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## Composition Strategy as Translation

The purpose of this paper is to bring together composition theory and translation theory in more than a metaphoric way. Although we who teach composition often feel like translators, and in many senses we are quite literally translators, there are significant elements of the composing process that precisely parallel translation theory and practice.

The recursive rhythm of writing underlies the way we teach composition today and the way we conceptualize composing as a creative act. We no longer view composing on a linear model, that is, planning, writing, and revising. Instead we create opportunities for inexperienced writers to think, write, invent, write some more, rewrite, get a reader's response, do some research, invent, rewrite, etc., guaranteeing the writer's right to creativity through the final revisions. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, in *Theory of Literature*, agree that "The creative process should cover the entire sequence from the subconscious origins of a literary work to those last revisions which, with some writers, are the most genuinely creative part of the whole" (85). Translation is also such a multi-staged, creative process, as are most complex processes. And like composing, it reflects game theory in that the translator perceives the problems of the text as they emerge, in the teeth of constraints proposed by the very first decisions he or she makes. The first decisions are already limiting the number of the next possible decisions. Like writers, translators are always working amidst the tension between what has just been drafted and what lies ahead. The interpretation of a whole text, like the composition of a whole text, requires the interplay of a total and piecemeal authority. In an essay on Jacques Lacan, Malcolm Bowie conveys the tumultuousness of the process:

In a sense all complex conceptual systems work like this, with each component helping to define and activate the others. But where these systems are customarily divided by their authors into separately tractable sub-units, it is for Lacan a matter of personal scruple that no such division should take place. Every concept acts as a nodal point within a network of choices and refusals, and is presented to the reader in a language where the practical business of choosing and refusing remains present as a syntactic turmoil. (123)

The translator interprets and drafts; and the writer, too, is working in that same turmoil to interpret what it is that needs to be said as it is being drafted. Both composer and translator continually discover meaning as the drafting is in process.

James Liu talks about the "open-ended spiral of infinite reinterpretations" (*Interlingual* 61); he sees the hermeneutic circle as the interrelation of parts and whole and cites Ricoeur's dialectic between understanding and explanation in a way revelatory of both translating and composing:

I propose to describe this dialectic first as a move from understanding to explaining and then as a move from explanation to comprehension. The first time, understanding will be a naive grasping of the meaning of the text as a whole. The second time, comprehension will be a sophisticated mode of understanding, supported by explanatory procedures. (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* 74, as quoted in Liu, *Interlingual* 61)

Translators "continue to modify and refine the initial understanding with new knowledge gained from explanatory procedures" (*Interlingual* 61).

Ideally, composition instruction begins with a student's naive grasp of the whole. Composers work best by keeping a whole structure, however vague, in mind, a structure understood at first to be a primitive whole that is rendered more and more dynamic through the strengthening of its interrelated parts. Translators read the whole work, naively at first, each word's meaning based on common usage, but increasingly on those particular values accumulated in the work itself. In the universe of the work, translators face the tension created by the differences between *parole* and *langue*. They understand meaning as what is liberated from the relationship of one element to another in the system. In the same way composing writers continually experience tension between the local bit of text they are composing and the influence that phrase or concept imposes on the whole piece, which comes gradually into view as the draft completes itself. That is, they are always working to complete a draft. Once they have completed a draft, they take it apart to strengthen the components the whole discourse has created. By invigorating the parts of the system, the writer makes the whole discourse at once more unified and more complex.

Composition teachers today see grammar in relation to writing. We rarely teach grammar for its own sake. Since we start with a whole, our respect for grammar arises out of the emerging text; we see grammar conditioned by the turmoil of writing. We apply inflectional forms, we discover syntax and elements of cohesion. Syntactic or formalistic pressure is created by the purposes and the rhetorical needs of the writer. In like fashion, for the translator the formal equivalence of texts (i.e. the correspondence that exists between linguistic units, independent of an idea or tone) is superseded by their dynamic equivalence (i.e. the larger social, emotional, and cognitive correspondence between an original and a translation) (Kelly 24). Most translators today will concede that formal equivalence is only an aspect of dynamic equivalence. Syntax is seen not only as the bearer of the message, but in part as the message itself. Formal equivalence, of course, can coexist with dynamic equivalence, texts ultimately sharing content, social function, and affect (Kelly 25). Finally, both writer and translator are continually inventing, even when the pre-conceived plan is precise. Language generates the search for ideas. This capacity of language brings me to the major burden of this presentation, a discussion of the obligations inherent in a particular language--"linguistic necessity," to use Louis Milic's phrase (83); I want to introduce linguistic necessity as the mother of invention.<sup>1</sup>

I have confronted linguistic necessity through my own flirtation with Chinese poetry. I don't read Chinese, but, with the aid of informants, I have translated the poems of Li Ch'ing Chao, a woman poet of the Sung Dynasty, and of a contemporary Chinese woman poet, Shen Yee-ping. But rather than merely polish someone else's literal English version of a poem, I require my informants to present me with the line of Chinese characters broken down into the content per symbol. Classical Chinese is such an allusive language that I ask my informants to bring me, insofar as they are able, the allusions and the multiple meanings of each character in a given Chinese line, so that I might work with those permutations as they would influence the mind of a Chinese reader who was familiar with those allusions.

My informants give me several meanings for each character. One character, for example, in one of the contemporary poems means "young disciples." The character for "young disciples," it turns out, also means "peach and pear saplings," which becomes a very interesting underlay and begins to define the poem for me as I merge the two meanings into a metaphor in my translation. So I work with the poetic implications and permutations of these meanings. Often I have had to make enormous compromises because the tension is so severe between my own sense of what the line points to and the threatened blackout of some of that meaning as I try to fit it into English grammar.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jakobson's "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation." See also the full treatment of translation and meaning by Steiner in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. Both of these important works deal with the limits of translation imposed by the imperatives within a given language.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted for this work to my collaborators, Rosabel Lu and Robert Chiang, as well as to the work of James Liu, Pauline Yu, A. C. Watson, and James Graham.

Chinese nouns have no indication of number. Distinctions for number are made primarily by the reader who, because of the way language influences concepts, often finds no need to distinguish, just as we, for example, might not need to distinguish between two and a thousand leaves on a tree turning color. We say, *the leaves are turning color now*. The Chinese writer may add other words to define number: "solitary" blossom or "ten thousand" (an idiom meaning *many*) blossoms or "frequent" storms.

Chinese is an uninflected language that relies on word order in sequences similar to, though not identical with, English word order. A Chinese word more freely than an English word assumes its part of speech through context. For example, a Chinese line may consist of three symbols, one for flower, one for petal, one for red. We in translating have to create some kind of syntactic relation among the three. We can say *the flower's petals are red*, *a flower's petals redden*, *there is a flowering of petals into redness*, shifting the abstraction and the concretion within the line.

A feature of Chinese verbs is that they show no tense. It is very difficult for a speaker of an Indo-European language to compromise with a language that consistently asserts no tense at all and no number. Verbs having no person and no tense of necessity contribute a verbal meaning impersonally and non-temporally.

Let me extend an example that James Liu uses in his *Art of Chinese Poetry* (41). To convey some idea of what the translator's task is, he cites the example of Wordsworth's line, "I wandered lonely as a cloud." Now here is how he would imagine the Chinese equivalent: *Wander as cloud*. You can see how much is left to the reader. The wandering, as Liu says, appears sub *specie aeternitatis*. The line has no subject and never reveals whether it is one cloud or more than one. The metaphoric force of the line, terse as it is, is suggested through the abstracted meanings. Now, if we were to work backwards and forget for the moment that Wordsworth wrote the line one way, how would we translate "wander as cloud"? *Wanderings are like clouds; People wander beneath clouds; We wander like clouds; I wandered as the sky was clouding up; I wandered lonely as a cloud;* and any number of other ways.

I also want to consider the capacity of the Chinese language to deliver meaning paratactically, through syntax or juxtaposition, rather than linking ideas by means of connectives or particles. A compelling examination of this and other matters by Pauline Yu compares the use of parataxis in the work of the German poet Georg Trakl (1887-1914) with similar instances in poems of the T'ang period (Yu 261 ff). Yu stresses in particular the ways a Chinese poet is assisted by the Chinese language to produce naturally a poetry of isolated images, and she contrasts that effort with the effort of a poet working in German who in his desire to achieve a poetry of nature dependent on isolated images must overcome the demands of German before he can produce such effects in his own language; and so he juxtaposes images, avoids most conjunctions, end-stops lines, eliminates a personal subject insofar as that is possible, and uses present tense. For Trakl the personal qualities of "I wandered lonely as a cloud" are exactly what he avoids. Here are a few lines of Trakl translated by Pauline Yu: "The field glimmers white and cold / the sky is lonely and monstrous." By virtually eliminating self from the poem the poet focuses on the imagistic rigors of that winter landscape.

A consideration of Professor Yu's study against a background of my own work as translator prompted me to rethink what I do as a composition teacher. As a result, I have had to raise several questions, remembering of course that the Chinese poet who wants to work personally has to overcome the limitations of Chinese, exactly as the German poet has to overcome the pressures of German in order to achieve his desired poetic.

The questions are these: what linguistic features constrain writers in English as we write? Does a connection exist, important to writers, between the necessary constraints of a language and the power to invent? And finally I ask a related question about our inexperienced students who bypass the constraints of the language, but who do so out of fear, habit, incompetence, or an absence of familiarity with the constraints: they create deviations that often expand rather than limit their range of inventiveness. How do we read or misread these deviations?

I want to emphasize the central force of these questions on the development of student writing and show that the constraints of English are what these inexperienced writers need to feel they are working against, in the sense that we work against something--a wall, a beam, a grammar--as a support for what we are erecting.<sup>3</sup>

Now here are the implications for Western writers. One of the chief constraints of English and of most Indo-European languages is the necessity to provide a subject and hence grammatical person for each verb. Discourse--the expatiation of an idea in prose--is accomplished through a finite verb tied to a subject, operating within a governing tense and an established point of view. The writer who writes impersonally, then, achieves an unnaturally objective tone, one we commonly identify perhaps with technical, scientific, or report writing but alien to personal exposition, the kind of writing our students are habitually exhorted to do in composition classes. Technical writers conceal the agent deliberately, and the student writer who often unknowingly does the same thing produces a kind of scientific language or "officialese" that is inappropriate to the message to be delivered. Behind circumlocutions, embedded personal subjects, nominalized verbs, and a passive voice, we discover the inexperienced writer for whom writing holds special dangers. Typically, we speak in the first person in English; this is our natural voice. The young writer, not yet precise about her subject and fearing the permanence of writing and the commitment that writing calls for, seeks that way of hiding the self in "officialese," in a kind of army talk where she is not visible enough to be held responsible for what she says. For example, she might say, "During the teenage years there are many problems. New adjustments toward life must be made. More responsibilities are imposed." Now this writer is not willing to say "Adolescents have to work through a lot of problems," or "We adolescents have to work through our problems," or "When I became a teenager I had to make new adjustments to my family. I had to accept more responsibilities," etc. It is as if she were writing in Chinese, eliminating the self and juxtaposing ideas. How convenient for her if her language could deliver her reticence in just three characters: *teenage problems adjustment* and leave to the reader the task of sorting things out; but we readers of English have a low tolerance for ambiguity. After this writer explores her subject and apprehends her idea, she may be ready in a later, more developed, revision to commit herself. Once committed to a point of view, she can ask herself many more useful questions about her subject. For example, point of view leads her into a direct line of inquiry. Who feels this way about adolescence? How does the agent come to hold this idea? Are you the agent? If so, how has the idea of responsibility affected you? Has your upbringing influenced your idea? If writer and agent are not identical, is the distinction clear in the writing? Does the principal agent share this idea with others? Does the agent thereby become a plural agent, and if so, can you document its several elements? Perhaps there is something to be gained by suppressing the agent. What are the consequences, in fact, of concealing the agent? Can the writer, through a detailed rendering of the action, compensate for the decision not to elaborate on the agent? These are important questions in the development of a discourse.

A second major constraint with which writers in English contend is temporal. Every verb through tense must exhibit a consistent and unambiguous connection to time. Thus writers in English predicate more about their subject through the specifics of tense and mood. The present tense, in which a general truth or abstract idea is asserted, contrasts with the past tense of its demonstration, through which visual illustrations and examples from research, history, biography, and personal experience are enumerated. We try to impress on our students the rhythm that develops between their assertion of a general idea, which often begins or concludes the essay, and the demonstration of that idea, which frequently requires that they dip into the past tense for recollected data to render what is visual, plastic, and exemplary in discourse.

In a similar way, the translator tries to harness obligation to power. The teacher-translator approaches ambiguity or misreading by stating options as precisely as possible to the beginning writer, endowing the

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<sup>3</sup> In the same way thinkers sometimes break new ground as they emerge from a very strict religious upbringing, still constrained by the tenets of their early training. Henry James, Sr., for example, tried to free himself of the Calvinist concept of the depraved self. In his writing, however, because he never quite trusted the self, that initial Calvinist constraint forced him to introduce the community as a more reliable fellowship for his Utopian theories.

medium again with its generative potential. In an effort to translate a partial, orally expressed idea into the written language, a teacher might ask the student questions exactly like those a translator asks a writer available for consultation about the original text: Did you mean A or B? When confronted with A and B, the writer may very likely say, "No, I mean C." When the writer is a student, this represents a confident response that gladdens the teacher's heart.

Although creative discovery continues throughout drafting and redrafting, most of it occurs in the first draft, where the writer has the greatest forgetting of constraints and the writing is most intuitive. I think we must deal patiently and respectfully with the first drafts of our students to uncover in them unexpressed relationships, ideas merely juxtaposed that seek out explicit relationships (Schor 124). Frequently after a quick reading a teacher is guilty of saying, "Well, that seems to be a digression. Let's take it out," simply because ideas are juxtaposed and not hooked explicitly into one another. The abundant power of language to be utilitarian and aesthetic is realized when we search out the connections that underlie these juxtapositions. .

A few remaining relationships between composition and translation are worth mentioning. First, I am always interested to hear that translators choose a "friendly" author; similarly, teachers of writers work best in a non-adversarial situation. Perhaps our students' texts "exist," in the historic sense that a work "exists" in another language before it is made available to others by a sympathetic translator, and a similar civic pride awaits us as we help our students to articulate meaning in a form accessible to others.

Composition theory also recognizes the importance of intuition in composing. I've touched on that already. Language generates ideas, and as most of us know, we are always running a little behind the language itself. We must sometimes be careful not to let the language lead us astray, but at the same time if we shut off the possibilities of being led, we shut off some very interesting connections that the language itself creates. Translating technical language is the least intuitive. It often requires formal equivalence (sometimes word-for-word translation), and there is a greater dependence on information than on intuition.

I want to touch again on discourse analysis and questions of cohesion because theory of composition today rests heavily on discourse--on determining those elements in a discourse that identify it as a coherent work. In composition classes, we are continually pointing out to students the features of cohesive structures they are already producing--without special instruction: enumeration, theme and rheme, determiners, demonstratives, oppositions, contrasts that create cohesive force, conjunctions, particles, substitutions, and pronouns. Of course, all of these belong to the translator as well.

For years translators were seen as teachers, and I think the principle holds in reverse. Translators were seen as teachers, not only of the target language, which was a major reason why translations were done, but, finally, translations were made to illuminate an author for a new audience. That was a brilliant new idea. Now we can see how teachers are translators. We are not only illuminating a text but we are illuminating our student writers as writers worth reading. We teach a set of concepts and literary behaviors, but we also mediate between the student and the text. We are often in the position today, given the state of urban education and urban populations, of mediating between two cultures and of bringing students and their writing from one world into another, one of education and literacy. But the key must continue to be assessing the author's purpose and expanding it, cracking open for our students what may have been a limited purpose and putting them in touch with a larger one. The Romantics held that translations enriched the target language. Our students bring to the standard language new forms and patterns. Louis Kelly reminds us that fidelity in translating requires either collaboration with the original text or servitude to it, and then he extends the meaning of collaboration to a literary friendship, to "shared insight, not domination" (206-7). The same collaboration applies to the writing teacher. The teacher's aim is to share the insights of the student, to make an original available to the minds of more citizens. We are illuminating the works of an interesting author otherwise unavailable to others, cut off from the author by language differences on either side.

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