

Is Every Translation a Vernacular Translation?

Thomas O'Loughlin

When I do theology, unlike the mathematician doing mathematics, I use a language, in my case English, which is also the same language I use in my everyday life. So, normally, whenever I communicate whether in a lecture, in a chat with a friend, in writing, or a brief encounter on the street, I use this language with all its foibles, curiosities and hidden history. A word that is rich in one situation is explosive in another; a word that is redolent with meaning for some is bland and almost meaningless elsewhere. Negotiating these contours of language is a skill in any culture, and those who do not develop this ability are considered 'awkward,' gauche, or downright foolish. This seems such an obvious fact of life that it seems silly to mention it, and surely a fact of human nature with which no one would disagree?

So, if it is an obvious fact of every linguistic analysis that, unlike mathematics, it is done in the language of the analyst, and therefore is prone to follow the particularities of that individual human language,¹ then why bother to mention it? However, anyone looking at the new translation of the Roman Missal is struck by the fact that it reads like Latin in many places and whenever a Latin root (e.g. 'chalice' rather than 'cup' for *calix*) could be chosen for a word, it has been chosen. This is seen as acting in fidelity to the original text and, therefore, as a model of the practice of translating. Moreover, there is a growing number of Anglophone bishops who declare that this new translation is either excellent in itself or else a great improvement on the former one. But do these approbations stem from an adequate model for vernacular translation?

Understanding a foreign language²

For most people who read Latin – at any level – the primary task of 'translating' is to make sense of the Latin text in front of her/him.

¹ This is taken for granted in most branches of the humanities: e.g. J. Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Cambridge 1982), 26.

² Many readers of Latin object to being described as a foreign language because it has been central to our literary culture from the very beginning, I am using 'foreign' here in the sense that it is not our mother tongue and so we relate, *de facto*, to it as a foreign language.

This probably began with an encounter with *mensa* as the paradigm of the first declension and then was put to the test with a sentence such as *Nauta puellam amat* or *Agricolae in agris sunt*. In each case, the act of ‘translating’ is, in reality, the act of decoding a foreign set of signs and the functional task is that of finding out what the sentence ‘means’ in the language of the student. So one progresses, word by word, and notes that *nauta* = ‘sailor’; *puella* = ‘girl’ and with *m* at the end is an accusative and therefore ‘comes after the verb’ in English; *amat* = ‘he/she/it loves.’ Note that at this level there is little difficulty in using the mathematical sign, =, to express the relationships between the languages. So now we can assemble the bits, and we get ‘the sailor loves the girl’ (note that the definite article has been introduced) and so the student rejoices for he/she has successfully translated his/her first sentence! Progress should now be rapid to *Gallia omnis in tres partes diuisa* (Caesar, *De bello gallico* 1,1) and on to *Arma uirumque cano* (Vergil, *Aeneid* 1,1) and the joys of reading a body of literature that stretches over many cultures and two millennia. Unfortunately, this is not the case. For most people who come from a non-Romance native language over the past millennium and ‘who have learned Latin’ in school or college, command of the language did/does not extend to such easy familiarity that they actually read the works with enjoyment. This situation is different from that of those whose native languages are Italian, Catalan or Spanish, or, to a lesser extent, French, where Latin’s forms and structures are still deeply embedded in their speech. For those whose native language is Germanic in origin, ‘having Latin’ is, primarily, having the ability to decipher the Latin text, not the ability to read it as it is, nor to translate it. Those skills were, and are, far more restricted and usually result from an extensive competence in dealing with languages (plural) such that one recognizes that every language had its ‘genius’ and one is aware that a stylish piece of Greek can become crabbed Latin, and *vice versa*, and that English too has its own elegance and style.

However, our Anglophone student who has studied Latin for five or six years in school, and may have done some more work in university, now moves on to the seminary and is confronted with yet more Latin: textbooks, liturgies, and, most importantly, technical and legal formulae. Here the aim is not literary appreciation, nor translation so that those who do not even have some schooling in Latin might access these works, but the *detailed and technical comprehension* of the text in front of the reader. Here the task was to find out exactly what was in the Latin – and the Latin remained in Latin, because that particular language was integral to ‘the text.’ Hence the passage was worked through, word-by-word, often with the aid of special

dictionaries produced for this purpose,³ and when the meaning of the passage was accurately understood, the task was successfully completed. This was the exactly the same process that the student met in studying the New Testament in Greek, or occasionally the Old Testament in Hebrew.⁴

What is a good translation?

It is important to note what is happening here because it forms the background to how many people appear to be assessing the quality of the new ‘translation.’ In the seminarian’s task, and it would continue if that young priest ‘went on’ to study canon law or theology until the 1970s, *translation is not the issue*. The aim is to understand a text whose existence, for example as a law, demands that it be in Latin - and in canon law, the Latin text forms the legal text. Here one does not aim at conveying meaning in another human communication system, but understanding a text in a communication system that is not one’s own. The accuracy of the completion of the task is that the nuances of the Latin *as Latin* are brought out to the student, and each grammatical twist and turn becomes important so that one does not simply imagine that the text means what it appears to mean at a quick read. The activity of studying the Latin text in this way, where the Latinity is not simply a case of it being one language rather than another, does not prepare anyone for the activity of translating. One reads canon law in Latin because it only exists primarily, as law, in Latin. Or as Marshall McLuhan would have said: ‘the medium is the message.’ This process of study, so familiar to generations of clergy and still being practised today, is not the act of translating; but, conversely, it should alert everyone that if one has to study each minute difference, then translating is a far more complicated task than that of ‘figuring out what it means’ and representing that meaning in one’s native tongue.

This ‘figuring out’ such that someone without a deep familiarity with the target language can appreciate the details of a text is sometimes described as being the translation principle of ‘formal equivalence.’ By this it is intended to convey the notion that the grammatical ‘forms’ of the original can be seen in the translation. It means that while reading in English, the reader should be able to see that some curious expression is actually a grammatical construction in the original and therefore has a meaning in the original not conveyed

³ For instance: W. Diamond, *Dictionary of Liturgical Latin* (Milwaukee, WI 1961).

⁴ One can see this rationale at work in the way the grammatical textbooks for students are produced, see (the rather excellent) work of J. Swetnam, *An Introduction to the Study of New Testament Greek* (2 vols, Rome 1992).

by the actual words in the second language. When such constructions are borrowed and in long use in any language we call them ‘calques,’ and when they are used by a recent immigrant we call them blunders. So when a pompous cleric announces before dinner that ‘desiringly he desired this meal to eat with you’ (cf. Lk 22:15) we know that he is thinking of older English translations which calque Latin calquing Greek seeking to calque Hebrew; but when a German professor announces to his class that he will ‘make’ his next lecture on Friday, someone will point out that we *give* lectures and *make* coffee. But such worries did not bother older translators who happily rendered Gen 4:1 and 4:25 as ‘Adam knew Eve’ – and hence we have the common euphemism in English of “know” in the biblical sense.’

It is interesting to observe the very particular situations when this notion of formal equivalence is invoked. Clearly, it is, and must be, when translating any law whenever one language is formally recognised as the authoritative language of the law. This backhanded admission that translation is more than formal equivalence affects any translation of canon law, and the translation is really only a matter of convenience. Down the centuries many societies have faced this problem: Latin was the language of the law in Constantinople until 1453, as it was in many Austrian possessions as late as 1848, Irish is the language of Irish law today although it is a *cause célèbre* when that language is actually used in court, and in an increasingly culturally diverse Europe new linguistic problems about languages and law appear almost daily. Likewise, formal equivalence was the chosen translation strategy of Jerome in producing the Vulgate (but note it was not the policy of either those who produced the Septuagint nor the *Vetus Latina* with which he found fault), precisely because he had become convinced that the Hebrew was the truth (*Hebraeica ueritas*). Given his theological position on the nature of scripture and its languages, he then had to give expression to each detail and, in effect, commit himself to a notion of verbal inerrancy.⁵ Revelation was, in his eyes, language specific, and so book bound – a notion about theological language that would have a long and unhappy career in the West. This attitude to the biblical text, every detail of the original is sacred and significant, then underlay the translations of the sixteenth (e.g. Luther’s German) and early seventeenth (the English ‘Authorised [King James] Version’) centuries. By extension, given the Council of Trent’s position on the Vulgate, this had already become the style of vernacular editions for Catholics such as the Douay-Rheims. The effect was to create in English a tolerance for non-English expressions, provided that they were sanctioned by sacral

⁵ See the study of his translation method in T. O’Loughlin, ‘The Controversy over Methuselah’s Death: Proto-chronology and the Origins of the Western Concept of Inerrancy’, *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 62(1995)182–225.

use in ‘the Bible.’ Just how alien such language is to us can be judged by two simple tests: first, it is possible for comedians to invent dialogue using those recognised calques to produce a ‘biblical language’ with which one can lampoon any subject; and second, there is the constant need in religious education, when faced with people taking the bible literally, to point out that the actual wording they/we read is not what it means!

In more recent times there has been a new impetus for formally equivalent texts arising from the desire to produce a text that allows someone to study the scriptures in detail but without acquiring the biblical languages. This was one of the inspirations behind the *Revised Standard Version* and the *New Revised Standard Version*, and it produced a text that is excellent for the classroom but which does not help the reader to understand the text nor is it always a good text for proclaiming what were originally oral texts.⁶ It is in this vein that we should place the ‘translations’ that are specially prepared for students,⁷ or those textbooks that are intended to help those charged with translating the scriptures into new vernaculars in mission fields.⁸ Similarly, there are the facing-page translations of patristic and medieval theological works where the focus is that of aiding a student study the text in the original, despite a linguistic competence that would not enable a study without such a translation. No one would see interlinear works such as these as translations, but their fidelity, word-by-word, is excellent. Similarly, few would consider facing-page translations (in general) as works of English, but rather would praise them for their fidelity in allowing the original language to be accessed with less than fluency in Hebrew, Greek, or Latin.

Words have meaning, but acquire value

What holds true for calques, holds equally true for individual words. One may think that one is translating by using words that are etymologically related or which seem so common as not to pose a

⁶ The problems of a lectionary that actually conveys its message adequately (leaving aside aesthetic concerns such as those who are devotees of Jacobean English) in contrast with a good text for use in class brings out the different demands of translators: one is for ordinary communication which must be understood *while being heard*, the other is for use at a desk with time and the intention of teasing out meaning. See T. O’Loughlin, “‘Would you read?’: The Task of the Lector,” *Anaphora* 1.2(2007)19–36.

⁷ For instance: J.R. Kohlenberger III ed., *The NIV Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI 1979); or A Marshall ed., *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* (London 1958).

⁸ For instance: S. Kubo, *A Reader’s Greek-English Lexicon to the New Testament* (Edinburgh 1975).

problem, but experience tells translators otherwise! Every word has a value in a language and that value is a product of its use, not of its etymology, and when two etymologically related words in differing modern languages are compared, we can see, at once, the dangers of opting for Latin-based words for translating Latin. One may use the device of noting Latin derivatives in the classroom as an aid to building students' vocabulary, but one should be wary of such similarities when conveying meaning – a phenomenon translators often refer to as 'false friends' where words that are linguistically related have developed in radically divergent ways. The current, and new, translation of the Missal contains an excellent example of how a word can acquire a value in addition to its dictionary meaning. It is commonplace, and has been since the first Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, to render that central word of the liturgy, *panis*, by the word 'bread'.⁹ What could be simpler? Alas, 'bread' was chosen because the original Reformation translators were imbued with scholastic categories where what was of concern in the Eucharist was the stuff that was going to be consecrated and cease to be, or not, depending on one's theology. However, a glimpse at the original texts (Paul, the *Didache*,¹⁰ the gospels) or the tradition of the Eucharist¹¹ would show that what Jesus took was a 'loaf' which could be broken and shared. Hence, this is the correct translation into English, as has been recognised by the *New Revised Standard Version* and some others.¹² The moral is simple: linguistic fidelity is different from fidelity in meaning; and it is one thing to seek to understand a text in a foreign language, another to render it in one's own language.

If you are still in doubt, consider these examples. Should a French guest to an English household fear the stench of food rotting in a saucepan when the hostess says that she has placed a *pot pourri* in each bedroom? Or recall the Spanish lecturer who remarked to her English-speaking colleagues that lecturing a particular class was like 'throwing daisies in front of pigs!' – her colleagues giggled at the curious image, but few realised that she was actually citing scripture (Mt 7:6).

Many people have expressed surprise that bishops around the world have in recent months made public statements about the quality of the new missal translation, and many have wondered how they came to

⁹ See T. O'Loughlin, 'Translating *Panis* in a Eucharistic Context: A Problem of Language and Theology,' *Worship* 78(2004)226–35.

¹⁰ See T. O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (London 2010), 85–104.

¹¹ See T. O'Loughlin, 'The Praxis and Explanations of Eucharistic Fraction in the Ninth Century: the Insular Evidence,' *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 45(2003)1–20.

¹² *The Jerusalem Bible* (London 1966) used 'loaf' at 1 Cor 10:17 recognising that this was necessary for the body symbolism used here by Paul and also found in the *Didache*, but elsewhere (e.g. 10:16 and 11:24 and 27) used 'bread'.

this judgement. I suspect it is because for them, as for most English-speakers, their notion of translating Latin is actually the process of finding out what the Latin means, and when that is done, they rest their case. This has been the dominant trend in Latin studies in seminaries for centuries, it is also the appropriate method used by English-speaking canon lawyers (the background of many bishops) and of those who teach theological texts originally written in Latin (the background of those bishops who were seminary teachers). And, of course, it is the appropriate method for use in studies of the scriptures.

At this point it is worth recalling that the question most often posed of translations is ‘is it accurate?’ But this question’s formulation presupposes the technical and academic situation just outlined. When it comes to a translation where the result must be natural speech in the recipients’ language, then we must ask a far more complex question: does the result capture the meaning of the original and then express it in a way that respects the users’ use of language? This task is often referred to, but not expressed by, the term ‘dynamic equivalence.’

Praying in our own language

But producing a guide to the Latin text is not good enough for the vernacular liturgy. The liturgy must exist as a linguistic entity for those who use it. And if one is going to celebrate in English, it must become an English text. Here lies the basic problem: when people, prior to the Second Vatican Council, wanted ‘to understand’ the liturgy, they knew that the liturgy *qua tale* only existed in Latin. The task was to provide a facing-page translation whose fidelity was such that it enabled someone to make better sense of the liturgy. Their aim was not to produce a set of words that would be used as the liturgy, and they did not produce a piece of liturgy, but a linguistic guide to a piece of liturgy.

Today, for all but a statistically insignificant group, the liturgy is a matter of the various languages of humanity, and it is in each that it is celebrated. This fact constitutes a paradigm shift in the understanding of the Eucharist.¹³ This may not have been foreseen by the Fathers of the Council, but it is now a fact. Therefore we are now faced with an either/or choice. Either, we continue to celebrate in the vernacular which will require a very different translation strategy than that currently employed; or we should decide that the liturgy is really in Latin, and hence the vernacular is just there as a help. In the case of the first option we have to develop a liturgy that has

¹³ See T. O’Loughlin, ‘Eucharistic Celebrations: the Chasm between Idea and Reality,’ *New Blackfriars* 91(2010)423–38.

fidelity of meaning as its chief driver; in the case of the second, we have to use Latin whenever possible, and have constant reminders that linguistic comprehension is simply a concession to our bad luck in not being born in a Latin-using culture or being sufficiently linguistically gifted to operate in Latin. If we opt for the latter option, then we must see, as some are prepared to argue, the whole trend away from Latin as a mistake. But if one is not prepared to accept that position, or finds the suggestion preposterous that a Eucharist is less a Eucharist because it is not celebrated in Latin, then one must seek a dynamically equivalent translation. Moreover, the notion that the liturgy is, intrinsically, in Latin was never the position of the advocates of Latin prior to Vatican II, and it is insulting to many languages in which the liturgy has been celebrated who never had contact with Latin.

Translating and the ‘article’

So where should we go? The translation of the Missal that emerged in late 1960s and 70s is by no means perfect, but it is a text with which millions have become familiar. It has the strength that most of those who translated it had experience of the difference between helping students understand a text in Latin and translating those texts into English. The new translation fails repeatedly to appreciate this difference, and the appeals to the principles of *Liturgiam authenticam* (2001) should fall on deaf ears. That instruction meets the need of those who expect a translation to help in understanding a foreign text, but does not address the phenomenon that each language has its own genius and words have differing values in each language. A study text of Vatican II’s constitutions could, indeed should, be produced using that instruction as its guide, but one cannot generate an actual English prayer in this way. Translation here means that I absorb the Latin, and one will need word-for-word attention in doing so, then one must set out to pray with the same intention and liturgical situation in mind, but in English. What results may not be recognisable as a rendering of Latin, but it may be a genuine translation.

I do not want to take any passage from the new translation as an object lesson in how to translate or not to translate, as such an exercise would take up more space than any journal would allow, rather I want to examine just one peculiarity of Latin to show how easily ‘formal equivalence’ of the kind found in the proposed translation can sell us short. One of the first peculiarities of Latin every student meets is that ‘there is no Article in Latin.’ So, when we look at any common sentence in Latin we do not usually see any word where we would see ‘*ho*’ in Greek or ‘the’, ‘a,’ or ‘an’ in English. Now recall

that the article is a most expressive word in English and carries out far more tasks in spoken English than that of simply ‘pointing’: as can be seen in the distinction we make between ‘Joe is the man for that job’ and ‘Joe is *the* man for that job!’

Jesus Christus has been in such constant use as ‘Jesus Christ’ that we, along with most other European languages, think of ‘Christ’ as a name (a noun), indeed a surname, and we behave towards it as a name, an identifier: hence, ‘Christ said’, ‘before Christ’s time’, or ‘in Christ’s teaching.’ However, as we all know, *christos* is not a name but a title (and so functions as an adjective) – and in Greek appears as such whether or not the article is used. To convey this in English we need the definite article. So we should use ‘Jesus the Christ’ which immediately conveys the basis of belief: Jesus is the Anointed One of the Lord. It is an interesting study to go through a few prayers, selected at random, from the liturgy and just make this simple adjustment, and observe if their significance and clarity are increased. Sometimes simply adding ‘the’ as in ‘may we welcome the Christ as our Redeemer’¹⁴ produces a far richer understanding of the prayer, while sometimes substituting ‘the Anointed’ for the more familiar ‘Christ’ as in ‘help us to look forward to the glory of the birth of the Anointed One our Saviour’¹⁵ makes clear the prayer’s allusive range to the history of Israel. As with all unfamiliar sounds, the change slightly grates on the ear, but has it enhanced our understanding, in use, of the prayer?

At the very heart of the Nicene Creed is the phrase; *et homo factus est*. Again, it is apparently easy to translate: ‘and was made man.’ However, if one wants to use ‘human being’ instead of ‘man,’ one notes that ‘he became human’ is just not right! Here we have a case of the special character of the indefinite article in English – a grammatical element central to our language but unknown in Greek or Latin. Take the standard form: ‘and was made man’ and note that it does not specify the reality of Jesus as an individual human being in history: a man. To omit the article conjures up the notion of a generic quality, which in Latin would be rendered by *humanitas*, but our faith is in an historic individual, like us in all but sin, and his historical individuality requires an indefinite article: the Word became flesh, the Word became *a* man.

The third example also concerns that tricky little indefinite article: *accepit panem*. At present we use a word that bears the whole value of scholastic and Reformation disputes about ‘what happens at Mass’: ‘he took bread.’ But what one takes in one’s hands is a specific object: a piece of bread, or some bread, or a loaf – in whatever way one expresses it, in English, one must have the article: ‘he took the loaf’

¹⁴ Nativity of our Lord, Vigil Mass, Opening Prayer.

¹⁵ Second Week of Advent, Tuesday, Opening Prayer.

or ‘a loaf’ or ‘the piece of bread’ – but you cannot say ‘a bread’ unless one is thinking in sacristy argot where there is a thing called ‘a bread’ or ‘an altar bread.’ The most accurate translation of *accepit panem* is ‘he took a loaf’ – and the proof of the necessity of the article is found in the way *accepit calicem* was translated: ‘he took the cup.’ Since theologians had traditionally discussed ‘the consecration of bread and wine’ rather than ‘a cup,’ when the translators met *calix* they responded as the situation required, rather than defaulting to a stock phrase.

These simple examples are intended to show that even with the simplest words, each language has its genius, its peculiarities, its foibles and its pitfalls. Latin has as many faults as English when rendering Greek, Greek has twists when rendering Hebrew. And Italian, Spanish and French pose special problems when this is the base language of people learning Latin who then also want to read English, while German and English speakers, often feeling the common roots of their grammar, do not appreciate how far the languages have grown apart over the last 1300 years. Translating is much more complicated than the ‘figuring out’ style of translation that we see appearing at the present time – and this leaves aside the extrinsic theological or cultural factors that the new texts seek to express.

Language is precious. It is personal, without it our deepest thoughts and feelings, our very life, would remain unexpressed and it makes each culture distinctive. And it can express great subtlety, but it can also be blunt and common – hence we need poets who can help us find language that can capture our imaginations. Each and every language is, moreover, a unique insight into the human condition and the history of its speakers. And this is never more true than in liturgy where we seek to use language at the very end of its capabilities in addressing the divine – it is then not helped if a motivating concern is not to be genuinely expressive but to show that our words are faithful to another language in translation.

Thomas O’Loughlin

Email: thomas.oloughlin@nottingham.ac.uk