

Translation as a Conceptual Act

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Abstract

Differing translations will have different priorities when translating a theoretical author such as Weber. But the case is made here for translation along historically pure lines, or in accordance with Weber's own views: that means placing a principal emphasis on the accurate translation of concepts, both on the page and via commentary off it. If we do not translate in this way, then any engagement with a Weberian text may be theoretically fruitful, but it will not be an engagement with Weber himself. Good history can be a basis for good theory, unless we believe that the only bad theorist is a dead one.

Keywords Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, translation, concepts, historicism

Whilst I think that a round robin session on Weberian translation is an excellent idea, I also think that the provision of sample extracts is a somewhat illusory guide to the quality and worth of translations. That there is a certain armchair fascination in looking at famous *cruces* in translation, such as the first sentence in Proust, I do not doubt. However, I am not aware that any developed tradition identifying such passages exists in Weber's case, and if such an approach is adhered to in any rigorous sense, it must indicate fundamentally mistaken intellectual priorities (as I shall explain below). My position on translation is laid down at sufficient length in my 1994 article ('Some Problems with Talcott Parsons' Version of *The Protestant Ethic*'),¹ and all I wish to do here is to make some of its premises more explicit. The essence of my view, which was implicit in the article, is that to suppose that translation is merely or even primarily a linguistic exercise is a mistake in Weber's case. So whilst one might reprove Parsons, for example, for inaccuracy or occasional inability to translate some of Weber's odder borrowings and neologisms (how many German dictionaries contain a word such as *cawerzisch?*), merely linguistic criticism of what he did is, though not entirely trivial, superfluous. Linguistic

1. *Archives européennes de sociologie* 35 (1994), pp. 104-123.

errors should of course be rectified, but the process hardly requires comment.

Many, I think, might agree with my initial premise, but they may be rather more reluctant to draw the practical inferences which follow. If translation is not primarily a linguistic act—we may be allowed to take linguistic competence more or less for granted, even in German as notoriously difficult (or virtuoso) as Weber's—then what is it? To which the answer must, I think, be that, according to Weber's language and assumptions, it is a conceptual act; or, from our perspective a hundred years on, a historical and conceptual act. The only serious critical approach to Parsons' translation, for example, originates in a consideration of Parsons' own historical formation and conceptual world. The major practical inference I draw from this premise is that translation should not be undertaken by a linguist, then to be checked or revised by an historian; it should be done by an historian *ab initio* and then, to be sure, revised by a linguist. Furthermore, the only properly equipped historian is an historian of ideas, who is familiar not only with Weber's conceptual world, but more or less the entire tradition of German social and political thinking to which Weber has reference. This is an exalted postulate no doubt, but hitherto, at least, translations of major German authors writing on social and political theory executed by linguists almost always reveal a significant degree of conceptual uncertainty and hesitancy—I select as a neutral example H.B. Nisbet's much respected translations of Hegel, which are indeed linguistically impeccable. This is for obvious reasons: the linguist's ordinary or formative familiarity is commonly with literature and poetry, genres where the priorities of translation are radically different from those pertaining to theory or *wissenschaft*; his or her conceptual world is that of the German language at large, often with a strong present-day focus; it is rarely that formed by reading German social, political and philosophical theory throughout the 19th century, and, specifically, the reading of the target author's *oeuvre* across its entire range. Yet it is only by these latter forms of reading that the full range of meaning attaching to concepts can be revealed and explored. Here, of course, I indicate a further assumption: that my reasoning is historical from beginning to end.

To say that translation in Weber's case is primarily a conceptual act is not to just to remark on the preferred intellectual background of the translator; it also maps out a practical priority in translation. In the case of the novelist, or of any author who is concerned with 'style' *per se*, the translator's first concern has to lie with the entire verbal surface, and with conveying the effect of that surface: in this sense,

every word counts. However, in the translation of a work which was identified by its author as a part of *Wissenschaft*, and not of literature, a different order of priorities obtains. Weber never, I think, acknowledged the existence of an entity called 'style', and the many literary authors (or painters or hymn writers) who are referred to in the *Protestant Ethic* are treated as vehicles for conceptual (or anti-conceptual) utterance alone. This reflects on his lengthy insistence that concepts and concept formation were the foundation stones of all social scientific inquiry. Thus in Weber the translation of concepts is more important than the translation of any other word; and any attempt to calibrate a set of translations of Weber's most celebrated work should proceed in the first instance not from the translation of selected passages of text—which inevitably implies some kind of preoccupation with the verbal and stylistic surface—but from a sample mapping in English of the conceptual lexicon of the *PE*.

Of course, I am talking the language of 'priority' throughout, and I do not mean to imply that the detailed structure of Weber's prose should be neglected. Concepts are the lynch-pins around which sequential argument is constructed, and in this more general sense the priority of the translator who is also an historian of ideas must be to attempt to convey, together with the conceptual substance, the sequence of the author's ideas as strictly as possible.² However, I would stress that what we are translating is better regarded as 'argumentative sequence' rather than the device for literary effect called 'style'. The convinced believer in literary form may wish to argue that, willy nilly, Weber did believe in literary and rhetorical effect whether he admitted it or not. It is, of course, hard to argue with such an 'ethic of conviction'. My empirically grounded belief is that one can (incidentally) show a bare modicum of evidence both for Weber indulging in minor rhetorical inflections in 1904, and also for his having forgotten about them entirely in 1920. But the broad point is surely that, if he had been taxed on this ground, he would have replied that the literary effect he was trying to achieve was precisely that of conceptual or ideal-typical rigour. (I freely admit that, like many of Weber's readers, I find the granite-like integrity of his phraseology exercises a certain mesmeric fascination). Fidelity to 'argumentative sequence' will, nonetheless, align me quite closely with positions which (I suppose) are common ground to many of the translators and

2. I very much disagree with the view of Margaret Hollis and Jose Harris in 'A note on translation', in Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. xxxviii.

translations appearing here. For example, one's initial assumption must always be to take Weber's argumentative structure and convey it as closely as possible. Unless English syntax absolutely collapses under the strain, one must attempt to reproduce his phrase and sentence structures intact. But here too an apparently commonsensical position should be developed rigorously or, as Weber would say, 'without compromise'. The desire to convey argumentative and intellectual sequence should also *transcend* literal fidelity, where the claims of the two come into conflict.

My final point is that, if Weber's meaning is primarily embodied in his concepts and argument, rather than in a linguistic or stylistic surface, then the text on the page is only a first or preliminary stage in translation. Of course, a literary text can be glossed or discussed quite as much as one which is theoretical or *wissenschaftlich*; nonetheless, given the literary commitment to style and to verbal finish, the translated text must be regarded as the translator's last word. Hence the comparative lack of literary studies which take the form of translation together with extended commentary. But this is not so in our case. If our primary concern is with Weber's own meaning(s), then the editorial apparatus which goes with and beyond the 'translation' is at least as important as the text on the page; perhaps even more so. This again will not be revealed by a sample prose extract.

It will be clear from what I say that my position is a particular one and I do not for a moment suppose everyone will agree with it. Some may wish to contest what I have said about the relationship between style and concept, whilst others will, quite justifiably, disagree with the historicist purism to which I aspire. Such purism is, after all, only an aspiration and there is a tension inherent *ex hypothesi* in any attempt to convey the language of a hundred years' ago and of a different *Kultur* into an English acceptable or comprehensible in Britain or North America today. (Again, and evidently, even the difference between Britain and North America is significant.) But if we set aside what is ineluctable, differing priorities will remain. Other translators, not to say editors in publishing houses, may fairly ask, for example, about the needs of a readership which is not historical, and which is primarily geared to the language of social and political theory today. In this sense, whatever we may think about the desirability or necessity of revising their work on either linguistic or conceptual grounds, the intellectual foundation of the tradition of translation represented by Parsons and Bendix, which sought to render Weber immediately accessible to contemporary theory, is unimpeachable. Even in this perspective there remains (of course) a

specifically historical case to be made for translation in terms of a conceptual lexicon which runs as close to Weber's as possible, rather than to that of modern political and social theory – a case that rests on the proposition that good history makes for good theory, and that there is no stable version of Weber's meaning apart from an historically exact construction thereof; but a broader response to the dilemma is surely that the present plurality of versions of Weber's work can only be welcomed. We may hope that they represent a wide variety of positions rationalised with the sort of logical clarity and consistency that Weber himself thought desirable. To be sure, none of those responsible is likely to make much money; but then translation is commonly an ascetic act, and one which is rarely, notwithstanding the argument of the *PE*, imbued with the spirit of capitalism.