English-Vietnamese Translation: An Internship

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ENGLISH-VIETNAMESE TRANSLATION: AN INTERNSHIP

by

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Blaine L. Hart
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The art of translation lies in a literary limbo, subservient to the creativity and expressions of others. Yet in attempting to bridge two different languages and cultures, it entails unique problems as difficult as those encountered in any other literary activity.

The following is the report of a project carried out with the Translation Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in the fall of 1975 as a senior Honors project in fulfillment of requirements for graduation from the Honors Program at U.S.U. Since this internship itself formed the bulk of my project, the following is presented as a personal and occasionally subjective report of that experience, not primarily as the product of academic research.

The project was concerned principally with the translation of the Book of Mormon into Vietnamese. My involvement was based on abilities and interests gained in nearly a year and a half served as an L.D.S. missionary in Saigon, South Vietnam, supplemented by use of Chinese in Hong Kong previously. Comments on translation and some of the particular difficulties in Vietnamese-English translations are also influenced by experience gained in translating Doan thi Thu Anh's journal of her family's evacuation from Vietnam, published in Sunstone, Vol. 1 No. 2 (Spring) 1976, and a number of Vietnamese poems translated for an honors class in "Far Eastern Thought."
VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE

Some background on the basic characteristics of the Vietnamese language may be useful in understanding the difficulties faced in translation in general, as well as those peculiar to Vietnamese.

Like many Asian languages, Vietnamese is tonal—that is, the pitch or pitch contour with which a word is said has phonemic significance. Two words which differ only in tone are just as much different as two words which differ in consonants or vowels. Morphemes are usually one syllable long, giving the language a "monosyllabic" character. The origin of Vietnamese is unclear; linguists differ in their theories as to its source. It is not directly related to Chinese, but heavy borrowing during the centuries of Chinese domination has resulted in a large Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, roughly comparable to English borrowing from Latin and Romance languages. As a result, referral to Chinese translations of difficult English passages was occasionally helpful in choosing the best Vietnamese word or phrase.

Writing systems based on Chinese characters gave way by the twentieth century to quoc ngu, a phonetic Roman script developed in the early seventeenth century by French Catholic priests. Quoc ngu, employing simple diacritical marks to indicate tone and some vowel modifications, is now universal in Vietnam. All Vietnamese publications, including those involved in this project, are in quoc ngu.

As has been noted, Vietnamese is often characterized as monosyllabic. Many words are actually disyllabic, however. Two-syllable words may be composed of a meaningless syllable combined with a word which may stand by itself, an independently meaningful syllable combined with a syllable which is meaningful but may not stand by itself, or two independently
meaningful words which have a different meaning when combined. Adjectives and verbs often have a wide range of related meanings. For example, 'c means shy, 'g is to fear, 'ngai is to be hesitant, lo means to worry, and 'kinh means to be terrified. These may be combined with each other, as in lo 'g and 'c 'ngai, or other syllables may be combined to intensify or otherwise modify the meaning, as in 'c 'l and 'kinh 'hai. Thus all of the following are listed in one medium-sized Vietnamese dictionary as expressing various shades of "to fear": 'c, 'c 'l, 'c 'it, 'c 'ngai, 'g, 'g 'hii, 'g 'sii, lo, lo 'g, lo 'ngai, 'ngai, 'di 'ngai, nghi 'ngai, ghê 'g, 'kinh 'g, 'kinh 'hii, 'kinh hoâng, 'kinh hoâng, 'kinh hőn, and 'kinh ngâc. Deciding which one of these most accurately reflects the meaning of a given English sentence is obviously a problem. In addition, interesting stylistic possibilities are available in the use of intensifying adjectives. For example, the phrase "an exceeding great mist" (1 Ne. 8:23) is translated 'mot 'dam 'song 'mu 'day 'duc. 'Day 'duc, which modifies 'song 'mu, mist, means "very thick." 'Day alone means "thick;" the addition of 'duc intensifies the meaning, although 'duc does not mean "very" but "solid."

In terms of syntax Vietnamese is in many ways much simpler than English. Tense is indicated only by prefixing 'a ("-ed", past), dang ("ing", progressive), or 'a ("will", future) and is many times not indicated at all. Many subtle time distinctions in English are thus untranslatable in Vietnamese. Without going into great detail, Vietnamese grammar is generally loose and more fluid than English grammar. This is not to imply that Vietnamese grammar does not follow rules; like any language, Vietnamese has a definite syntax. However, it tends to rely much more on word order to indicate meaning than on the inflectional
endings of Indo-European languages. Words like "and" as well as articles are often understood elements in Vietnamese.

Vietnamese has one unusual trait to a greater degree than any other language I know of, that of variability of personal pronouns. There is no one way to say "you" or "I". The word used in a given situation, based on a family relationship, depends on the position of the person speaking or being spoken to. In my family, for instance, when speaking to my father, I would say con ("child") for "I" and ba ("dad, father") for "you". With my younger brothers and sisters I become anh ("older brother") and each of them becomes em ("younger brother or sister"). A woman might, when speaking of herself ("I"), be má ("Mom") to her children, con ("child") to her parents, chị ("older sister") to her younger siblings, and em ("younger sister") to her husband and to older brothers and sisters. There are a host of other words for aunts and uncles (older and younger, maternal or paternal), grandparents (maternal and paternal), and so on, but a few close relationships are sufficient for most situations. Beyond the family the words chosen depend on degree of intimacy. Ông ("Mr.", literally, "grandfather"), bà ("Mrs.", literally, "grandmother"), and cô ("Miss") are formal, while tô (literally, "subject (of a king)") does for "I". Anh ("older brother") and chị ("older sister") are informal language among peers. There are special words for deity (Ngài) and royalty (trần), and for common people when addressed by such (người, người). There are a good many pejorative references for other people (mày, bà, y, hân, tến). Finally, there are unlimited possibilities for special titles, such as teacher (thầy). A real-life situation involves a healthy dose of slang, but fortunately this does not enter into much literature beyond comic books. Forms of address are
accompanied by an appropriate style, and there are some words which have no other meaning than to indicate respect (thuta, dq). In short, there are endless possibilities for confusion.

Vietnamese and English thus differ significantly in many major aspects of language, making accurate and pleasing translation oftentimes very difficult.

INTERNSHIP

My internship with the L.D.S. Translation Department lasted from September, 1975 to January, 1976. John Alleman was the project supervisor; Thinh Van Dinh was the Vietnamese translator with whom I spent most of my time. The Book of Mormon had actually been translated previously in Saigon by Cong Ton Nu Tuong Vy and been reviewed several times, but all but the first rough draft had been lost in the evacuation of April, 1975. Thinh's job was to correct this initial translation from a Vietnamese mind—and extensive revision was necessary. It was my responsibility to review this revision for accuracy from an American background.

Individual work on my part with photocopies of Thinh's work was punctuated by conferences with Thinh about every two weeks to discuss problems and suggested changes. Throughout this time I kept a journal with notes on translation of specific passages of interest as well as my reactions and thoughts on translation in general. Perhaps the easiest way to indicate the flow of the work during these three-plus months is to quote a few portions of my notes made at that time.

9/26/75 "Already I feel the pressures of time and the difficulties imposed by a deadline. The very best translation obviously requires
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much practice and much time."

9/27/75 "I sense the unevenness of my work. Small but obvious
errors... are easy to pick out, while errors of style or construction
may slip by. The vast majority of my corrections are small errors like
this."

10/15/75 "I recognize two main areas which I am marking in my review.
One is questionable usage or style, an area which should be taken care of
by a native speaker. My role in this area, in which I am entirely
unqualified to make suggestions, should probably be no more than to indi­
cate questions. The second, more important task is to detect genuine
mistranslations, places where the translator(s) apparently misunderstood
the meaning of the original. This should be my main role as a native
speaker of the original language."

10/16/75 Met with Thinh in Salt Lake and went over a list of
standardized names and reviewed corrections thus far.

10/19/75 I began a new, faster system of marking corrections and
questions and also began to have people read the English text aloud while
I followed and marked in the Vietnamese. This proved to be much faster
than my initial solitary work.

11/4/75 "Went to Salt Lake and worked with Thinh. It was our most
productive session yet. In addition to photocopying up through Mosiah,
we agreed on standardization for a list which I have kept of important
phrases and words. One of the more important such decisions was to
translate both "Holy Spirit" and "Holy Ghost" as Thánh Linh, following
the Chinese. I still feel uneasy about "consecrate"; he wants to use
dành riêng or công nhận, neither of which properly carries a sacred
connotation."
"He explained several things that helped me understand Chi Vy's manuscript better. She worked quite a bit from the French translation, which simply compounded errors in it. Also, he noted that her translation was excellent, the biggest problem being the lack of standardization. When reading in Vietnamese and not comparing with English it sounds good."

11/13/75 "Mosiah seems to mark an abrupt change; Thinh makes many more corrections, I do less. My comprehension and speed are picking up again."

11/29/75 "Passed the halfway mark. The primary difficulties now are 1) standardization of terms, and 2) pronouns. Occasional real mistakes in meaning, perhaps one or two during a period. I seem to have reached a fairly consistent speed."

12/10/75 "My visit today with Thinh was profitable but very, very frustrating. Most of our time seemed to be spent rehashing old problems, with little progress being made."

(About two pages of specific examples followed, most of which were difficult phrases which had to be decided by context, plus several phrases which were heavily loaded with cultural implications and had varying precedents among different religions.)

"Today I felt more keenly than hitherto the subjective nature of this work. There is no "right" answer, it is a question of evaluating all factors and making the best decision according to one's own judgment, sometimes a discouraging process."

In the end I felt that my work, which had resulted in the correction of a number of potentially serious mistranslations as well as many rather simple errors, was both necessary and productive.
OVERVIEW OF TRANSLATION DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED

Errors and difficulties which occurred ranged from the frequent and simple problems of standardization and pronoun usage to difficult questions of meaning and style and even passages which are simply untranslatable.

The most frequent error was the lack of standardization. For example, the original manuscript often uses Chúa and Thượng Ðế indiscriminately for both "Lord" and "God", although Chúa plainly means "Lord" and Thượng Ðế means "God." (Vìt Chúa Trời, the usual Catholic translation of "God", also appears on occasion. It is an acceptable translation, but for the sake of consistency it was decided to use only Thượng Ðế, in common use among both the Buddhist and Christian communities of Vietnam--an example of the cultural considerations which will be discussed later.) Words and phrases which reoccur in English were often translated in several different ways. Obviously, consistency is preferable.

The solution was usually rather simple--a list was kept of words and important phrases which recurred, a standard translation was decided upon, and each instance of nonstandard usage was marked for later correction. There is a more subtle problem, however. Words in English often have several meanings which may not even be apparent to the native speaker without careful reflection, meanings which are rendered in other languages by separate words for each meaning. Context in this situation must determine usage. The difference between cay ("spicy") and nóng ("warm") for "hot" is obvious. Phrases such as "the word" may be less so. "The word of God" (or "the Lord") can be lời Chúa Thượng Ðế (Chúa), but "preach the word" obviously means more than just preach words. "Word" in this context has the connotation of a message, a way--đạo, a cognate
of the Chinese ảo (道) of Taoism. Giảng ảo here conveys best the concept "preach the word". "Order" presents similar difficulties. "Holy order" (e.g. Alma 13) was decided upon as thành ban; "order of Nehor" (Alma 14:16) was translated quite well as lề lôi của Neh. Ban in the first has the sense of a group; lề lôi is defined as "manner, procedure". There are probably half a dozen other common senses of "order".

The complex system of Vietnamese personal pronouns creates the intriguing problem of interpreting other cultures in terms of Vietnamese society and interpersonal relations. One frequent problem is that the family-conscious Vietnamese are too explicit, necessitating an interpolation of the English text. "Brother", for example, must be translated as either anh, older brother, or em, younger brother. Often it is not clear from the original which relationship is correct.

More imagination is required when a relationship is clear but level of familiarity must be accounted for. Just how superior would Nephi be when chastising his older brothers, who would normally be addressed with respect? Would the form of address used by the Lord to a prophet be more intimate than that used when he is calling people to repentance? A traditional Vietnamese king addressed his subjects as inferiors, but what if a king is also addressing his people as their spiritual leader? And how would one address an angel? As Ngài, a term usually reserved for deity? And would an angel reply with ngudi, used only to inferiors? Clearly there are no right or wrong answers, only good guesses.

Tenses, as has been noted earlier, are seldom delineated as clearly in Vietnamese as in English. Thus a phrase such as "having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days" (1 Ne. 1:4) cannot be conveyed precisely in
Vietnamese. Even the simple distinctions possible are often neglected in common usage, making their application every time such translation seems appropriate impossible except at the expense of an awkward and non-Vietnamese style.

Though it may seem that unusual characteristics of Vietnamese create most of the problems mentioned so far, English has just as many potentially frustrating peculiarities. Understood elements in English are more common than we realize, elements which usually need to be explicit in the target language. Consider the phrase "... then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty ..." Fifty what? Men (người)? Subordinates (bồ hả)? The first translation of 1 Nephi 13:40 had incorrectly used các vị đầu tiên ("(plural) honorific first", first people) for "These last records ... shall establish the truth of the first ... ". Context makes it clear that "the first" should be những biên sỹ đầu tiên ("(plural) record first", first records). The understood "records" must be explicit in Vietnamese. Several other similar instances were misunderstood by the original translator.

Multiple meanings present hazards. Narga is one way to say "fall", but its involuntary connotation, as in "to trip", does not fit "they came forth and fell down and partook of the fruit of the tree" (1 Ne. 8:30). "Man" can be either an individual man or mankind; the latter meaning is used in Alma 42:4 (loài người) and the former in the previous verse (người). Care is necessary to always be aware of such differences.

Unusual phrases are sometimes meaningless when translated literally, or even impossible to express. We understand when we are told to "be men", but the meaning can only be conveyed in Vietnamese with an explanation,
con người xứng đáng, "worthy person". "Driven snow" (1 Ne. 11:8) is completely foreign to the Vietnamese people; not surprisingly, the translators had to make do with snow mới rơi, "newly fallen".

Style is an important part of translation, though usually one beyond my capabilities to correct. I occasionally felt justified in making recommendations, as in Alma chapter 5, where a long series of questions had been put in a rhetorical Vietnamese style which was probably less appropriate than a normal question form.

A number of errors occurred which were due to little more than misunderstanding on the part of the translators. A reference to the "Babylonian captivity" was translated incorrectly as dân òa Bì Lan bị bắt từ đâu, literally, the people of Babylon being taken into captivity, when the captivity of the Jews in Babylon was intended. "... Knoweth all things from the beginning" was misunderstood to mean every thing from the time it begins, hiểu hết tất cả mọi chuyện từ lúc nó mới khởi đầu.

Mistranslation of "man" in Alma 42:3 as loài người, as mentioned earlier, is another example. Such mistakes can occasionally lead to more than trivial confusion, as when "form of a man" in 1 Nephi 11:11 is translated thân hình, "body", yet the personage referred to is actually a spirit.

The above are intended as examples of types of problems encountered by even the best translators. Lest I leave an overly-critical impression, I should add that most of the material I reviewed had been translated quite well, even impressing me on occasion with a sense of artistic skill. I was most aware of the translators' skill when their correct translation made me recognize a faulty interpretation I had been making in my native language. For example, I had always thought of "lawyers, and judges, and priests, and teachers who were of the profession of Nehor" as those who
followed the career of Nehor. It was not until I read *dức tín theo kiểu Ni Hô* ("faith after the fashion of Nehor") that I thought of the more likely meaning of religious faith, that which one professes, for "profession". Họi các anh em và đồng bào của tôi ("O my (blood) brothers and compatriots") makes more sense than the curious English phrase "My brothers and my brethren" (Alma 26:1).

The last problem I wish to discuss is that of cultural factors. They have already entered into several previously mentioned examples, as in the decision to use *Thường Đức* for "God" rather than *Đức Chúa Trời* because the former is in use among both Buddhists and Christians while the latter is largely a Catholic term. The matter of what form of address to use, what level of familiarity is best, is also cultural. Perhaps the best example lies in a question that troubled Thinh and me from the beginning to the end of the project, one that prompted half a dozen different decisions. "Holy Ghost" and "Holy Spirit" both occur often in the Book of Mormon. The problem was whether they should be translated by one or two terms, since they are frequently synonymous. We had agreed that consistency was desirable. However, all previously published L.D.S. Church literature used Thân Linh indiscriminately for both terms. Vietnamese, Japanese, and Korean translations for these words were all Chinese derivatives, so it was easy to compare them. Japanese and Korean differentiate the two terms. Chinese does not, using only the characters from which Thân Linh is derived. French, Spanish, and German translations also do not differentiate "Holy Ghost" and "Holy Spirit"; they use Esprit, Espiritu, and Geist respectively. Other languages thus offer ambiguous precedent. Previous Vietnamese translations by other groups are no more decisive. The Bible Society in Vietnam and the Gideon
translations both use only Thánh Linh. The Catholics use các thần for "Holy Ghost", which, being a plural construction, is a clear mistranslation. Thần, a divine being, spirit, or god, is a conceivable alternative, related to the Japanese and Korean words for "Holy Ghost", but most of its associations are with Buddhist and Taoist beliefs. The final decision, to use only Thánh Linh, was thus based on not only linguistic but historical and cultural factors.

ON TRANSLATION--SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

In a sense every reading of a text is unique, a translation of the author's thoughts in terms of the reader's own experiences. Translation may thus be considered an extreme extension of a continually occurring process, one in which different languages as well as difference of background obstruct communication. Such an approach may be both heartening and distressing--distressing in the recognition of the ease of misunderstanding between even speakers of the same language, heartening in the realization that the basic problem, since it is constantly faced, is not insurmountable.

The demanding creativity required of a translator is seldom recognized. He is bound to the expressions and intents of another author, forced to resist the temptation to improve, yet called upon to exercise both technical skill and imagination. He must be a perceptive reader and a talented writer. Command of his own language is one of the prerequisites to interpreting another. A knowledge of words is only the beginning of his abilities necessary.

Only rarely can a concept expressed by a word in one language be conveyed with what might be considered exactness by a single word in
another. Since only trivial and uninteresting dialogue tends to proceed on this easily translatable level, constant compromise is called for. The vast range of meanings possible for most words makes a one-to-one correspondence impossible. The translator must make an approximation according to his best judgment. Moreover, the way something is said may be just as important as what is said. As much as possible the style and feeling of the original writing should be maintained, a goal often irreconcilable with exactness in meaning. Thus, bà ngoái denotes one's mother's mother—but "maternal grandmother" sounds comically pompous in English, while bà ngoái is no more unusual in Vietnamese than "grandma" in English. A slavish adherence to accuracy can easily produce a translation which makes true communication even more difficult by its stilted, non-native style.

Words alone are a small part of language. Larger constructions--phrases, idioms, sentences, exclamation--present even greater problems. An idiom is almost by definition untranslatable. Other of these linguistic elements, sometimes even single words, may be so heavily loaded with culturally related overtones that a literal translation falls far short of all that is called up in a native speaker's mind. To translate em in a line of poetry as "you" fails to convey the sense of intimacy present in the original; correspondingly, to use any word at all to translate English "you" into Vietnamese implies to the Vietnamese mind an exaggerated social consciousness lacking in American culture. The translation of cultures is far more difficult than that of words.

Translation, despite its subsidiary status, is a highly difficult and challenging literary art. It requires of its practitioners discipline, imagination, and specific skills as great as those needed to produce quality results in any field.
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