

Charles Bally and the origins of translational equivalence

Anthony Pym
Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Spain

Version 3.1. June 2014

Abstract: The Swiss linguist Charles Bally, mostly known for his work in comparative stylistics and phraseology, developed a descriptive methodology for linguistics based on translation and functional equivalence. Historically, the difficulties encountered by his students when translating between French and German alerted him to the peculiarities of the different languages on the level of style, which then set in motion his descriptions of those stylistic differences. Bally claimed that his linguistic analyses could then constitute a “method” for the performance of translations at a more advanced level, where they ideally enable students to “work through the idea” rather than mechanically move from form to form. Bally’s work thus recognized two distinct kinds of translation – one mechanical, the other communicative – and a loose dynamic relation between linguistic description, language teaching, and the learning of translation skills. He stopped short, however, of actually elaborating comparative stylistics as a method of translation. That task, along with many of Bally’s key terms and basic approach, would be picked up by the French linguists Vinay and Darbelnet, who would in turn become one of the mainstays of contemporary Translation Studies.

Translation Studies knows its past badly. Here this relative ignorance concerns two related things: the concept of general equivalence, and the use of comparative linguistics to isolate translation solution types (“procedures”, “techniques”, sometimes also “strategies”).

To take “equivalence” first, I have spent a few years looking for how the term entered translation theory. For a while I thought it was used by the Valencian scholar Joan Lluís Vives in his *De ratione dicende* of 1533, but then that appearance of the term turned out to have been put there by an over-enthusiastic Spanish translator from the Latin. Vives actually had a notion of general equivalence, I suspect, when he outlined a “third genre” of translation in which “the matter and the words are [both] weighed up” (“*Tertium genus est, ubi & res & verba ponderantur*”, 1533: 168v); that is, when he sought a middle path between functional adaptation and extreme literalism. The notion of equivalence that interest me here is precisely that: a concept that bridges the extremes and can be applied to many things that translators do, all within the one unified concept of translation (and is thus “general”, as opposed to the idealist tradition of abstract binary oppositions of “one kind of translation versus the other”) – I will come back to this “weighing” of function and form later. Yet I admit Vives had no word for “equivalence” in that particular passage, much as I would like to put one there now. More recently I found the term “equivalent” (actually эквивалент) in an almost forgotten piece of Russian translation theory (Smirnov 1934), and in the subsequent Russian tradition the word usually came to refer to established equivalence of the kind found between technical terms, rather than as a general conceptualization of translation as a whole. This

“restricted” use of the term would clash with the more general use when the Russians read Catford (1965) (cf. Barkhudarov 1975: 11). So did the general sense start from Catford? Not really, since the term *équivalent* is used in the general way in Vinay and Darbelnet in 1958, well prior to Catford, where it frustratingly appears alongside the naming of *équivalence* as a specific translation solution where all items are changed (making it virtually the opposite of the Russian sense of the term). So as far as I can tell, no one really knows how “equivalence” as this more general concept, applicable to many of the things translators do, entered Western Translation Studies, although we can see that its origins were very confused. I know Wilss (1982: 134-135) presumed it came from mathematics, but he was guessing, like the rest of us.

Now, I suspect, a new lead can be found in Bally.

As for the role of linguistics and translation solution types, although theorists and pedagogues have referred to the work of Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/1972) for more than fifty years, virtually no one seems to have asked where the two French linguists recruited their ideas from. This concerns not just their formulation of seven basic translation solution types (which they actually called “procédés”, “procedures”), but perhaps more importantly the idea that a certain kind of linguistics, a “comparative stylistics”, could locate and justify those solution types. Indeed Vinay and Darbelnet openly name their approach as “stylistique comparée”, *comparative stylistics*, rather than translation theory or analysis. So what does that term “stylistics” mean? Where did it come from?

A history of German Translation Studies (Siever 2010: 32) associates the founding of comparative stylistics with the publication of Alfred Malblanc’s *Pour une stylistique comparée du français et de l’allemand* in 1944. Vinay and Darbelnet do indeed recognize a debt to Malblanc, who was in charge of the series where they published chez Didier in Paris. However, Vinay and Darbelnet themselves attribute the origin of comparative stylistics not to Malblanc but to the Swiss linguist Charles Bally, who, they say (1958/1972: 32), formulated the corresponding concept of “external stylistics” in 1932, an idea that Malblanc merely renamed as “comparative stylistics”. Vinay and Darbelnet certainly owed much more to Bally than they did to Malblanc: they cite Bally some 23 times in the first edition of their *Stylistique comparée*, while Malblanc gets little more than a few nods of respect.

So if you want to find out where Vinay and Darbelnet were working from, Bally could be the man to look at. And if you would like discover where the concept of “equivalence” as a general relation came from, Bally could also be your man.

So I looked. And what I found was a whole theorization of translation, with lots of equivalence, but without any real attention to translation theory.

Charles who?

Charles Bally is widely recognized as the founder of modern linguistic stylistics and, within that frame, modern phraseology. It would be nice to say he is a forgotten figure in English-language linguistics¹ but I am not sure he was ever really present enough to be forgotten. He is usually referred to as no more than the coeditor, alongside Albert Sechehaye, of Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), compiled from what are

¹ Although not translated into English, to my knowledge, Bally occupies a major place in the modern history of French linguistics and is known in Germany. He was translated into Russian from 1923.

misleadingly called “students’ notes”. In discussions of that coediting, Bally is sometimes mentioned as sharing the blame for concealing many of the less systemic questionings that have since been discovered in Saussure’s *Écrits* (2002) – Bally would be the over-eager apprentice who excessively simplified and formalized his master. And yet, as Bally’s independent interest in stylistics might suggest, that characterization is not entirely fair.

Charles Bally (1865-1947) was only eight years younger than Saussure. Prior to attending Saussure’s *Cours*, he had studied classics in Geneva, completed his doctorate on Euripides in Berlin from 1886 to 1889. He had then been a tutor to the Greek royal family for four years and had taught as a *privat-docent* at the University of Geneva from 1893, in addition to teaching at a business school and an introductory grammar school (*Progymnasium*). That is, he was not just a student and not just a linguist: he earned his keep by teaching French, particularly as a foreign language. This teaching experience, coupled with his knowledge of German linguistics, brought him to stylistics. Bally published his *Précis de stylistique* in 1905 and his *Traité stylistique française* in 1909. Since Saussure did not begin teaching his course in general linguistics until 1907, there is little reason to see Bally as simply applying Saussure. Some of the more systemic notions were actually formulated *in nuce* by Bally prior to Saussure, albeit without the revolutionary clarity. From 1913 Bally held the chair of General Linguistics and Comparison of Indo-European Languages at the University of Geneva, the chair that had previously been held by Saussure.

So what does “stylistics” mean? Bally set out to study the “expressive resources of a whole language” (1905: 11). In this, his project differs from the kind of literary stylistics that would study the language used by one author, for example, and it refrains from assuming, as had some of his German predecessors, that the works of great writers could help shape a whole language. Bally wants to look at the entire French language, at all its levels of usage, and give a systematic description of its peculiarities at the level of *parole*, linguistic expression, rather than the underlying obligatory grammar. This is where his association with Saussurean tradition becomes difficult: Bally wanted to study a whole language, but he did not want to do so at the level of obligatory grammatical rules. Instead of cold oppositions and pure differences of the kind one might find in the later Prague structuralism, for example, he emphasizes the *affective* uses of language, the musical and rhythmic qualities, the varieties of possible expression and the constant imbrication of utterance with “life”, in a sense that, given the dates, would owe much to the philosophical work of Henri Bergson.

The important point here is that stylistics, although assuming the same extension as the entire language system (*langue*), is not looking for abstract binding laws. Instead, it is an affair of tendencies, possibilities, options, relative frequencies, and what “sounds right” in a particular language. Bally’s various formulations of this point are often wavering. In his *Traité de stylistique française*, in almost confessional mode, he puts it as follows:

With respect to method, one must distinguish between what is normal [*la règle*] and what is a law. Stylistics has to study expressions without having a systemic frame of mind; it has to identify the general tendencies without excessive concern for rigor. (1909/1951: 1; my translation, here and throughout)

You might imagine how difficult it is to translate the word *règle* in the above passage. A “règle” is a rule, but here it is not a “law.” So what is the difference between a rule and a law? In Bally’s mind, it is a question of attitude and approach: he works close to the examples, of which there are many, and he works bottom-up, from the examples to the abstraction, rather than top-down, from the hypothetical law that then seeks examples. So much for Bally as the “student” who over-systematized Saussure! The one reproach one might make of Bally’s own work is precisely his lack of clarity with respect to theory and methodology (as we shall see below). But that fault might also be seen as an excessive love for language.

Interestingly, Vinay and Darbelnet echo Bally’s vague distinction as far as they can, and rather more clearly: “Grammar is the domain of servitudes, whereas options belong to the domain of stylistics” (1958/1972: 32). But Vinay and Darbelnet immediately qualify this with respect to their own research project, messing up the apparently linear boundary:

Even though options dominate internal stylistics, which is focused on the facts of expression [as in Bally], external stylistics [what Vinay and Darbelnet call “comparative stylistics”] concerns both servitude and option. (1958/1972: 33)

That is, when it is a question of speaking or writing in French only, then stylistics concerns the choices you can make. But when you are moving from English or German into French, then it seems there are grammatical laws and frequent patterns of expression that you simply have to accept.

This accounts for why Vinay and Darbelnet, and many of those who have followed them, make distinctions between the “obligatory” and “optional” modalities of the various solution types they present, whereas that kind of distinction was of little interest to Bally.

One might nevertheless ask why such a distinction between two kinds of stylistics should be made. Surely there are rules (or “laws”) and options for the speaker of French, just as there are rules and options for the translator going *into* French? If a stylistics can be formulated just for French, why should it be fundamentally different from a stylistics that works for movements between French and other languages? I can see no strong reason for any difference. Indeed, one might remain faithful to Bally, to the origins of linguistic stylistics, if everything were regarded as optional – why not?

A methodical linguist

The real interest of Bally is that his epistemological starting point was actually translation, his methodology was based on a theory of equivalence, he recognized that his whole procedure was in effect a way of training translators, and yet he never said anything systematic about translation. You will not find him listed among any list of translation theorists.

When I attempt to grasp his methodology for translation, I am thus looking for something that is fundamentally not there in any organized way, but is there nevertheless.

Bally’s major text, for methodology and much else, is *Linguistique générale et linguistique française*, first published in 1932. As the title indicates, the first part

elaborates concepts and procedures that are presumed to work for all languages, while the second part applies those concepts and procedures to the stylistics of French. Beneath the cover, though, what is happening in this book is a constant process of translation between French and German. In fact, the method is explicitly marked by Bally's experience as a teacher of French to German-speaking students:

As I went through French texts with foreign students, as I translated German texts into French with them, I was naturally led to reflect on the difficulties they encountered and the differences they found between the two languages. These observations gradually became impressions of a more general order, which in turn allowed me to glimpse the deep and divergent tendencies of the French and German languages. Text analysis and translation thus ceased to be the purposes of my work and instead became practical ways of defining these general overviews. ("Préface à la première édition", my translation, 1932/1965: 8)

The bottom-up approach is very clear. So, too, is the functional role of translation. Further on, Bally gives special weight to the need to study the *mistakes* that Germans make when they speak and write French, and the *difficulties* encountered by translators. Both kinds of data are held to reveal the key points of different linguistic systems (1932/1965: 28).

And so, despite a title that only talks about universal linguistics and French, this is a work that starts from translations between French and German (especially if we can envisage an *explication du texte* as a mode of translation) and is in fact full of detailed comparisons of the way French and German differ in expressive modes and capacities. Much of it functions as a direct precedent of Malblanc's comparison of French and German (1944), and thus of the linguistic and institutional space necessary for the work of Vinay and Darbelnet (1958).

Bally, however, is not directly concerned with helping anyone translate. As can be seen in the citation above, his working method takes him from the particular to the general, from translational activity to an awareness of the differences between languages. And then, in the presentation of his findings, this inductive method is reversed: he goes from the principles of "general linguistics" to the specificities of French as compared with German (with the title blatantly omitting not just the German but also any hint of how translation set the whole exercise in motion).

Bally takes pains to point out that his first concern in all of this is "methodological", since adherence to strict method will protect him from the errors of other kinds of stylistics:

Our mother tongue is constantly mixed with our own life, with the life of our society and of the nation. So how can this mixing not give rise to erroneous views, displacing disinterested observation with *a priori* engagements and conventional ideas, introduced from the outside without control? (1932/1965: 13)

The enemy of scientific objectivity is the very liveliness of an embodied language and its social nature. Yet there is no suggestion of social determinism here: Bally is keenly aware that there is no one-to-one parallelism between the way a language evolves and the societies that speak the language, not only because languages change much more slowly

than other institutions but also because they are imposed on speakers of other languages. And since there is no consistent correspondence between language and culture (1932/1965: 14), Bally's cannot be a linguistics of national psychologies. A second challenge to method is the idea that great speakers shape a language, making stylistics a question of (great) individual expression. Bally counters, in Humboldtian mode, that "if thought works on a language, the language also shapes thought" (1932/1965: 15). A third misconception is that one language is more logical or clearer than another, where Bally has no trouble indicating that German is clearer to Germans, and French is clearer to the French. These notes are important because Bally was working against previous studies that were overtly shaped by precisely such presuppositions, notably Fritz Strohmeyer's historical-psychological portrait of French in *Französische Grammatik auf sprachhistorisch-psychologischer Grundlage* (1921) and *Der Stil der französische Sprache* (1924), as well as Karl Vossler's *Frankreichs Kultur und Sprache: Geschichte der französischen Schriftsprache* (1929), which had generally seen French as shaping and being shaped by works of literature.

In order to break with all of that, Bally proposed that the linguistic method – the method that is linguistics rather than anything coming "from outside" – must be based on pure comparison. The foundational assumption of that comparison is that several elements, within the one language, can share "functional equivalences" (*équivalences fonctionnelles*), defined as follows:

Pieces of a grammatical system can replace each other [*peuvent s'échanger*] because of their shared function, even when their semantic and stylistic values are not identical. Compare the following "functional equivalents": *the house my father owns, of which my father is the owner, belonging to my father, owned by my father, and finally, my father's house.* (1932/1965: 40)

The functional equivalence here allows identification of... what, exactly? Bally does not really say. It is not just an underlying grammatical category like the genitive or possessive, which would be simple and constant enough: OBJECT + DE + OWNER in French, and OBJECT + OF + OWNER or OWNER + 'S + OBJECT in English. That would lie in the land of grammatical laws, and Bally's example includes structures that do not correspond to simple laws ("belonging to", etc.). The examples do more than a grammar does; they are marked by semantic values: these equivalent expressions can scarcely be aligned with cases like "My father's smile" or "My father's death". And yet the equivalence here stops short of producing functions for each possible concept in a language. The equivalence of interest to stylistics is somewhere between the grammar and the dictionary. That said, Bally's project, despite its firm insistence on method, seems to offer no clear grid for organizing the "functions" that this process of comparison can indeed isolate. What he presents is merely a tool for investigating language, not a map of any complete language system. It is rather like giving a young geologist a pick-hammer and saying, "Off you go, find some geology!"

My interest here, of course, is the central role that "equivalence" plays in Bally's method. On one level, his use of the term could be among the most obvious: any speaker can say the same thing (or almost) in different ways; reformulation exists. Bally nevertheless insists that such functional equivalences are "the basis of all linguistic

systems” (1932/1965: 35), which is a statement that requires some thought. If it is true, then systems are not based on pure differences, as in a simplistic reading of Saussure. If it is not true, then language could not talk about language, and there would be no linguistics.

Bally, as a lover of language, does not want to lock himself into either of those paths. He asks us to accept that, with some give and take, reformulation does exist, and different languages do restrict it in different ways. Bally perhaps wanted the rigor of a methodological tool to save him from the presuppositions of the German tradition, but he was not a blind Saussurean: he never accepted the rigor of a system that had no life – a language was something dynamic waiting to be explored, and the exploration was itself a dynamic process.

Does equivalence, or reformulation, have any theoretical right to exist? That is not a question we can answer. Its possible existence should nevertheless be a key element in the training of translators and interpreters. I remember a lecture given by Daniel Gile in Monterey whose sole point was that reformulation is always possible within any one language, so there was no reason why any translator or interpreter should feel obliged to stick to the start-text forms they are working from. And if the author or speaker can reformulate, then so can the translator or interpreter. A linguistics that recognizes reformulation should be of some interest to translators.

Bally’s use of functional equivalence has certain productive virtues. For instance, he recognizes a mode of “grammatical equivalence”, actually based on word classes, that allows for the concept of “transposition” to be formulated:

A linguistic sign can change its grammatical value and yet retain its semantic value by adopting the *function* of a lexical category (noun, verb, adjective, adverb) to which it did not previously belong. Thus the nouns *planet* and *country*, without changing their signification, become (functionally) adjectives in *planetary (system)* and *country (house)*[...] (1932/1965: 116)

The resulting notion of “transposition” would be provide a key term for Vinay and Darbelnet.

A further example of equivalence as a methodological tool is rather more exciting and might resonate with any scholar struggling to find time and silence in which to grapple with old books. Bally claims that the following series of utterances and actions could be functionally equivalent to each other (1932/1965: 41):

1. I want you to leave.
2. I order you to leave.
3. You have to leave.
4. You must leave.
5. Leave the room!
6. Get out!
7. Out!
8. [Gesture toward the door and facial expression indicating irritation.]
9. [Throwing the person out.]

Bally observes that the series moves from the explicit to the implicit. That is, the assumed

functional equivalence allows the linguistic categories of “explicitation” and “implicitation” to be identified, along with some of their degrees – and this, too, would appear in Vinay and Darbelnet. Bally actually claims that each movement down the list sees a logical category disappear from the expression, while the mind of the receiver (the person who is supposed to leave) can still make up for the missing expression. He thus manages to build a psychological observation and a linguistic category on the basis of a methodological banality: any act of comparison requires the assumption of an invariant or common core that allows the differences to be identified; all linguistics must be doing something like this. The name for the operator in Bally is “equivalence”.

I pause a moment to consider how much more Bally could have done with this example. For instance, observe the way the first person disappears as you move down the list, then the second person withdraws, the third, and finally we see the linguistic, corporeal, and interpersonal actions flow into each other. We can equally posit that, instead of the linguistic expression becoming increasingly implicit as we move down, one can see the potential action, the possible grimace, and the linguistically marked anger all becoming implicit as we move *up*: “I want you to leave”, although formally explicit, implies that non-leaving could activate any or all of the other utterances and actions. Put another way, “I order you to leave” is a well-formed performative that can only actually perform to the extent that its force and relation with action is implicit in all the others. Bally’s example seems on the cusp of a performative linguistics; he is relating language with action in a novel and intriguing way. And yet he has no interest in any of that. He makes no comment on the system of pronouns – Benveniste (1966) would later claim that the pronominal system, not equivalence, was the basis of human languages. Bally did not want to go there (and this in a chapter called “Théorie de l’*énonciation*”). The kind of performative French linguistics that Robinson (2003) explores in relation to translation would be developed completely to the side of Bally’s stylistics.

Let me take the example just a little further. One might posit that the physical action at the bottom of the list is possible in all languages and all cultures (the restricting condition concerns power, not different language systems); the grimace and gesture at the penultimate step could be more culture specific (an Italian would be cutting one hand with the other), and so on up the list, such that the utterance most specific to its language system would be the one at the top, marked by the explicit first person, possibly with marked degrees of politeness (as in Japanese?). This could seem counter-intuitive if you think that the most linguistically explicit utterances should be the least socially embedded and thus the easiest to translate (cf. Pym 1992/2010: 126), showing that linguistic specificity is not the same thing as social embedding. I leave those paradoxes for another day, however. The interesting point, here, is that it would have cost nothing for Bally to recognize that innumerable languages could articulate the action and the grimace; many could capture the monosyllabic interjection; and why not imagine, with increasing frustration, an enraged Heinrich reverting to his mother-tongue “Raus!”, while an infuriated Inés screams “¡Fuera!”, as one tends to do, furtively, when driving in heavy traffic and the like. Why does Bally *not* mention other languages?

Just as he does not want to see the key role of performativity, Bally does not seriously entertain the possibility of interlingual equivalence. For him, equivalence is something that operates within one language system only. So when Bally comes to compare French and German, there seems to be no mention of any kind of equivalence.

That is strange. The two languages somehow line up as if by magic: “Wenn du kommst: Quand tu viendras” (1932/1965: 355). It would seem logical to apply the same principle to such interlingual alignment, but that just does not happen (as far as I can see).

A possible reason for this can be found in Bally’s early two-volume *Traité de stylistique française* (1909/1951), where he pushes the notion of equivalence into territory that is extremely idealist and unnecessarily monolingual. Bally talks about pieces of language having a “logical equivalent”, which is held to be a “simple notion” that can then be used in order to classify those pieces of language (1909/1951: 1.30, 96). However, Bally also talks about “equivalence in context” (since words function in contexts), and from there we find the combination of the *two* kinds of equivalence in something like a pure language:

When the logical equivalence of an identifying term is accompanied by an equivalence in context, one has constituted a mode of intellectual expression or language of the pure idea. (1909/1951: 1.105)

What seemed like no more than a methodological assumption for the linguist at work here becomes a view of language as expressing a series of simple ideal forms – yes, a pure language, with a resonance that cannot help but recall the similar reference in Walter Benjamin (1923/2012: 78). Benjamin, however, was comparing two languages, the words *pain* and *Brot* (French and German for “bread”); Bally was just pretending to work within just one language, where recurrent values of form in recurrent situations are held to give something like the true definition of meaning of the linguistic item. One might also like to relate this back to Vives’ (1533) notion of translation as a “weighing up” of the literal form and situational similitude, a middle path where translational equivalence becomes thinkable. In theorizing the coming together of these two kinds of equivalence, in naming a “pure language” based on his methodology, Bally logically provides a basis for all future translations – one need only locate the pure form, then generate it anew in different languages. All translation problems could be solved by such an idealization of equivalence.

And then, very quickly, realizing that in some cases there are numerous potential equivalents and their differences are not intangible (or, to speak with Derrida, there is no “transcendental signified”), Bally abandons all idealism and reverts to the excuse of methodological necessity: “these equivalences are only justifiable to the extent that we are only looking for points of comparison so that we can identify the stylistic value of the linguistic facts” (1909/1951: 1.109). That is, Bally formulated an extremely idealist notion of linguistic equivalence, at once on the level of form and context; he thus glimpsed the lifeless pure language that the ideal would lead to; he then retreated into the loosest of terms and acceptance of “equivalence” as little more than a useful assumption. Instead of “logical equivalence” and “contextual equivalence” meeting in somewhere paradise, he replaced both terms with the later references to a vaguely evoked “functional equivalence”, of much the same indefinite kind as we have lived with ever since. This timid double-footing ultimately makes him an unsatisfying theorist.

For or against translation?

That reservation notwithstanding, Bally claims, right at the end of the explanatory part of the *Traité*, that his method of reducing pieces of language to ideas as “logical equivalents” and “equivalents of context” can and should constitute – wait for it – “a veritable method of translation” (*toute une méthode de traduction*)... which, he says, he will leave for another day (1909/1951: 1.138).² The second volume of the *Traité* then comprises numerous exercises for learning of French stylistics, and many of the activities do indeed involve translation. But it was not Bally who wrote the “*méthode de traduction*” – he saw the promised land, but Vinay and Darbelnet went there.

As I have noted, Bally was thinking from a translational situation, his method was based on a concept of equivalence that could have been made translingual, and he himself saw that his stylistics offered a way of training translators. So why did he *not* have anything systematic to say about translation?

At the very beginning of the *Traité* we find a few words that are rather less enthusiastic about translation:

The formal learning of a language system [*langue*] tends to favor an *automatic* and mechanical view of language use [*langage*]; too often it makes one think in a passive way, which is not the best preparation for disinterested scientific observation. [...] The pedagogical use of translation [*la méthode de traduction*] promotes this mechanical work precisely because it accustoms the learner to exchange linguistic symbols – words – for each other, without obliging the mind to work through the idea. (1909/1951: 1.2; italics in the text)

This is intriguing. Here at the beginning of his treatise, Bally associates translation with a “mechanical” process that jumps from form to form without analyzing the “idea” (the idealized use of a piece of language in a situation).³ And then, at the end of the same work, he claims his analytical method, in isolating “ideas”, can provide exactly the same thing, a “method of translation”. One can only conclude that there are two kinds of translation being referred to here. The one at the beginning of the book is bad, since it is a mapping operation that goes from form to form, as in the “grammar translation” teaching method where translation was basically a backward-looking check on acquisition. The second, however, is positive, since it is made to analyze precisely the situated “idea” that the first concept avoids.

This seems to be confirmed in the even earlier *Précis*, where Bally similarly claims that “if translation is a mechanical exercise, a juggling with words, the result can only be bad” (1905: 165). However in that work we actually find a whole “Appendice” on translation, added despite the fact that “in theory, translation should not concern us here” (1905: 163). So why the marginal status of translation, relegated to the appendix? On the one hand, Bally admits that the passage from one language to another, especially as

² “Il faudrait pouvoir insister sur la précision des résultats qu’on peut obtenir par l’emploi de ces procédés, mais cette digression nous entraînerait trop loin de notre sujet; il s’agit en effet de toute une méthode de traduction; je la pratique depuis plusieurs années au Séminaire de français moderne de l’Université de Genève; elle est pour moi une réalité absolument concrète; mais elle demanderait à être démontrée systématiquement, textes en mains; cela ne peut se faire que dans un ouvrage spécial, qui verra peut-être le jour plus tard” (Bally 1909/1951: 1.138; italics mine).

³ The repeated term “mechanical” has a resonance in terms of Bergson’s distinction between mechanical (clock) time and interior time or *durée* (1889/1904), and indeed with his association of laughter as being caused by the human body acting like a machine (1900/1940). For Bally, as for many reacting against the industrial revolution, the machine was the opposite of life and its *affectivité*.

manifested by the difficulties of learners, remains an efficient way of approaching what is particular to a language. On the other, though, he consistently mistrusts all translation activities that are based on word-for-word principles, or that work on words or phrases in isolation, or indeed that ask learners to translate complex passages before they are adequately trained for the task. Such uses of translation avoid passing through the “idea”, thus cultivating blindness to all the intricacies of the way subjective desires and emotions (“l’affectivité”) operate in language. In fact, translation, thus understood, effectively shortcuts all the work of stylistics. It is thus almost necessarily marginalized, as an inferior and misleading rival.

There is, however, an alternative use of translation, envisaged as an advanced learning activity:

When translation is introduced at the appropriate stage, not at the beginning of language studies but at a time when the learner has access to many materials that have been taught in a controlled way, it is not without value. Approached in a certain way, translation can become a touchstone for the lessons learned and the knowledge acquired. (1905: 163)

So we have a bad kind of translation, the one commonly used in language acquisition at lower levels, and a good kind of translation, which is a high-level *application* of grammar and stylistics.⁴ It is in this pedagogical sense that stylistic analysis can become a “method for translation” (meaning, for the higher, more advanced kind of translation), while translation itself cannot be a method for learning a language.

In a slightly later lecture, Bally once again allies translation with “mechanical correspondence from language to language” (1910: 4) but this time he sees pedagogical composition exercises and translation as both being based on “synthetic *combinations* of expressions” (1910: 5). These combinations are apparently too complex for the learner to appreciate what is actually happening in language, in this case in the acquisition of abstract nouns. Bally then claims that his stylistics should once again provide a “preparatory study” for such compositions and translations, basically by “describing the fundamental ideas expressed in the abstract vocabulary and the *means of expression* that language use gives us for rendering them” (1910: 5). Stylistics should precede a better kind of translation.

The bad kind of translation might be as literal as possible, applying the rules of grammar but actually doing too many things at once. The second would seem an even more complicated affair, about which Bally had very little to say part from the fact that it should follow his stylistic analyses.

Conclusion: A delayed legacy

Bally’s comments on translation are dated about 50 years prior to Vinay and Darbelnet: they were there, but they were by no means about to cause a revolution. On the more methodological level, Bally’s comments on equivalence seem almost banal but could

⁴ Bally goes on to talk about translation into the learner’s L2, is which “nothing is learned” since it can be no more than the application of previous lessons (1905: 165). Here Bally applies a reasoning curiously similar to Ladmiral’s much later but similarly sophistic assertion that there is no such thing as L2 translation: “Le thème n’existe pas” (1979: 50).

become something else. In his *Linguistique générale*, equivalence is simply confirming the fact of reformulation and the necessary assumptions of comparison. In his *Traité de stylistique* it momentarily becomes a very naïve idealization of semantics. And all those things would probably be mere wishful thinking were it not for the subsequent history of translation theory.

Vinay and Darbelnet, as one might imagine, eventually found in Bally an open door to walk through: he had announced a complex “method of translation” based on assumed equivalences in particular situations; they just had to write it up. As I have noted, Vinay and Darbelnet also found several of their technical terms and concepts in Bally: the analyses of “transposition” and “explicitation/implicitation” were waiting to be used, as indeed were basic concepts of “loan”, “syntactic calque”, and many of the grammatical terms and observations about the peculiarities of French. More important, there was a whole methodology there: Bally had gone from practical translation problems to the idealism of logical and contextual equivalence (and then “functional equivalence”); Vinay and Darbelnet just had to go the other way, taking the assumed equivalences and using them to give guidelines for translation.

One final reason for recalling Bally, beyond the history of Translation Studies, is his pedagogical awareness that translation can relate to training in several different ways. As we enter to an age where translation is once again acceptable as a means of language acquisition (see the bibliography in Pym, Malmkjaer and Gutiérrez 2013), one does well to remember that the kind of advanced translation Bally described as “working through the idea”, and which we could call “communicative translation”, is far from mechanical and assumes a high level of language skills. As we enthusiastically embrace yet another trend, some words of wisdom can still be found in the past.

References

- Bally, Charles. 1905. *Précis de stylistique. Esquisse d'une méthode fondée sur l'étude du français moderne*. Geneva: A. Eggiman.
- Bally, Charles. 1909/1951. *Traité de stylistique française*. Seconde édition. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Bally, Charles. 1910. *L'étude systématique des moyens d'expression*. Geneva : A. Eggiman.
- Bally, Charles. 1932/1965. *Linguistique générale et linguistique française*. Quatrième édition revue et corrigée. Bern: Francke.
- Barkhudarov, L. S. 1975. *Язык и перевод (Вопросы общей и частной теории перевода)* (Language and translation. Questions in the general and specialized theory of translation), Moscow: International Relations.
- Benveniste, Emile. 1966. *Problèmes de linguistique générale*. vol. I. Paris: Gallimard.
- Bergson, Henri. 1889/1904. *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. 4ème édition. Paris: F. Alcan.
- Bergson, Henri. 1900/1940. *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*. Paris: PUF.
- Catford, John C. 1965. *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: an Essay in Applied Linguistics*, London: Oxford University Press.
- Ladmiral, Jean-René. 1979. *Théorèmes pour la traduction*. Paris: Payot.

- Malblanc, Alfred. 1944. *Pour une stylistique comparée du français et de l'allemand: essai de représentation linguistique comparée*. Paris: Didier.
- Malblanc, Alfred. 1963. *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'allemand: essai de représentation linguistique et étude de traduction*. Paris: Didier.
- Pym, Anthony. 1992/2010. *Translation and text transfer*. Tarragona: Intercultural Studies Group.
- Pym, Anthony, Kirsten Malmkjaer and Mar Gutiérrez. 2013. *Translation and Language Learning*. Luxembourg: European Commission.
- Robinson, Douglas. 2003. *Performative Linguistics: Speaking and Translating as Doing Things With Words*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1916/1974. *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. W. Baskin, Glasgow: Fontana Collins.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. 2002. *Écrits de linguistique générale*. Ed. Simon Bouquet and Rudolf Engler. Paris: Gallimard.
- Siever, Holger. 2010. *Übersetzen und Interpretation: die Herausbildung der Übersetzungswissenschaft als eigenständige wissenschaftliche Disziplin im deutschen Sprachraum von 1960 bis 2000*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Smirnov, Aleksandr A. 1934. "Perevod." In *Literaturnaya entsiklopediya* (Encyclopedia of Literature and Folklore). <http://feb-web.ru/feb/litenc/encyclop/le8/le8-5121.htm>. Accessed January 2014.
- Strohmeyer, Fritz. 1921. *Französische Grammatik auf sprachhistorisch-psychologischer Grundlage*, Berlin, Leipzig: Teubner.
- Vinay, Jean-Paul, and Jean Darbelnet. 1958/1972. *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais: méthode de traduction*. Nouvelle édition revue et corrigée, Paris: Didier.
- Vives, Joan Lluís. 1533. *De ratione dicendi*. Lovanij: ex officina Rutgeri Rescija.
- Vossler, Karl. 1929. *Frankreichs Kultur und Sprache: Geschichte der französischen Schriftsprache von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter.
- Wilss, Wolfram. 1977. *Übersetzungswissenschaft. Probleme und Methoden*. Stuttgart: Ernst Klett.