

OF GREEN IGLOOS, GLOBALIZING HIERARCHIES,
AND RENAISSANCE *TRANSLATIO*

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In memory of Virgilio Moya

Virgilio, in the days I knew him, would get excited about words. The most exciting of them were neologisms that appeared in *El País*, which could be reaped in over a breakfast coffee, then carefully stored in pre-doctoral notebooks. “¿Sabes cómo se llama esto?”, he might say, before any topic of conversation was established. “Este *container* ahí, el de las botellas rotas...”. And before I could claim due ignorance of those large waste-disposal units for glass, “¡Un iglú!”, he claims with pride of conquest, “¡un iglú verde!”, and not just any old green igloo: “... se lo pone aquí en *El País*”—this particular neologism had all the authority of the national newspaper.

Virgilio was a collector of new words, expressions, terms. He collected and classified, since this was research, but he mostly collected, for the joy of discovery. Correctness was not the key, nor was consistency. When I sought a Spanish word for the Australian term “bush”, he came up not just with a string of valid possibilities but also with parallel contexts drawn from the news: “the boys in the bush”, apparently fighters in the Zimbabwean countryside, gave “matorral” as the equivalent used in the Spanish press. There was no question of testing this quantitatively (the early 1990s knew of no Internet search engines); frequencies and norms were of little import; there was similarly no need for authoritative consecration by continued expert usage. What counted was the creativity of the one-off invention, for the pleasure it would bring. This was a secretly hedonistic terminology.

Given those priorities, Virgilio’s preference was clearly for target-language derived equivalents, hopefully of the most modulated kind. Straight loan words were of interest but too easy. Invention for the sake of gratuitous invention probably also went beyond the scales of this particular kind of pleasure. Virgilio was no reader of *Finnegans Wake* and its ilk; his was the world of streets where things changed, curiosities were created, and newness in language could at least get a handle on how to solve problems. For Virgilio, the best kind of problem-solving was from within, from the inner resources of the target language, in this case Spanish.

That preference is common enough in our days. But it is not at all obvious. It requires the initial assumption that our language systems are in some way equal with respect to their values, capacities, and prestige. That much might indeed be assumed for the relation between Spanish and English. Yet we live among globalizing asymmetries where some languages produce technologies and are central, others receive the technologies and develop their own terms for them, and still others, the vast peripheral

majority, receive the technologies and the foreign terms, or do not receive at all. We live within a pronounced hierarchy of languages.

For most of the world, there are few green igloos in the press. There are only foreign objects that arrive with foreign names. The green igloos are probably something like CWDUVMs (Conic Waste Disposal Units for Vitreous Matter—I just invented the term), or words similarly technical. With a name like CWDUVM, you could populate the technical planet. Everyone who makes, maintains or operates the technology will know exactly what you are talking about, all over the world, in whatever language. We can all interpret and use the WWW, with those precise initials, in whatever language we happen to need. Consistency and exactness are well served that way. So why come up with domesticating denominations like “green igloos”? Or with similarly adaptive terms for any international technology?

I have recently entered the world of pirate codes for satellite television (where the term “pirate” is, of course, a quaintly domesticating metaphor—should I put on an eye-patch and a head-scarf each time I go hunting for the secret keys?). In that case the metaphors are quite different: the pirate codes (sorry, “keys”) are known as “flores” (flowers), to pass on the codes is “echar flores”, to throw flowers (also a metaphor for kick-back praise), the websites giving this information are called “La jardinería” (gardening) and similar things, and enthusiasts fill blogs with exclamations like “¡Qué bonitas flores tengo hoy!”. All this amid truly technical acronyms that are far less penetrable. The flowers, like the igloos, are at least ideas we can live with. They draw on the imagination and the cultural resources of those who want to do more than merely receive technology. Like the piracy, they are points of minor resistance to anonymous globalization.

The hierarchy of languages is quite incompatible with that kind of creativity. The hierarchies are strong in our days of extreme electronic communication, where technologies are complex and the centralization of their production is correspondingly strong. Yet the hierarchies also existed far back in history, prior to any assumed equality of languages and equivalence-based creativity. Much medieval translating was carried out in situations that assumed the source language was intrinsically superior to the target. Some languages (Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, Latin) were closer to divine inspiration than others; they were thus more perfect than the rising national vernaculars, which were in turn felt to be superior to the rustic patois. When translating between the rungs on this hierarchy, there was little question of seeking equivalence or home-grown adaptation. The role of translations, mostly moving downwards on the hierarchy, was more to help shape the target language. Target-language terminology relied on loan words and calques rather than creative invention. If experts were the only ones who could understand them, that was of little matter. Sooner or later the imported neologisms would filter down to the populace, and they would all be happier and wiser as a result.

That medieval hierarchy, repeated in our own electronic day, was publicly challenged in the early years of the Italian Renaissance. In the very early fifteenth century, Leonardo Bruni sought to translate Aristotle in a way that many of us these days would associate with equivalence. He located what he saw as the rhetorical function of the text, the voice or person that gave it its unity, and attempted to render that function rather than the Greek on the page. He also coined new Latin terms for Greek terms, insisting that Latin (along with vernaculars like Italian) had all the resources they needed to express foreign ideas. His terms for translation, for example (and it is a very significant example) were based on the root *traduc-* (giving *traductio*), as opposed to the previous Latin terminology based on the root *translat-*. From his

innovation, Romance languages gained the terms they use today: *traducción*, *tradució*, *traduction*, *tradurre*, etc. Prior to the innovation, the terms used were *translatio* and its cognates, many of which are still serviceable in Spanish. Bruni thus gave Romance languages their new names for translation, and did so by producing neologisms (with some precedent in Aulus Gellius, to be sure) from within the resources of his target language.

Innovation is never easy. Bruni's new style and terminology in his rendition of Aristotle brought him a long debate with the previous tradition. The debate was carried out through a series of letters between about 1430 and 1437. His opponent was Alonso de Cartagena, bishop of Burgos. It was wrong, argued Cartagena, to alter the terminology that tradition had already established in order to talk about Aristotle's ideas in Latin. It was wrong to challenge so openly the previous translations, which were in fact responsible for Aristotle gaining stature in the Christian world. It was wrong, posited Cartagena, to go back and render what Aristotle apparently said, when Christian tradition had so delicately established what he *should* have said.

On all these levels, most of us would be in agreement with Bruni, against Cartagena. We live and think within the paradigm of equivalence, which is also the paradigm of critiques of equivalence. We live with assumptions of equal languages and authorial intentions.

There is a case, however, that could be made for Cartagena.

First, for Cartagena, the true judge of a translation is not fidelity to a source but reason (*ratio*), which is "common to all nations but expressed in different languages". Aristotle does not express reason just because he has authority; he has authority because he achieves reason ("Cum igitur Aristoteles ipse non rationem ab auctoritate, sed auctoritatem a ratione consecutus est..."). We therefore have the capacity and the right to judge Aristotle and to translate accordingly. We should thus translate in accordance with our reason, not with respect to words on a page. Why not?

Second, as we have noted, medieval translation generally involved a move downwards on the hierarchy of languages. On this view, there is little question of equivalence. Translation is not there to respect the forms or functions of the target culture but to introduce new forms and new functions. In short, translation is there to develop inferior languages and cultures. Only *after* this development might it become possible to talk about equivalence of some kind. Bruni, on the other hand, assumes from the outset that languages and cultures are potentially equal. Only thus could the Aristotle who had a voice in Greek hope to become an Aristotle with rhetorical force in Latin. Only thus could one begin to think about equivalence. But when were languages ever really equal?

That difference was so great that Bruni and Cartagena actually use different words for translation: Cartagena referred to the scholastic "transfero"; Bruni, we have noted, preferred compounds of the relative neologism "traduc-". They were perhaps referring to two different concepts. Yet they understood each other well enough, to the point of each adopting the terminology of the other in their more detailed critiques. There was no radical epistemological break. Yet a break there certainly was.

Much as we would all nowadays side with Bruni, consider a simple material fact. For Cartagena, for medieval tradition, one could rarely be faithful to a unique text, for the simple reason that there were very few such beasts. Texts were series of manuscript variants (Hispania still knew the Aristotle translated from Arabic); translation was first and foremost work on interpreting those variants; one extended a text's internal productivity, adding more readings, rather than replace the text. Bruni, however, was of the age of the Greek Aristotle, of attempts to establish the text, and soon, of the age of

the established and printed text. His paradigm, that of stable authorship and correspondingly stable equivalence, would become that of the printing press. Only then could one really be faithful to a text.

I note this historical debate to make one quite obvious point: Our own age, in the paradigm of localization, is leaving behind the fixity of the established and printed text. The texts of localization, in software, in websites, in collective electronic authoring, are not at all sources. They are series of modifications and updates, of processes in which translation enters as just another productive link in the chain. Here too, as in the medieval paradigm, languages mix, hybrids are commonplace, and knowledge flows from the languages of production to the relatively undeveloped languages of peripheral consumption.

Virgilio's authoritative source, in the nicotine and coffee of a morning bar in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria somewhere around 1989, was not a book but a newspaper. It was updating what we knew about things in the street, and it would in turn be updated (it seems those "iglus verdes" never become firmly established as a term, and I'm not sure that flowers will bloom as television codes next week). The green igloo was no more than a moment of localization, resisting the global standardization that is the more profound basis of contemporary text-production processes. In its allegiance and joy in the transitory, if nothing else, it had much in common with the one-off plays of weakly standardized medieval Latin. As a moment of resistance, of pleasure in invention, it is worth remembering.

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