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### **Collaboration, Autonomy, and Models of Translation**

Good afternoon, I'm glad to see you all. Before I start, let me congratulate the organizers of this conference for a job very well done. From 1997 to 2003 I chaired the Fair Committee, as it was then called, so I know what dedicated volunteers it takes to make an event like this look seamless. I also know about the esprit that develops among them and about the glow of satisfaction once the event is done. I hope that some of you in the audience will consider joining the effort next year. I encourage you to give your name to any of the members of the Conference Committee.

The editor of a psychiatric journal asked me last year to translate a 2000-word newspaper article from German. It arrived with something I had never before seen for such a small translation — a carefully lawyered contract, containing this stipulation: “You understand that we may make changes to the translation without your approval.” The subject matter was very interesting — a first-hand account of a therapeutic session with Sigmund Freud that had only recently come to light — and I wanted to do it. So I assured the editor that I viewed such translations as collaborative efforts and that I would not want it published until everyone was satisfied with the final product. But I also made clear that I could not put my name on a translation that had been altered without my consent. When I sent back the contract, I deleted that clause and inserted my own: “Any and all changes will be made solely on the basis of consultation.”

He and his lawyer accepted this wording. It turned out that they were nervous because a previous translation of the article had been rejected as faulty and too literal. They liked mine. Even so, the collaboration contained a lesson for me. I had rendered one key turn of phrase differently from the rejected effort, and when the client asked me to review that difference, I had to admit that in this particular instance my freer translation had skipped past an important nuance.

That whole episode got me to thinking about collaboration in translation — the theme of today’s conference — and why I have come to value it so highly. There is something enlarging and transformative about it, I hope to show, both for our work as translators and for our growth as individuals. When I began my career in translation almost 25 years ago, I accepted any work that came my way, most of it from the few agencies that responded to the rather thin résumé that I mailed out. As I parlayed my experience as a respiratory therapist in the 1970s and early 1980s into something of a medical translation specialty, I was able to target my marketing more narrowly. Later I added patent translation to my professional quiver. At the time I was still mostly thinking of translation as the act of rendering a source text faithfully in the target text.

That changed in 1996, when a young German woman tore a tab off a flyer I had posted at Harvard Law School and contacted me about translating some immigrant letters in her family’s possession. That little pull tab led to my first work of interpretive translation and, from there, to my first piece of real collaborative work. As I translated the letters, I entered into a richly imagined relationship with a family of 19th-century immigrants from a German town near the Dutch border. The experience was so vivid that I wondered sometimes how much I had really come to know the writers; perhaps I was fooling myself thinking I had. But now I think that was the wrong question. Even in our flesh-and-blood relationships, in our relationships with our spouses and old friends, we can never absolutely “know” them — we can only know who we imagine them to be over time. Of course, in this “paper” relationship, my subject, Theodor van Dreveldt, could never reach out across history and respond to me or create his own corresponding image of who I am. So there was no way to know how “correct” I was or wasn’t. My image of him, along with my translation of his words, would always be just one interpretation. Nonetheless, I learned from that project that for me, the act of interpretation is the core of what makes translation beautiful and satisfying and vital.

And as it turned out, that wasn’t the end of it. While I was working my way through the letters, a book began to form in my mind. I broached the idea with my client, a descendant of Theodor and the father of the young woman who had contacted me. My fax machine went off at 4 the next morning — he was delighted. He flew me to Germany, where we

spent a week discussing German history, his family, even his service in the Wehrmacht during the war. He showed me the old houses I had so far only read about and told me the back-story of the letters — how a Catholic priest and his housekeeper had come to have three children, and why two of them had felt forced to leave repressive pre-revolutionary Germany. He also financed a two-week research trip to Missouri and Illinois. The collection of letters published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1998 was my first book translation. It was the result of the relationship of trust that had developed between us.

My work on the van Dreveldt history taught me a great deal about how important collaboration can be for the fuller sense of story it gives to a translation. But the trust that develops between a translator and an author working in collaboration can affect the content of a work as well. Several years ago I translated a book about Latin as a world language. I have only a rudimentary knowledge of Latin and even less of its history. Because I couldn't do the kind of filling in that we tend to do automatically when we know a subject well, I was acutely aware of gaps in the argument. If only there were examples, I found myself thinking, I would understand this better. I also noticed that the author kept repeating his arguments, and that the very fact of the repetition made them seem less convincing than they really were. Examples! I'd think again. They'd give me so much of a better understanding *and* allow me to cut out some of this excess verbiage. I described my experience of the text to the author and asked him to consider adding some concrete examples. I told him that I thought these would make his points better than abstractions, however often repeated. It turned out that he had wondered about this while writing the book, but had concluded that examples would require too much prior knowledge of Latin to be of any use to a non-Latinist reader. But it was not hard to persuade him that the opposite was true. He ended up adding several well-placed examples. Our collaboration allowed me to produce a better translation of a better book, which, in English, enjoyed a level of success that astonished both author and publisher. One reviewer even commented on how greatly the translation improved on the German version.

So what gives collaboration its vitality? I think it's that shared critical thinking draws author and translator into a cross-fertilizing relationship. And that it's the process of

querying that is the best generator of such thinking. If nothing else, our questions make clear to authors that their translators are paying attention. My queries are often very simple: “What does this mean?” “Can we say it like this?” “This statement doesn’t seem to follow from what you said a few pages ago. How do you want to handle this?” I’m no longer surprised that academic authors, the kind I work with now, tend to be telegraphic in their writing. Most of them are so familiar with their own thinking that they omit key steps, not realizing that they’re leaving blanks that most readers won’t be able to fill in. Some are in love with their own writing style and execute sometimes unintelligible pirouettes. It’s not always easy to get them to take the real world (that is, their readers) into account in their writing. But most of them eventually come to recognize that their audiences end up understanding them much better when they use me as a representative reader. As they do, a powerful relationship of trust develops between us.

Here’s another example. I’ve had a working relationship with a Munich psychiatrist for more than fifteen years. My first translation for him was a book on attachment theory, which was so successful in its English version that a second revised edition followed a dozen years later. As I went on to translate his articles, book chapters, and books, he came to count on me to call to his attention details that he had missed; I do this routinely now, noting any changes and additions in my comments. Once he sent me a talk intended for students about to enter his field. In it he named two mentors whose importance to him I knew from his other writings, but here he made only perfunctory mention of them. I was surprised, and I pointed out that he was missing an opportunity to inspire his audience of young people as he had once been inspired himself. He agreed, and two days later sent me a moving account of how these two people had influenced him to take up the work he was now doing. And that was the piece I ended up translating for him.

Of course, my attempts to form a collaborative relationship don’t always pan out. I had a rather magisterial author once who refused to engage with my e-mailed queries, leaving them to his staff. One query that went to the heart of a central argument was met with stony silence. All I could do was provide a faithful translation of what I was given, with all its faults. Was this a failed relationship? In one sense, yes. But in its own way it too contributed to my growth as a translator and a thinker. The experience of “rejection”

became part of my larger understanding of that book and its limitations. It also gave me insight into books more generally, particularly the truth that, while all authors do their best to display their strengths to their readers, some of them hide their weaknesses. Even at best, all texts are written from a particular perspective, and it is incumbent upon us, as intelligent and responsible readers, to probe the limits of that perspective.

Now, you may be saying to yourselves that the kind of thing I'm talking about is something other than translation. But I would argue that translation can be more than unadorned fidelity to a source text. Here the collaborative model of translation diverges from what I call the agency model, which I will discuss momentarily. Obviously, this distinction does not mean that a translator gets to make things up. On the contrary: in collaboration, the author is there to vet all changes and clarifications, which must be made with his or her full engagement. But we do well to remind ourselves periodically that getting a sense of a text in its entirety *and intervening when necessary to convey that sense* are both processes integral to translation. They are also integral to a translator's own growth and expanding possibilities.

However, the kinds of critical interactions I've been talking about are almost always precluded in the agency model. Often this is because the material to be translated just isn't thought to warrant it, and indeed it may not. But more often it's because agencies routinely deny translators access to authors for fear of poaching and for fear of unprofitable delay — both legitimate concerns from their perspective. In addition, some translators don't want that sort of interaction, seeing it as peripheral to their job and a drag on their efficiency and therefore on their earnings. But to what extent does the narrow agency model limit how translators come to think of their work and of themselves? More explicitly, should translators consider themselves copyists? co-authors? or something in between? Certainly, different types of texts require different techniques and different mindsets, but must we *necessarily* define our relationship to translation only in terms of the creation of a faithful copy of a source text in a target language? In the agency model of corporate translation we probably must.

Here's an example of what can happen when collaboration is stifled by an agency. A number of years ago a German agency asked me to translate a psychiatric article. The translation was difficult partly because the German was abstruse and partly because the author insisted on writing part of it in fractured English — translating it was the equivalent of post-editing bad MT output. When I couldn't figure out what he meant, I asked the agency for permission to contact him directly so we could hash things out together. I offered to sign a separate non-compete agreement to short-circuit the agency's likeliest reason to refuse. No dice. So I had to send my queries through the project manager. Translators complain all the time about how unsatisfactory this sort of arrangement can be, and so it was in this case. The author's responses required another set of responses from me, and then another set after that. Few agencies look kindly on this kind of thing; they tend to see it as a waste of time, and it's all too easy for them to interpret it to mean that the translator doesn't really know what he or she is doing. In this case, it was even worse than that: with all the versions floating around the PM got confused and mistakenly sent the author not my final translation, but a preliminary draft. The angry author refused to pay for what was clearly unpolished work, and guess who was blamed. Luckily I was able to show that I had sent the final version, along with an e-mail receipt to prove that the PM had in fact received it. So it worked out OK in the end. But the whole mess would never have happened if I had been allowed to form a working relationship with the author. But the larger point is: If we are independent professionals, how come the agencies get to set the terms of our working relationship?

There are other more subtle ways by which the agency model discourages translators from developing their own ways of working with clients, to say nothing of developing their own clientele. At one point in my career, I was trying to establish a base of medical clients. I figured that an agency that paid me \$0.13 per word was probably charging its client between \$0.25 and \$0.35. If I charged \$0.20, I'd be earning almost a third more than the agency paid me, while saving the client something as well. At the time I was translating a lot of articles for one agency; the client was a large pharmaceutical company that was doing a literature search for a drug it was developing. In other words, the authors of the articles were *not* the agency's clients. They were investigators, scientists, and academics who published in many journals and had no connection with either the agency or even the

company. Some were very good writers, and I wanted to contact them directly. It would have had no effect whatsoever on the agency's arrangements with the pharmaceutical firm. But the wording of my contract with the agency was ambiguous enough that I wasn't sure whether this would be allowed. Whom could I ask? Certainly not the agency. In hindsight, knowing more about contracts nowadays, I probably should have plowed ahead. But at the time I was sufficiently spooked to give up my plan. In effect, the agency model tends to straitjacket translators into a narrow vision of a subordinate relationship and to place obstacles in the way of a fuller, more autonomous vision. This has implications that go beyond our work as translators, as I will try to show in a minute.

Over the years I have come to realize that the dividing line between commercial and literary translations is neither hard nor fast. I now see what I've come to call "literary documents" and "utilitarian literature" as the end points of a continuum. This realization came when I translated an expert opinion in a patent infringement case. I knew nothing about the technology involved, but the writing was so careful and the document so well structured that I could follow the author's logic right along with his perfect grammar and syntax. And it was a thoroughly compelling read; I wanted to see where he was going and whether I really *would* be able to follow him to the end. It occurred to me at the time that one sign of excellent writing — of a certain sort — was that one could translate it without necessarily understanding the technical particulars. This particular opinion had been written for a high-stakes purpose, and for more than one reason it called for a "literal" translation. There was nothing allusive about it, nothing that pointed toward some abstract vision beyond the author's concrete exposition. Nor was it the kind of poetic work that presents a translator with seemingly untranslatable constructions or sensibilities, or sound patterns difficult to replicate in another language. Nonetheless, this opinion, however purely functional in purpose, was literary in execution.

There are many kinds of literature. I now consider that fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and the scholarly works that I now spend much of my time translating may all be viewed as "literary documents" inasmuch as they document or record the thoughts, emotions, or accumulated experience of an individual as expressed at a particular moment. They may be

more or less artful, but they are all documentary of an author's mind. Collaboration with the author provides a pathway into that mind.

Utilitarian or functional literature, on the other hand, is often produced by committees or corporations, and seldom reflects a single person's point of view. This is the kind of product that forms the mainstay of many translators' daily work life because it permits us — so far — to earn a reasonable living, while the translation of literary documents is poorly, even laughably, remunerated. Still, although it may not be “literature” in the conventional sense, corporate writing profoundly influences how we use words, how we think, and even how we imagine our roles in society.

Furthermore, however well or badly these documents are written, their legal, medical, or financial implications may have a real impact on people's lives. Translators are often the closest readers of such documents and so are in a unique position to examine critically the implications for society of the words that corporations choose to further their interests, and of the purposes to which those words are put. Whether or not we as translators can do anything about these choices, our awareness of them is in itself valuable and constitutes an important and under-acknowledged reason for taking translation seriously. We can choose to see our source texts as nothing more than the raw material of our small businesses. But we can also use them as a starting point for critical questioning of the larger social and economic context in which we work and live. When we do, translation becomes “political” in its largest sense — a civic act. Unfortunately, because the agency model emphasizes the view of translation as a technical skill in which turnaround speed and fidelity to the source text are the highest good, an overtly critical approach to utilitarian literature has been slow to develop. Yet the more mindful we are of our relationship to translation itself, its purposes, and our understanding of ourselves as professionals and citizens, the more likely that this could change.

For instance, the deliberations of ethics committees are frequent assignments for those of us who translate medical material. It's comforting to imagine that these groups police clinical trials, ensuring that they are conducted with the interests of the participants at heart, to say nothing of the interests of eventual consumers of the drugs or procedures



under investigation. But ethics committees are not as reliably ethical as we might wish. The pharmaceutical industry (the most profitable industry in the US), has repeatedly shown itself to be less interested in health than in profit; clinical trials that demonstrate adverse drug effects, for example, may be suppressed in favor of trials that yield the desired results. The failure to disclose financial conflicts of interest in medical journal articles is a well documented problem,<sup>1</sup> and there is little reason to believe that journals published in other languages are somehow immune. Another example: almost all of the physician panelists who recommended lowering the cut-off numbers for diagnosing diabetes, high blood pressure, bone thinning, and high cholesterol were paid by the companies that stood to benefit most from the massively increased prescription rates that resulted.<sup>2</sup> Even assuming they were correct in their recommendations (and there are plenty of questions about that), realities such as this example should make us very wary when we read even the most authoritative-sounding promulgations of medical “truth.” Does this mean that we shouldn’t translate such articles? Of course not. Few if any of us are equipped to evaluate specific conflicts of interest or research results. But is there any reason why our mission as professionals and our larger one as citizens shouldn’t include examining and, when necessary, questioning the larger context of the source texts that we translate? As translators we may not be able to do anything in any immediate sense to influence Big Pharma (or, for that matter, High Finance, which almost collapsed the world economy in 2007-2008). We can, however, encourage our own critical understanding of the way the world works and make use of this awareness elsewhere in our lives.

I don’t want to be disingenuous about this. Although thinking critically about larger contexts is a vital skill, the pressure to make a living means that translators themselves are not insulated from conflicts of interest. Here’s a personal example that is painful in more ways than one.

When I was still struggling to establish a clientele of my own, I got a much-needed break: a friend recommended me to one of the principal attorneys of a patent firm. Between 2004 and 2010 I translated about 50 patent applications for that firm. I couldn’t complain about the pay: \$0.20 per word. Every patent brought in between \$500 and \$1200. I thought I had it made. Then one day the principal attorney called and asked me to change a phrasing. I

looked at the German and looked at the English and told him that I really didn't see that the sentence could be interpreted the way he wanted. He insisted. After a struggle I made the change. I found the interaction deeply disturbing, and I'm sure you can guess what happened: the firm never contacted me again. I had shown that I did not identify sufficiently with the company's interests, so I was no longer useful.

That experience taught me a lot. It showed me clearly that although "high-risk" translation — that is, of material likely to become involved in litigation — may pay the most, it is also most likely to raise ethical questions, both for the corporations and for the translators whom they "encourage" in support of corporate goals. These are issues that each of us must face and resolve for ourselves; my encounter with them was one of the reasons I quit doing patent translations.

But even when translators *are* willing to take the risks of high-risk work, we are not the ones who reap the rewards. The enormous sums of money that are spent on translation do not mostly accrue to us. Agencies talk a lot about high quality standards, and the better ones do attempt to maintain such standards. But the functional documents that are the staple of the agency-based translation industry are a high-volume business. Agencies end up fostering, albeit sometimes against their own better judgment, a certain get-it-in-get-it-out mindset in their translators. But at the same time, per-word rates are dropping, forcing translators to work harder for less pay. The lowered rates we have all observed are not only the result of market pressures. We know of at least one conference of agencies a few years back where agency heads bragged about their record profits and traded tips on how to persuade translators to accept lower rates. More recently a former "linguist services provider" boasted on her LinkedIn page that she had been "Ranked number 1 in negotiating rates with translators and reducing translator costs." Now there's a claim that requires no translation! The use of CAT tools, translation memories, and other computer aids is promoted less to empower translators, but to make them interchangeable "vendors." The increasing agency use on machine translation, post-editing, crowd-sourcing, and other such supposed "shortcuts" put further pressure on translators to work faster and faster just to maintain a decent standard of living.

No wonder we translators are so preoccupied with the wish to develop client bases of our own. But as my “firing” by the patent firm shows, this path is not an easy one. Furthermore, to enter the “premium” (as opposed to the “mass”) market, as some of our very successful colleagues encourage, requires subject expertise and superior writing skills that develop only over many years. However successful we are or aren’t in freeing ourselves from the agency model, therefore, we should never stop checking up on ourselves and on what our work is doing to us. Is it enhancing our growth or stunting it? Because in this harsh new world, in translation or outside it, we need the fullest armamentarium of life skills we can develop — the skills of relationship, for example, and of autonomy, and of discernment. We have to take care lest the habits of deference and literalness that agencies foster infiltrate other aspects of our lives. What kind of lives are we working toward? Ones that require deference and the shelving of critical judgment, or ones that encourage us to question and contribute and shape?

The translation landscape today has almost nothing in common with the one I broke into almost 25 years ago. The technological changes have been breathtaking, but crucially they have enabled those who are best positioned to control those technologies to increase centralization and automation, which has led to profound shifts in the way translation is done and profits are distributed. Specialization is one of the last refuges of a skilled translator, and with it comes the possibility of true collaborative work. Yet the adverse trends that are driving many of us to specialize — the demands for speed and for an instrumental approach to translation — are precisely the same ones that may discourage us from developing the critical skills we need for meaningful collaboration and the professional and personal confidence that comes with it. The increasingly fragmented nature of the agency-based translation process may not benefit either our translation or our larger capacity for thoughtful engagement.

Regardless of where an independent translator makes his or her home on the continuum between “utilitarian literature” and “literary documents,” in the final analysis we are all piece-workers in a gig economy that leaves us isolated and alone, vulnerable to the dictates of others, with no solidarity to fall back on. This is as true for translators like myself who work for university presses as it is for medical translators working for agencies or patent

firms, and even for those who work on banking and financial documents. Of course, some literary translators subsidize their avocation with other kinds of employment, often in an academic setting. But most of us working translators, particularly those who specialize in functional documents, work within a corporate marketplace that is increasingly indifferent, even inimical, to our needs. We know all too well how detrimental the structural changes engineered by those at the top of the pyramid have been. Per-word rates are dropping. Despite constant exhortations, fewer and fewer of us can raise our rates and make them stick. Crowd-sourcing, machine translation and post-editing, data mining of language corpora, outsourcing to developing countries, cattle calls, consolidation of agencies into fewer and fewer mega-players, translation portals that turn translators into cogs in a corporate machine — all these have exerted downward pressure on what we can successfully charge, while agency profits soar. Even as I speak there are undoubtedly translation agencies making themselves more attractive buy-out targets by trimming translator costs. If these trends continue, the rates for functional literature may soon approach the low rates paid for literary documents. All the more reason that, as we strive to gain the subject expertise that allows us to attract direct clients, we should give some thought to the different sort of engagement required when working with direct clients. We can't let the agency model in which we have been trained discourage our capacity for meaningful collaboration, for questioning the texts entrusted to us, and for vigorous back-and-forth. These are skills that we need, in translation and out.

It is undoubtedly true that until we have a national — maybe even an international — movement of working translators whose mission is to advocate for the interests of working translators, our situation isn't likely to change. Such a movement is not going to happen overnight. Some of us will manage to fight our way to a workable living anyway; some may choose to, or may have to, leave translation altogether. Still, no matter how we earn our livings, no matter whether we translate novels, financial prospectuses, or drug company inserts, no matter whether we specialize or whether we don't — we can keep reframing how we view ourselves. We are not merely tools in someone else's hands. Even in our work with agencies, we can demand the right to work directly with authors whenever *we* deem it appropriate. It may not be granted, but to strive for it is to stake out a position from which we can begin to address some of the adverse trends currently roiling

our profession. To strive for that is to foster our own autonomy. That is an ideal worth embracing.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., [https://www.cspinet.org/new/pdf/unrevealed\\_final.pdf](https://www.cspinet.org/new/pdf/unrevealed_final.pdf). Regarding Vioxx, a major case, see, e.g., <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/15/AR2008041502014.html>. This is also interesting: <https://newrepublic.com/article/121964/theres-more-one-kind-conflict-interest-medical-research>.

<sup>2</sup> H. Gilbert Welch, M.D. et al. (2011). *Overdiagnosed: Making People Sick in the Pursuit of Health*. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 24. See also “Lowering the Bar: Medicine in the 21st Century: Does diagnosis always mean disease, or does it sometimes mean opportunity?,” which asks many of the same questions: <http://www.medpagetoday.com/special-reports/LoweringtheBar/58048>.

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