

# The Reply to the Reply

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*Editors' note: the following is Sergio Viaggio's reply to Peter Newmark's letter written after the two had met in Trieste in November 1993.*

Dear Peter,

As I promised, here is my reply to yours. Your remarks can be, I think, divided into five distinct levels: my personality, my ethical and political views, my style, my interpretation of your writings, and my own thoughts. I shall address them in that order, with special emphasis on the last two, which are the ones really relevant to the discussion at hand.

1) I wish I did not have to address the first three, but a few comments are, I'm afraid, in order: a) I am indeed gregarious and social, and by now I hope you are reasonably assured that you have no problem getting a word in when in my immediate vicinity. b) There is nothing in my piece to lead anyone to believe that I do not take the Declaration of Human rights seriously, or that I espouse crowds and majorities. c) I never intended to question your ethical views (would that most of us had them!), nor do I find your commitment to moral universals itself at all bewildering or rewardable by a kick in the buttocks: all I did say, and repeat, is that I find that kind of statement bewildering and out of place in a piece on the theory of translation, and that a gloss of the kind you advocate would earn a UN translator a kick in the buttocks. I should know: I work there. As to my style... well, what can I say? I wish I could write like Seleskovitch, unfortunately I cannot — not in English, anyway, a language that, much as I love it, I wield like a broken sword. d) You bewail my verbiage, platitudes, diffusion and tediousness: I hope a more detached reading of my article would mellow your judgement. If not, what can I do? e)

As to your not being worth such a long space, I am convinced that, as one of the most frequently quoted translation theorists, you certainly are.

II) Now for the substantive part.

1. I started my piece by warning potential readers about my limited corpus: just the few pieces by you to come my way, which, as I confess, has not been that much. I am sure you have many more writings to your credit. *Paragraphs on Translation* is not addressed simply because it had not yet been issued. As to the meat of your argument, may I proceed point by point.

2. I presumed the definition in *A Textbook of Translation* superseded that in *Approaches to Translation* because it was written later. I stand corrected, but I still find them unsatisfactory, either singly or combined. Translation, to my mind, cannot be equated with an "attempt at replacing a written message and/or statement (again, what is the difference?) in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language", nor does it seem enough to add that "often, though not by any means always, it is rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text". I still think a definition ought to encompass what translation is always, including such manifestations thereof as, among others, interpretation and dubbing. My question to you remains: Can all of this be encompassed in a general theory of translation? Why? Why not? Although I have read your writings over and over, I still fail to find a satisfying treatment of these issues (but then, maybe that is my fault).

3. I know that you distinguish meaning from reference; my quibble is that you explicitly deny the difference between linguistic meaning and extralinguistic sense (*Approaches to Translation*

pp. 98-99), the *vouloir-dire* from the actually *dit*. I do not see where I confuse sense with reference; my comments on pp. 45, 48, and 49 specifically refer to "meaning meant" as a synonym of sense. Whereas you advise the student that his work "*is some hint of a compromise between the text and the facts [i.e. reference]*" (*A Textbook of Translation* p. 22), I name that intermediate territory 'sense' (i.e. what the author intends to communicate about those facts) and claim that that is, precisely, the yardstick for faithfulness — everything else, in extreme circumstances even Shakespeare's words, is negotiable.

4. I am also aware of your theory that non-SVO order was artificially imposed by clerics, but, although I am in no position to refute it, it does not sound convincing to me: if language and thought were so isomorphic, there would be, I think, many fewer structural differences between idioms. The "I love you" example, at least as written in *A Textbook of Translation*, is vulnerable: "*The sentence 'I love you' tells you something about the transmitter of the utterance [...] it gives you a piece of straight information [...] That particular sentence [...] should be translated literally [...]*" I repeat, the sentence 'I love you' has only linguistic meaning, but its sense as a specific utterance, as a conveyor of a particular extralinguistic sense, will depend on a myriad of non-linguistic circumstances. You explain that the context is typical: a declaration of love. I admit I had not quite grasped it (*mea* perhaps *culpa*), but from the first person to whom: to a woman, a man to a man, to several women, to several women and men? What kind of relationship? What kind of love? What if the melody demands more syllables? What if the literal translation cannot be sung? What if it does not rhyme as it is supposed to? If you resent my use of the term "legislate" I am willing to take it back, but the main issue remains. As to your advocating (whenever possible) the literal approach, you say so yourself in the very prologue (*A Textbook of Translation*, p. xi); and, as you yourself complain (*ibid*, p. xii) I am not alone in reading you that way. I wish indeed I did understand you and read you properly, believe me I have tried — if apparently not with much success.

5. I do, it is true, attack your plea for literalism, but I do not ignore your proviso, as I think is clear from my counterplea.

6. Next comes my assertion to the effect that

"Free translation gets all the invectives, whereas literal translation, its direct opposite [according to your scale], will systematically be preferred." I may be wrong, but that is the way I read you, to wit: "*Free translation [...] usually [...] is a paraphrase much longer than the original, a so-called 'intralingual translation,' often prolix and pretentious, and not a translation at all;*" whereas "*literal translation [is] the basic translation procedure, in both communicative and semantic translation, in that translation starts from there*" (*A Textbook of Translation*, p. 70.). Your advocacy of literal translation (whenever possible) is, I think, quite obvious. For you, provided it is accurate, a translation cannot be too literal (*A Textbook of Translation*, p. 72); for me, provided it is adequate, it cannot be too free.

7. As to 'adequacy', I do not speak German, so its different meaning in that language does not bother me. As I explain, in my opinion, an adequate translation is the one that makes the right extralinguistic sense in the right linguistic way, whether free or literal, communicative or semantic. Adequate, in other words, for its purpose. And no, I do not agree that translation is about meaning - that is, I think, the crux of our disagreement.

8. I think a comma would be very useful between 'best' and 'provided', but, English not being my mother tongue, I defer to your better judgement.

9. Unfortunately, I am not familiar with Sweet's writings other than his 1891 *New English Grammar*. As to Derrida, I find it more and more difficult to put up with academic French, so I'll take your word that he can be silly (*A Textbook of Translation*, p. 225). I have no idea whether humans drew before they mumbled, but I think it is well established that they were well into mumbling before they started writing.

10. I bring up mental speech because you assimilate it to writing rather than speaking and I disagree. I state that whatever was written, was first, and most probably also last, mentally uttered — why care otherwise about how the written word sounds? It is true, of course, that we know nothing of the oral Homer — except that he could not write.

11. Again I think words are indeed vehicular, the linguistic circumstantial evidence of sense, and if they were all we had, communication would be

impossible. I do not confuse, I think, translation with interpretation (I practise both), but I do think they are both forms of mediated interlingual communication (please blame Neubert for the phrase), that interpretation offers the advantage of being directly observable, and that, in view of the extreme conditions that weigh upon it, it allows us to see the essence of translation in its broadest sense: conveying sense across languages. In that, I just join my illustrious Parisian (and I dare venture Triestian) colleagues.

12. If I mistook your attempt to give a hint about repeated words for a statement, I apologise, but it definitely reads as one.

13. I could swear I have read that you intended *A Textbook of Translation* to be your last book on translation - I am delighted this is not the case; I am very much looking forward to more.

14. You must have had much better luck with your students than I and every teacher I know (particularly our colleagues at the Scuola).

15. On page 39 I am referring - quoting Lvovskaja - to the situation as the actualiser of the extralinguistic sense of the linguistic meaning of the utterance (pardon my genitives), which concept - if I for once read you right - you do not accept.

16. With respect to deverbalising, I specifically state that I do it better when translating, and I give quite a few examples.

17. I am sorry you find my faith in translatology pathetic: I enjoy it very much.

18. No, I have not seen you teaching: I simply assume you teach what you preach.

19. I legitimately count myself - without the least intention to bludgeon you or Wilss, or to put myself on your or his level - as seeing eye to eye with a series of more authoritative theoreticians who are also practitioners, including, if I read him correctly, Brian Mossop.

20. Of the great translators you name, I can only speak of Nabokov, and then not very well - much as I otherwise admire him. His ideal of literary translation, by the way, seems lifted flint, stock and barrel from yours: "*rendering, as closely as associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. Only this is true translation*" (*Eugene Onegin*, p. viii). Now this is what his application of his own theory leads him into:

*when he was taken ill in earnest,  
he has made one respect him"  
and nothing better could invent..."*

Would you believe you are reading some of the towering verses of universal literature? I for one would take Lolita anytime!

21. I would definitely agree with you and most theoreticians that everything is translatable more or less, as I assert on p. 44. But that is not what you say in that particularly sweeping quotation ("*The principle with which this books starts is that everything without exception is translatable; the translator cannot afford the luxury of saying that something cannot be translated*" (*A Textbook of Translation*, p. 6)), and furthermore, the argument you give I find wanting.

22. I never meant to imply that you wrote that Shakespeare wrote his sonnets to himself. Upon a second reading, I realise I give the impression that I do, and I apologise. What I was trying to do is refute your statement in *A Textbook of Translation* to the effect that "*a poet [...] may only be writing for himself*" (p. xii). The assertion that a communicative translation would normally be better than a semantic one, however, is not mine but yours: "*A semantic translation is normally inferior to the original, as there is both cognitive and pragmatic loss [...]; a communicative translation is often better than its original*" (*A Textbook of Translation*, p. 48). If, once again, I have failed to understand you, it is not altogether my fault: I interpreted your words literally, and I took a hypothetical translation of Hamlet as an example to make my point. My point, in essence, is that the vector resulting from the dialectics of linguistic form and meaning is itself the form of lingual communication, its content being extralinguistic sense, the Parisians' *vouloir-dire*, and that translation (in all its innumerable aspects) must strive to preserve such a relation across languages. As I stress, linguistic meaning is also form - an insight I gained from Catford. It cannot be 'transferred' any more than sounds. As sounds can be reproduced insofar as the two languages similarly segment and organise the phonic substance, it can be more or less recreated insofar as the two languages segment and organise experience (or, to stick to Hjelmslev, the content substance) along semantically parallel lines. This point I try to illustrate with several examples strewn through-

*My uncle has most honest principles:*

out my article, but most particularly with two extreme examples: Dryden and a public notice. Would you go about translating either of them differently from me? Your illustrated answer to that, I think, would be what would turn this epistolary exchange into something invaluable to all our readers.

From Janáček lover to Janáček lover,

Sergio Viaggio