

Hebrew and Translation Issues

Dr. Joel M. Hoffman

Joel@Exc.Com

Fall 2002

..... Overview

The task of translation offers an unparalleled opportunity to understand a language and texts written in it, because nuances that remain hidden to a casual observer — levels of meaning, minor word-order variation, idioms and metaphors, allusions, register distinctions, puns, and much more — are all brought to the fore during the course of translation.

We will start with theoretical overviews of translation, meaning, and literary criticism, followed by a survey of Hebrew and its unique elements. Then we will choose one or more texts to investigate and translate. We will work as a class evaluating possible English renditions and devising translations for discussion. Our conversations will yield insight into the intricacies of how translation works, as well as a better understanding of Hebrew and even English.

By the end of the semester, you will better appreciate the complexities of language and translation, and understand how those complexities are expressed in Hebrew and in translations of Hebrew.

..... Topics

The course begins with an overview of its three key theoretical aspects: elements of translation, theories about text and language, and the unique aspects of Hebrew. From there, we move on to translation projects, examining texts in detail and translating them. (The works are chosen to suit the interests of the members of the class.)

Translation.

Five levels of translation — sounds, words, sentences, concepts and affect — can be identified, and often translating one means not translating another. What does each level entail? When is

each most important? How do we identify the content of each level in Hebrew, and how do we decide which to translate? Finally, how do we translate each from Hebrew?

Language and Text.

Some modern literary critics tell us that a text, or at least some texts, are incomplete without a reader. But more generally, language has many purposes, only one of which is simple conveyance of information. We will take a brief look at how texts work, and what we need to know in order to translate them.

Meaning

One of the most basic purposes of text is to convey meaning. But what does “meaning” mean? Do words have meaning in isolation? Who determines the meaning of a word or text? Does a text have a single meaning that can be identified and translated?

Dead Languages

Dead languages are particularly hard to translate, because we have to rely on subtle clues to decode their original content. Which clues should we use? Which clues should we avoid using? How do we know when we have the right answer?

Hebrew

While all languages share the same basic building blocks, the way those blocks are assembled differs from language to language. To properly understand (and so to properly translate) Hebrew we must understand the unique elements of Hebrew, and how they function. For example, what does word order convey? What are the ramifications of a “root-based” system of words. What about translating from a language with prominent gender to one in which most words are genderless?

Projects.

Armed with an understanding of all of the elements of translation, we will set out to translate one or more Hebrew texts, looking in detail at how the language works, and in so doing learning much more about Hebrew, and even about language and English.

The students will help choose the projects, so that in addition to studying Hebrew and how it is best translated, students will get an in-depth look at texts of their choosing.

.....**Requirements**.....

Because much of the course will consist of class discussion and evaluation of translations, and because the remainder of the class — lectures about translation, Hebrew, and where those two meet — is not available in printed form, you should plan on attending every class. If you must miss a class, you will want to make sure to obtain class notes from someone else.

Your grade in the class will depend upon a final translation project and a few small written assignments during the semester. Students may work on these projects in small groups.

.....How to Reach Me.....

You can reach me most conveniently by e-mail: Joel@Exc.Com. You can also reach me by phone: 718/834-1080. You can call as early as you like, but *please don't call after 9:00pm.*

.....Selected Bibliography.....

Most of the course consists of class lectures, handouts and discussions. However, the following are used to greater or lesser degrees during the course, either to supplant or to reinforce material presented in class.

Of these, the books most worth having on your bookshelf are marked with an asterisk (*). Those most relevant to the course are marked with a plus symbol (+).

Eco, Umberto. 1992. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge, England.

Eco, Umberto. 1994. *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. Cambridge, MA. (*)

Even-Shoshan, Avraham. 1993. *המלון העברי המרכז* [hamilon ha'ivri ham'rukaz]. Jerusalem. (*)

Hirsch, A. 1967. *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven.

Hofstadter, Douglas R. *Le Ton beau de Marot*. New York. (*+)

Klein, Ernest. 1987. *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*. New York. (*)

Lakoff, George. 1987. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. Chicago.

Lefevere, André. 1975. *Translating Poetry*. The Netherlands. (+)

Lefevere, André. 1992. *Translating Literature*. New York. (+)

Malone, Joseph L. 1988. *The Science of Linguistics in the Art of Translation*. Albany, New York.

Newmark, Peter. 1988. *Textbook of Translation*. New York.

Pinker, Steven. 1995. *The Language Instinct*. New York. (*)

Putnam, Hilary. 1988. *Representation and Reality*. (*) Cambridge, MA

Sáenz-Badillos, Angel. 1993. *A History of the Hebrew Language*. J. Elwolde, trans. Great Britain. (+*)

Snell-Hornby, Mary. 1995. *Translation Studies*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia.

Steiner, George. 1992. *After Babel*. Oxford. (+)