Equivalence has been a much debated issue in modern translation studies in the West. It is usually understood in semantic terms, roughly in the sense of two texts, an original and its translation, meaning the same thing. I want to suggest it may be useful to think of equivalence primarily in terms of equality in value and status, and see where that takes us. Let me begin with a few examples.

**Equal Versions**

The Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament made in the third century BCE for the Greek-speaking Jewish community in Alexandria, is named after the seventy-two translators who worked on it, each man for himself, for seventy-two days. After this period all the translators emerged, miraculously, with identical Greek texts. The amazing feat was explained by invoking divine inspiration. God had breathed the one correct rendering in each translator’s ear. For those who accepted The Septuagint’s supernatural origin, the translation effectively replaced the Hebrew Bible, because God spoke with equal authority in both versions. That singularity of voice and intent lifted the translation up to a status on a par with that of the original. What differences in meaning there might be were subordinate to this single underlying intent.

The Book of Mormon is an even more spectacular case. Not only was Joseph Smith, aided by ‘the gift and the power of God’ as the book’s title page has it, able to decipher an unknown script, we know for certain he arrived at the one correct translation into English. In June 1829, shortly after Smith had finished translating, he and his most faithful followers witnessed an apparition of the angel Moroni while a voice descended from heaven assuring them ‘that the book was true and the translation accurate’ — upon which the angel took the original text under his wing and vanished with it. It has not been seen since. It is not missed anyway, because it is no longer needed. For the believer the translation covers the original in every relevant respect. Both The Septuagint and The Book of Mormon are literally as good as their respective originals.

Latter-day instances of this kind of strong equivalence are not as uncommon as we may think. The Convention of Vienna, a UN convention from 1969 (revised in 1985) governs bi- and multilingual treaties. Article 33 is concerned with the interpretation of ‘authenticated’ versions of such documents. ‘Authentication’ here means the performative speech act by which the various versions in different languages are declared to be equivalent, as a result of which they ‘are presumed to have the same meaning in each authentic text’. Authenticated versions are authentic text wholly equivalent to the corresponding authentic versions. Any differences in meaning that may be discerned between them cannot be explained by going back to the originary text, since such a step would privilege one version over others and thus undo authentication. They must be resolved with reference to the common intent underlying all the versions. In effect, authenticated versions have ceased to be translations. Texts which began life as translations must forget their genesis from the moment of authentication, which transmogrifies them into equivalent authentic texts.

Authentication may seem an arcane legalistic operation, but it is enacted every single day in the European Union and in other international organisations. Parallel texts which are to gain legal force in the EU member states are declared to be fully equivalent across the Union’s official languages. Each language version appears with a rider declaring that only this version is valid in this language, but all the versions are deemed to enjoy equal status.

For a translation, then, being declared equivalent to its original, whether through divine intervention or legal
Translation, Equivalence and Intertextuality

authenticity, marks the end of its status as a translation. And if equivalence spells the end of translation, it also spells the death of the translator. Strong equivalence is total: it posits congruence of meaning and singularity of intent, and leaves no room for differential voices, aberrant subject positions or interpretive margins. It follows however that for as long as translations remain translations, equivalence remains beyond their grasp and different subjects inhabit their discursive space.

Translation and Self-reference

We know why this is so. Translation requires interpretation and therefore a viewpoint, and it involves expression and therefore a particular choice of expressive means. Both create room for a kind of agency that is entirely the translator's. One aspect of this is the way in which translation generates its own ongoing discourse about translation. Put differently, in translations that remain translations, translators speak of translation and translating. A good way to approach this idea is by invoking self-reference.

David Lodge's novel Changing Places concerns two university professors, one British, the other American, both literature specialists, who take part in an exchange scheme. In the following passage, close to the end of the novel, they are discussing how novels end. Their conversation is presented, unusually, in the form of drama:

PHILIP: ...I mean, take the question of endings...You remember that passage is Northanger Abbey where Jane Austen says she's afraid that her readers will have guessed that a happy ending is coming up at any moment.
MORRIS: (nods) Quote, 'Seeing in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.' Unquote.
PHILIP: That's it. Well, That's something the novelist can't help giving away, isn't it; that his book is shortly coming to an end?2

The passage can hardly avoid being read self-referentially. It offers an ironic comment within the novel on the ending of novels, and therefore also of this novel. The comment is both thematic, in that the characters, unaware that their story is about to end, speak about stories ending, and formal, in that the episode is cast not as standard narrative but as theatre. The novel meditates on its own form by reminding itself of the form's conventionality. The reader is meant to perceive and appreciate the novel folding back on itself.

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We can think of translation too as an inherently self-referential form. The form is framed by the entry on the title page identifying the text as a translation. It invites the reader to enter into a contract, an agreement to read the text as simulating an originary text in another language. The contract allows the reader's awareness of the original as being distinct from the translation to remain dormant for as long as the translation illusion, the illusion of equivalence, lasts. The illusion can never be complete. If it were, the translation would cease to be a translation, as we saw. But together with the contract on which it is based it permits us to state, in casual and elliptical fashion, that 'I have read Dostoevsky', when in fact I know I have read a translation of Dostoevsky.

The latent self-referentiality of translation is raised as soon as we remind ourselves of the contract itself, or when we take the text's translation-specific intertextuality into account, for then we consider not so much the way in which the translation re-entails its donor text, but the way it interacts with existing translations and with expectations about translation. This happens when the performance of translation is thematised in the translation itself. Here is a crude example.

In one of his case histories Freud tells of a neurotic patient, the so-called Rat Man, who was passionately in love with a woman. The lady had a friend called Richard, or Dick for short. One day the patient, who was intensely jealous of Dick's good fortune, became obsessed with the idea that he was too fat and had to get thinner, so he began to exercise madly. Freud explains the patient's behaviour as a case of transference, an association of 'fat' with the name 'Dick' — which the English translator can only get across by informing the reader in a bracketed aside that the word for 'fat' in German is 'dick', so that they can understand the association in the patient's mind between his desire to lose weight, killing off his own 'fat', and his wish to kill Richard alias Dick.3 The problem of translating into English the similar-sounding words 'dick' and 'Dick' invade the translation itself.

It is interesting to note, incidentally, that the other, sexual meaning of 'dick' in English, as slang for 'penis', is not mentioned in this case study at all. For the obvious reason that it plays no part in Freud's original German. Nevertheless, in the context of reading the case study in English, the secondary meaning attached to the name Dick forcefully imposes itself on the Anglophone reader, rendering the absence of any reference to it puzzling. Here self-reference works indirectly, highlighting the translated status of the translation.

Let us take another example. A recent collection called Women Writing in Dutch contains extracts from the diary of Anne Frank in English translation.4 The section is introduced by Laureen Nussbaum, who also provides a long footnote to the translation as printed. In both her introduction and her notes Nussbaum explains that in her opinion the standard English
Translation of Anne Frank's diary, by B M Mooyaart-Doubleday, is riddled with errors and inadequate overall. Nussbaum had hoped to correct the errors in her own version, but the copyright holders refused permission to publish this new translation. Being forced to reprint Mooyaart-Doubleday's standard English version, Nussbaum decided nevertheless to insert her own corrections into that text, as a kind of running commentary. The result can be seen in the following brief passage, in which Nussbaum's alternative renderings appear between square brackets and her additions between accolade marks:

I must keep my head high and be brave, those thoughts will come [all the same], not once, but oh, countless times. Believe me, if you have been shut up [confined] for a year and a half, it can get too much for you some days. In spite of all justice [fairness] and thankfulness, you can't crush [repress] your feelings.¹ (my italics)

Intertextuality

There is an obvious dialogue going on in the passage between the main text and the bracketed words, the subject of which is what makes a good translation of a classic like the diary of Anne Frank. Nussbaum's interventions point not only to the original Dutch but just as much to the perceived inadequacies in the standard translation. Her alternative choices are polemical, even if for legal reasons they can lead no more than an interstitial existence, crammed into brackets and footnotes.

But there is more. Imagine that Nussbaum had been permitted to print her own version, and that the edition had made no reference to Mooyaart-Doubleday. The passage would have looked like this:

I must keep my head high and be brave, those thoughts will come all the same, not once, but oh, countless times. Believe me, if you have been shut up [confined] for a year and a half, it can get too much for you some days. In spite of all fairness and thankfulness, you can't crush [repress] your feelings.

This passage is no less double-edged than the previous one. It still keeps one eye on the Dutch and the other on Mooyaart-Doubleday. Nussbaum's words still speak for Anne Frank and simultaneously against another translation, except that the latter discourse is now harder to spot. It is present only in the form of covert intertextual allusion. To appreciate the nature of the relationship we need to set this translator's choices against her colleague's. This requires a double-edged reading, one that takes translation as representation or re-enactment of an underlying original, the other keeping an eye open for the translation-specific intertextuality at work in the differential choices which translators make.

Such a reading can activate various kinds of – forgive the mouthful – intratranslational intertextuality. In Gérard Genette's terminology, Nussbaum's polemic with her colleague would be a form of specific intertextuality, as one text alludes to a specific subtext.² Beyond this Nussbaum differential selection of expressive means appeals to generic intertextuality in that her choices reflect more broadly on ways of translating certain genres or kinds of text, in this case literary classics, or war documents, or autobiographical writings. Finally, beyond this, and even more generally, her choices call on expectations about translation as such, the kind of intertextuality Genette calls archetypal. It is, I want to suggest, because individual translations constantly play out these kinds of intertextuality that translation persists in time as an activity and as a concept in particular communities.

Reading translations against the backdrop of other translations, self-referentially and intertextually, may be a somewhat schizophrenic activity. But it offers clear benefits. It directs us to the translator's agency. It reminds us that translators speak in their own name in their translations, and that they occupy discursive positions that cannot be reduced to the original's single dominant voice. Translation is irrevocably plural. And it is plural because it is repeatable. If there were one correct translation, it would be equivalent to its original, and no longer translation.

Notes

5 Ibid, p 552