and beauty for the good of all
[Previously published as fb190701 piya]

Irish linguist Seán Golden (1996:289) discusses a complex visual pun that exploits the interplay between the verbal and the visual, exemplified in this line from the Chinese Tang poet 王维 Wáng Wéi (699-759):

(read top-down):

木 mù “tree”
未 wèi “bud”
芙 fú “shoot” (n)
蓉 róng “growing”
花 huā “flower”

On a literal or verbal level, this line of poetry “describes a hibiscus on the point of flowering” (Golden 1996:289)¹. We can render this line **literally**: “Tree bud shoot growing flower” or better: “Treeing, budding, shooting, growing, flowering.” As in most Chinese nature poems, the “poetic experience” is not complete unless it is read or felt while looking or imagining what it addresses.

Experience of nature

On the non-verbal level, the ordering and shape of the letters that make up the verse mimic a vision of a tree or bush in the process of growing and flowering. Chinese-born French scholar and translator, François Cheng (程抱一 *Chéng Bàoyī*, b 1929) explains Wáng Wéi’s line: “first character: a bare tree; second character: something is born at the end of the branches; third character: a bud breaks out, [*cǎo* 艹, the top element of the character] being the radical of grass or flower; fourth character: the bursting open of the bud; fifth character: a flower in its fullness” (Cheng 1982:9 f², in Golden 1996:289).

Translating anything

Professor of translations studies, Mona Baker (2018), explains that the visual mirroring of the semantic content of this line of verse creates a powerful cohesive tie between the verbal and the visual levels that sustains the poet’s image beyond the mere communication of the idea of a tree blossoming into flower.

¹ Seán Golden, “No-Man’s Land on the Common Borders of Linguistics, Philosophy & Sinology: Polysemy in the Translation of Ancient Chinese Texts,” *The Translator* 2,2, 1996: 277-304.

² François Cheng, *Chinese Poetic Writing, with an Anthology of Tang Poetry*, translated by Donald A. Riggs and Jerome P. Seaton, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982.

Golden opines that such visual puns “are virtually impossible to translate into alphabetic languages” (1996:290), but, Baker proposes, “History tells us that nothing is impossible to translate. Indeed, the explanation Golden provides of this line is itself arguably a form of translation!” (2018:280)³.

Translation as communication

What do we mean when we say something like “this passage in this language cannot be translated”? Without going into too much abstruse academese, we can say that it is likely that the speaker is either:

- (1) a racist or chauvinist (who puts race first, poetry later), or
- (2) he thinks of poetry or translation as a literal or word-for-word exercise.

There is a great disadvantage about this. When we cannot express something truly good or beautiful in our culture into another language, it appears as if only **we** can enjoy it (we may be said to barking in our own manger). When a dog is barking at the moon: the moon is there for all to see, whether it is a lion, a tiger, a wolf, a cat, or a human. I’m just being darkly humorous.

Culture and religion as human experience

My point is that **culture** is partly about good and beauty in our common experience, whether locally or mentally. Surely, it is to our advantage to be able to share this good and beauty with outsiders or in another language. To do this, we must somehow show how others can find ways to know, or better, to feel, that good or beauty we are experiencing.

Since this is a human experience; it is humanly possible to share such an experience. It boils down to how good we are with language and communication. This is often true with **religious experience**, too. Anyone believer or a susceptible person can join in the rituals of a religion, and experience the “same” thing, such as the “power” of God or whatever (say in speaking in tongues). But this is only true of the believer and his believing tribe. It is highly unlikely for an outsider, especially an informed observer to have that “same” experience, or view it in the same way.

Spiritual experience

This is, however, a bit more difficult with **spiritual experience**. Unlike a “religious experience” which can be a “crowd feeling,” spiritual insight is a direct and personal realization of universal reality which, however, can be realized by others, too, but each, as it were, in their own way. Dhamma experience is often described in this way.

The key Dhamma experiences described by the Buddha and experienced by his disciples are unique in the sense that:

³ Mona Baker, *In Other Words: A coursebook on translation*, 3rd ed, London & NY: Routledge, 2018:280.

- (1) they (eg, the teaching of non-self) are not found outside of oneself;
- (2) they (eg, dhyana) are experienced for the sake of **right view** (seeing non-self).

It's interesting here that we can translate the **texts** of such teachings into any language, and any religion can claim their truths and goodness to be their own. For example, the Buddha's teachings on the **Breath Meditation** can be plagiarized by God-religions who claim that they have this teaching, too; or they can lift the **Cultivation of Lovingkindness** and direct it to God rather than other humans and beings.

Personal transformation

In fact, **modern psychology** is voraciously assimilating Buddhist meditation teachings, theories and practices, and fitting these into their own Procrustean beds, claiming to be legally wedded to them. They have translated the **texts** of the Dhamma, even transmuted their **tastes** of meditation, etc, which they give them **new names**, branding them as their own offspring.

Then, in the leisure after the marriage, they may even declare "I'm not a Buddhist!" Yet, none of these branded methods will bring the awakening which the Buddha teaches and which his disciples experiences.

The wall or the tree

This is where we are up against a **wall**: we cannot translate the Buddha's **experience** of awakening. Actually, we are up against a tree, **the Bodhi tree**. We can bark up this tree, pee at its foot to mark ownership or simply out of spite. The tree neither speaks back nor minds it: it simply keeps growing upwards and giving cool safe shade to any who comes under it.

Whatever true Buddhist **translations** we read should be seen as windows or doors opening into this garden of the Bodhi tree. We may read the best descriptions and catalogues of this garden; so long as we are not in it, we will not feel its fresh air, fragrance and goodness—we will not see the Buddha.

We can only fully taste the Dhamma by sitting under one of the nearby trees, close our eyes. Then, we will see what eyes see not, sense beyond the senses, and rise to heights beyond even the divine, time and space themselves, and gain the death-free.

We cannot translate any of these; we must each **experience** them for ourself. This is true awakening.

R632 Revisioning Buddhism 245

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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