



Fragment 4 - A short note on translation

“Traduttore, traditore”.

So says Freud in his book on Jokes and their relation to the unconscious¹, that the translator is a traitor. But it is no joke for the translator, rather a reality that the translator faces because of the inevitable difficulties presented by the particularities of each language, the crucial part played by metaphor and metonymy and the so-called play on words. One can, after all, play with language, change a few letters around, and it is this playfulness, according to Freud, that allows for the pleasure gained from a joke, with the liberation of nonsense and the lifting of inhibition. Of course, Lacan carried the playfulness of language one step further by his inventive and instructive use of neologisms.

James Strachey, Freud’s translator, tells us a little about the problem he faced when translating *der witz*, for his English translation of ‘Jokes and their relation to the unconscious’². He noted how, for the sake of consistency, a compromise had to be made. The English word ‘*wit*’ or ‘*witty*’ has a much more restricted meaning in English, referring more to a refined or intellectual type of humour and instead. The difficulty meant that neither the word ‘*joke*’ or ‘*wit*’ was a perfect fit for the translator. The word ‘*joke*’ had a broader meaning which allowed the reader to make his own interpretation, even if in some cases the translation was incorrect. For Strachey, once the English word had been adopted, consistency of use was important.

So it is for the German word ‘*angst*’. Strachey comments directly on the translation of ‘*angst*’ into English³. As it is for ‘*anxiety*’, ‘*angst*’ is quite a common word in German. However what seemed important to Strachey was that the translation had to reflect what was Freud’s psychiatric use of the word *angst* which was present in such words as ‘*angstneurose*’. This led to Strachey using the word ‘*anxiety*’ despite it also having broader uses in English. Strachey tells us that the psychiatric use of the word *anxiety* goes back to the mid seventeenth century and like ‘*angst*’, its psychiatric use is reflected in its etymology. Both have a reference to choking and to the psychological characteristic in question (*angst-eng- to narrow, restrict, anxiety-angere-to squeeze, throttle*). The English word ‘*anguish*’ also has the same etymological root as ‘*anxiety*’ and ‘*angst*’ but Strachey claimed that it reflected a more acute psychological condition. Strachey compromises by using ‘*anxiety*’ for ‘*angst*’, a more technical translation, characterised by an anticipatory element and the absence of an object.

Anxiety as an English translation for ‘*angst*’ is a compromise. Anxiety has become one of the most frequent and apparent complaints in the modern-day psychoanalytic clinic. Like in Freud’s time, it can appear in various ways, so that it has become increasingly difficult to know what the subject intends when they claim to be anxious. Following Freud, Lacan links anxiety to the real, ‘*hilflosigkeit*’ when faced with what cannot be spoken. Anxiety is, as Lacan called

¹ Freud, S. (1905). SE. Vol VIII, p.34

² Freud, S. (1905). SE. Vol VIII, p. 6-7

³ Freud, S. (1895). SE. Vol III, p. 116

it, an exceptional affect. It is the affect that does not deceive, precisely because it does not have a possible object, but an impossible one, *objet a*. Given the compromise and the broader use of the word ‘*anxiety*’, it is therefore incumbent on us analysts in the clinic to work out what the patient is speaking about when they refer to the signifier ‘*anxiety*’, as many do in the English psychoanalytic clinic. We must determine whether the real is at stake when they speak of ‘*anxiety*’. When a patient comes speaking of ‘*anxiety*’, we cannot assume that they are speaking of another less exceptional affect if they don’t use the word ‘*angst*’ or ‘*anguish*’, which is less commonly used in English. Nor can we assume that there is an impossible real object at stake. Do they speak of *real anxiety*? How to make it speak?

The use of the word ‘*anxiety*’ has a resonance for those who read and study Freud and Lacan in English. We may have inherited this translation reluctantly, but consistency, when needing to become the traitor remains appropriate. I look forward to playful discussion on the topic in Paris.

Carmelo Scuderi
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