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The limits of translation

DAVID FREEDBERG

At what point does it become pointless to expand the meaning of translation beyond the realm of spoken language? (When I speak of spoken language, I mean any language capable of being spoken or once having been capable of being spoken.) My claim will be that whenever the concept of translation is applied outside situations in which there is a *polarity* of performativity (two spoken languages may serve as the immediate illustration), it loses its utility—or simply becomes too vague to be useful in any meaningful sense. Joseph Rykwert's contribution illustrates the problem.

Where is the polarity between the architect's concept and his drawing? Or even between the graphic and the built? Rykwert seems to think that just because all these terms—concept, drawing, the graphic, the built—can be described as “languages,” the idea of translation may be applied to the passage from one to the other. But they each belong to such different realms that any notion of translation from one to the other must be suspect. It is true that the fashionably loose application of the idea of language to a whole variety of different phenomena, both conceptual and actual, offers the broad hope of a view of translation expanded beyond the literary and linguistic; but I believe this hope to be in vain.

In responding to Rykwert's paper, I will maintain that there is no analogy between “the linguistic and the built” in the way that he thinks and that it makes little sense to speak of the translation of a mental notion into its “two-dimensional graphic account,” or of the latter into “the solidity proper to building.” The basic question posed by Rykwert's paper is where, if at all, is the notion of translation useful to architecture? Not often, will be my response, since its most efficient use can come only with the translation of one performative and performable *representation* to another. Neither of these poles can be a mental representation. If one confuses different kinds of representation, or randomly lumps different forms of representation together, as Rykwert characteristically does, then one runs into intolerable difficulties. I will suggest that the only way out of the aporia into which the modern broad use of translation leads—well exemplified by the problematic nature of Rykwert's claims—is to stay with the literary model.

It is important to observe that the passage from concept to material in architecture is not paralleled in the literary sense except in the passage from concept to real language. And when we speak of translation in the literary sense, we speak of translation from one language to another, not from concept to language. The architectural equivalent may be the translation from one medium or one material to another—though I think it unlikely. In any case, it is rarer and has a much more special sense. If we mean translation from concept to form, then we have to speak of translation from idea to language; and then we need another word, or another sense, of translation—not, I take it, the one intended by this conference.

My strictures will seem to be puritanical, but with the term “translation,” a certain puritanism may indeed be in order. To apply the term to extralinguistic spheres seems to me to present a threat to both precision and rigor. Extended use of the term carries with it a series of dangers that have not fashionably been recognized, or even acknowledged. To say this is not simply to express a kind of conservative desire to preserve the term for the domain of the literary and the linguistic; it is to suggest that when we transfer the term to the very broad range of fields where it may indeed (even) make etymological sense, we run the risk of abdicating our responsibility to be clear about precisely those concepts to which the term is too generously or too slackly applied—as I believe to be the case with Rykwert's proposal of the analogy between the linguistic and the built. “*Traduttore-traditore*” indeed! The real betrayal lies in the catachresis itself.

What could be the point, besides conceptual laziness, of speaking of the *translation* of an architect's concept into an architectural drawing? Or, as Rykwert also puts it, the translation of a “mental construct” into its graphic “presentation”? Or “from thought to materiality”? Desperation for analogy drives the endless search for polarities. Rykwert speaks of a double act of translation, first “from the architect's mind” to the graphic realization of what he has in his mind, and then from the drawing to the building itself. In neither instance does the term “translation” seem to me to have

any useful sense; but it is the first part of this so-called double translation that is particularly difficult, and that infects its second part as well.

If we speak of the translation of a concept into its graphic or its textual realization, we sacrifice not only all precision in our use of that term, we also fail to adequately investigate what more precisely the passage from the conceptual stage to any form of its realization entails. The fact is that use of the term "translation" to describe this passage—however so constituted—wholly obscures the essential differences between it and whatever is entailed by the passage from a text to its translation, in other words, whatever is entailed by more precise and less expansive use of the term itself.

Why? The precise sense of translation can have to do only with its reference to the transformation of one incarnate form to another; one could also say from one representation to another. But the term "translation" should not be applied to the transformation of a mental representation to a real representation; or a mental image to a real representation; or an idea to its incarnate form. *This* passage involves an entirely different process. When a concept is transformed into a text, or a speech, or a drawing, or even a score, the search for equivalences is of another order altogether from that involved in the act of linguistic or literary translation. It is not even analogous to such acts. Why should it be? Indeed, when it comes to the transformation of the conceptual into the real, it is better not to think of equivalences at all—there are none, in any graspable sense.

Be that as it may, texts (like scores and realizable architectural drawings) are grounded in competence (or potential competence) in the way concepts never are. They are *necessarily* predicated on the possibility of translatable competences, whereas concepts and ideas are by their very nature not necessarily thus predicated. The fact is that the good, useful, and admittedly narrow sense of "translation" has to do with two *performative* poles, or two potentially performative poles. But the conceptual, prior to its execution in one form or another, is essentially nonperformative. One could even argue that it is never performable either.

With the translation of one linguistic text to another, things are much clearer. Here one moves in the realm of equivalences between signifiers (or attempted equivalences between them), not between the two always inseparable realms of arbitrary signifieds, on the one hand, and signifiers, on the other. It is this switch

from one realm to another that cannot be described, in any helpful or precise sense, as an act of translation. The challenge of a meeting on translation must surely be to refine the distinctions between the ways we think about images and representations, not to be seduced by the implications of their plain etymological sense of "carrying over," or to expand the meaning of the word "translation" into different conceptual capabilities, that is, into places where in ordinary talk such distinctions are often blurred.

How then does the confusion arise, this all-too-loose use of the notion of translation? It certainly is common enough and runs through many of the papers in this symposium. It arises from the modish habit of ironizing and metaphorizing the notion of language itself and from insisting too heavily on the linguistic basis of all forms of semiosis. As soon as we put language in quotes or carry it over (let us not say "translate!") from the purely linguistic—in other words, as soon as we transform language into "language"—we lose all precision in our use of the term "translation." Everything then is up for grabs. Hence the need for a certain puritanism when it comes to the application of terms that have the potential, at least nowadays, of an apparently infinite expansion of sense.

It might perhaps be argued, by the proponents of such promiscuity, that the problem could be resolved by an appeal to the idea of grammar. Would this not offer a way out of the difficulty of speaking of translation from one very different kind of competence to another, or from one set of competences to another? But such an appeal would be based on a specious faith, or a whimsical one. It is not just that I wish to impose limits on the troping of "grammar" (or "language," or "translation"). At least when it comes to language, we can be reasonably certain that grammar—*all* grammars—proceeds from a single area of neuronal competence. With the vague realm of artistic ideas, of artistic creativity, we lie very far removed from any such specificity (however much we may want to think that the limits of our language are the limits of our world, or some such notion). Indeed, simply to reflect on the grammar of language, unironized, cannot but make one aware of the difficulty of suggesting that translation is an adequate term for the passage from graphics to scale model, as Rykwert also (and more plausibly, at first sight) suggests. In what conceivably useful sense can one speak of the identity—or even the similarity—

of the grammars of drawing and building? One might poetically or merely engagingly, do so, but I don't see that this would be particularly illuminating.

Rykwert has other proposals, as if attempting to improve his basic arguments in favor of thinking about the passage from concept to built form as a kind of double translation (from the conceptual to the graphic and from the drawing to the building). As he admits, Michelangelo's rejection of Sangallo's model for St. Peter's cannot be called a translation (one could hardly think otherwise); but then, as if wanting to have his cake and eat it too, Rykwert defines this same mutilation and rejection as the distortion of translation. He clearly needs to cling to the translation model because of his insistence that Michelangelo's "double plastic transformation" of his initial "notion" for St. Peter's ought to be seen as a translation, or as analogous to translation. But this is just the passage from the concept of a building to its developmental stage that cannot usefully be compared to the processes of literary translation, as little as can Michelangelo's working out of the composition on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Rykwert offers another analogy for his model, a further instance of what he calls the translation from concept to graphic form—Tennyson's correction of his poems in proofs made by his local printer on the Isle of Wight. The notion of alienation from the text is here introduced as an aspect of the process of translation. But it is not clear to me why typesetting, or even (as Rykwert claims) the typewritten page, is any more distant from the conceptual stage than the handwritten text, or any less so than the computer-generated text. Here, in this language context, the argument seems to depend on some kind of process of visual translation as well (as may seem applicable to the visual "translations" he is suggesting in the case of architecture). But then one loses all sense of what exactly is being translated, in what spheres of competence one moves, and of what kind of grammar one speaks.

Perhaps Rykwert was somehow wanting to insist (as one might indeed want to do) that what the case of architecture shows is that authors themselves can translate their own works—in other words, that translation does not always or necessarily involve two agents. Indeed not. This might well have been an interesting issue to unpack in this context. After all, the neatest model for translation is the prevalent case: translations by others of authors' original texts. To have

examined this model would have had the additional advantage of offering a clearer analogy for the relation between an architect's design and the work of assistants, in the first instance, and builders in the second, third, or fourth; and one might have avoided the altogether more tricky passage from the conceptual to the material or the built.

Clearly, authors can translate their own texts too. But here we find that the literary model for translation reveals itself most efficiently of all. The three essential ingredients for the definition of translation are clearly present, namely performativity, polarity, and distinctive areas of competence. After all, the poet who translates his or her own work must have some degree of competence in the language into which he or she is translating as well; and then the obvious problems of fidelity and betrayal in translation may also arise. But there can be no parallel with an architect who reworks his drawings or his material (Rykwert's "plastic transformations"), because here one is not speaking of any definably different competences at all. There may be what one could call the *manipulation* of one competence or another, but there is nothing that could be called translation. There is little polarity and no set of distinctive competences. In *both* cases, of course—that of the poet and that of the architect—there is a passage from the conceptual to the textual, to the built, to the material, whatever one wants to call it; but this is a different issue altogether.

Might not the notion of interpretation help one out of the swamp? Perhaps this is what Rykwert intends when he claims, toward the end of his paper, that at each stage of the "translative cycle of concept-representation-realization . . . choice and judgment—as well as mechanical skill—have to be exercised." A banal conclusion, this! Once again, it is plain that before one speaks of translation, *whatever* is intended by "concept" must be severed from representation, and the phenomenological varieties of representation distinguished, and realization defined as specific and separate from other forms of representation. Translation in any useful sense naturally involves interpretation; but what does it mean to speak of the interpretation of one's concepts into any form of their realization at all? Something very different from the interpretation required in translating one text into another, or even (if one wishes), a drawing into a building. As so often occurs, the use of one and the

same word to describe two very different phenomena obscures more than it clarifies.

In short, Rykwert has gathered together a group of examples from the field of architecture that has entertainingly but only imprecisely to do with the idea of translation. The failure of the attempt is signposted by the various reservations expressed throughout the piece: sometimes the passage from concept to construction is not an actual translation but an analogy to one; the ultimate version of a building is the translation from "representation" to the "thing proper" (suddenly a representation is not a "thing proper," nor a "mental representation," but something intermediate, like a drawing); Michelangelo's changes to his Sangallan model are no longer any form of translation. Analogies, in any case, should not be forced. Indeed not! Sometimes they had better not be made at all.

At the end of his paper, Rykwert generates a further point, the polemical project, perhaps, of his whole piece. It is that there can be no such thing as "an entirely computer-generated [architectural] project, or any such idea as "concept-less designing" (on the just-cited grounds that "there is no escape from the translative cycle of concept-representation-realization"). But the refutation of banal claims on behalf of conceptlessness is obvious and easy. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the idea of translation, and everything to do with the place of the conceptual in all acts of human creativity. To maintain *this* should require no energy at all.