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**“Whoever finds it relevant”
- translating and retranslating *Tao Te Ching*
in a relevance-theoretic perspective**

1. Introduction

Translating literary and philosophical texts is often a translator-driven activity and may be seen as a process of communication with no definite addressees. As such it seems to represent what Sperber and Wilson call “broadcast communication” in which “the communicator is communicating her presumption of relevance to whoever is willing to entertain it” (Sperber—Wilson 1986:158). This seems to be especially true of the ancient Chinese philosophical work *Tao Te Ching*, which - after the *Bible* - is reputedly the second most often translated book in the world. Written some time between the 6th and the 3rd century BC by the legendary sage Lao Tzu, the Book of the Way reflects upon the nature of the universe and human behavior thus laying the philosophical foundations for one of the world’s great wisdom traditions, Taoism. Comprising a mere 5,000 words broken up into 81 chapters it has been one of the major underlying influences in Chinese thought and culture for over two millennia. Though the book was first translated into English in the 19th century most Westerners remain oblivious to its existence, yet it seems to have captured the attention of legions of translators. As Ursula Le Guin observed, “... so many Tao Te Chings have appeared or reappeared that one begins to wonder if Lao Tzu has more translators than he has readers” (Le Guin 1997: 110).

While it may be argued that each of the various translators merely attempts to restate the classic for his or her generation, this does not explain the sheer number of recent translations or the surprising fact that many of these are merely interpolations based on other translations and are written by authors who do not even know Chinese. Inevitably the question arises why so many feel compelled to produce yet another rendition of a text they cannot read? Another question that might appear is to what extent the numerous translators are merely mediators of meaning between the source text writer and the target text reader and to what extent

they have become the source language writers. In this presentation I shall attempt to apply Gutt's (1991) relevance-based model of translation in order to address these questions and to investigate the issue of how the choices made by the translators of *Tao Te Ching* are determined by their potential target audiences.

2. Gutt's (1991) relevance-based model of translation

Gutt (1991) views translation as a process of communication. Like communication it is inferential in nature, and like communication it is essentially asymmetrical in that as the main responsibility for making a spoken text intelligible falls on the speaker, in the case of translation, it is the translator who takes on "the responsibility for avoiding misunderstanding and other communication breakdowns" (Gutt 1991: 180).

Adopting the relevance-theoretic distinction between the descriptive and the interpretive use of language, Gutt takes the position that translation represents interlingual interpretive language use, i.e. rather than produce a text which would have relevance in its own right, the translator produces a text which – to a smaller or greater degree - bears interpretive resemblance to the source text which it represents. Constrained by the Principle of Relevance, the translator will "aim at resemblance in those aspects which she believes will satisfy the expectation of optimal relevance" (Gutt 1991: 45) understood as deriving adequate contextual effects at minimal processing costs.

Among the requirements that Gutt imposes on the translator and audience we find "a thorough understanding of the original text and its cognitive background" (Muscard 1996: 107) and modifying the translational approach according to the audience's expectations. This requirement is closely connected with what Gutt refers to as the secondary communication situation, in which comprehension is hindered by differences in background knowledge between the old and new audience.

Moreover, drawing a distinction between the meaning and form, Gutt argues that a translator should aim at preserving the stylistic properties of the source text.

3. Renditions under analysis

In this presentation I shall focus on five renditions of Chapter 1 and Chapter 5 of *Tao Te Ching*, all of them presented in appendix II:

- the pioneering 1886 translation by John Legge,
- Arthur Waley's 1934 work, entitled *The Power and Its Way. Lao Tzu's Tao*

Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought, perhaps the best known and the most influential translation in the English speaking world,

- a 1972 translation by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, much-praised for its literary merit,
- Stephen Mitchell's interpolation, published in 1988, and
- Ursula K. Le Guin's rendition, entitled *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching. A Book About the Way and the Power of the Way*, published in 1997.

Since the last two versions are best described as interpolations as they were written by people who admittedly cannot read Chinese, someone might question the wisdom of comparing renditions evidently not based on the same source text. However in the case of *Tao Te Ching*, whose original manuscript was lost, the term "the source text" is something of a misnomer. All the translations I am going to discuss are based on or were inspired by the so-called Wang Pi arrangement dating from the 3rd century AD, though Le Guin also made some use of Henrick's (1993) translation of the recently discovered earlier version of *Tao Te Ching*, the so-called Ma Wang Tui arrangement dating from the 3rd century BC. The Chinese text included in the appendix comes from the Wang Pi's edition of the original text.

Since it is impossible to provide here a thorough comparative analysis of the five renditions I shall limit myself to a handful of observations regarding major points of divergence between the translations under discussion, such as

- structural patterns,
- lexical choices,
- uncommon coinages,
- vagueness and indirectness,
- explication,
- over- and
- under-interpretation.

In my attempt to establish what makes each rendition relevant or irrelevant to a potential reader I will discuss these textual features with respect to the amount of implicit information, the translator's assessment of the reader's contextual resources, the poetic effects and the interplay between the processing effort and contextual effects. But first I'd like to comment on the layout, which - it can be argued - is the first ostensive stimulus provided by the translator.

4. The layout as the ostensive stimulus

Even a cursory glance at the five texts under discussion (presented in Appendix II) reveals that in this respect they differ tremendously. Evidently each translator

wanted to make manifest a different set of assumptions about the type of text we are dealing with. Curiously, none of the translators chose a continuous form, which is how the Chinese text seems to have been written. Instead, the English versions are versified, the way works of poetry in Western tradition are written, with each idea being conveyed in a separate verse. Legge goes as far as to number the verses.

With the exception of Waley's and Feng—English's Chapter 1, the translators further divide the translated chapters in various ways thus giving prominence to different portions of the text. Evidently, the various translators took a different view of which ideas should be emphasized. For example, by splitting verse 2 of Chapter 5 Legge gave special weight to the section which he alone phrased as a question:

2. May not the space between heaven and earth be compared to a bellows?

In the same chapter Mitchell focuses the reader's attention on the very last, adage-like line: "Hold on to the center", which – curiously - is one of the lines that Le Guin chose to omit in her version.

Finally, only Le Guin chose to provide chapter headings, the measure which provides a focal point triggering the readers expectations as to the contents of each chapter. The uncommon coinage "Taoing", which serves as the title of her version of Chapter 1, will doubtless make the reader aware that he is confronted by a reality "whose identity is mystery", as Le Guin put it. After all, neither the logical nor the encyclopedic entry for this concept can be regarded as accessible.

5. The secondary communication situation

Due to the temporal and cultural gap Western readers of *Tao Te Ching* find themselves in what Gutt refers to as a secondary communication situation. Consequently, the first encounter with the ancient text is likely to throw most of them into the state of total bewilderment. Consider, for instance, Chapter 1 of *Tao Te Ching*, often described as the seminal chapter of the book, which proclaims that all matter, referred to as "the ten thousand things" (Chinese: *wan wu*) is a manifestation of ultimate reality, whose name - the *Tao* - is merely a convenient label while the reality itself is essentially inexplicable.

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and Earth.

The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.
 Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
 Ever desiring, one sees the manifestations.
 These two spring from the same source but differ in name; this appears as
 darkness.
 Darkness within darkness.
 The gate to all mystery.

[trans. Feng—English]

Without additional information the average reader may be unable to establish even the assumptions explicitly communicated in the chapter.

To boost comprehension impeded by enormous differences in background knowledge between the old and new audience, the translator has, in Gutt's words, to reconstruct "the historical, cultural and sociological background in which the piece of literature was written" (Gutt 1991:165). All the translators mentioned acquit themselves of this task by providing introductions and notes on the chapters, characteristically the older three versions being more scholarly and comprehensive and the two newest ones more personal and brief, the fact that tellingly reflects the changed relevance of the text bound up with the different view the translators seem to have of their audiences' expectations as well as their cognitive resources. The introductions also inform us of the translators' views of the type of text we are about to read, which in Gutt's (1997: 47) terms, may be seen [as an attempt to guide the readers in their search for optimal relevance.

6. Other factors increasing the processing effort

Nonetheless, for many readers the costs of trying to make sense of the obscure text may prove prohibitive. The first stumbling block might be a mismatch between the expected and actual text type. Having been informed that *Tao Te Ching* is a philosophical work, the reader of Waley's translation might expect clearly stated principles and directives, not an anthology of enigmatic poems and self-contradictory statements. The famous opening line of Chapter 1 "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao", may instantly provoke the question as to why an entire book should have been written to describe the reality which apparently cannot be described in words. Readers of Le Guin's work, hoping to hear what she called "a voice that speaks to the soul" (Le Guin: x) will indeed find a plethora of pithy sayings offering practical wisdom for life, work and relationships yet many of them are confusingly paradoxical. On being told that in order to achieve har-

mony with the fundamental laws of the universe one has to “act without action” (Chp 63, trans. LeGuin), the baffled reader may be forgiven for putting the book away. Those who will persevere hoping for intellectual, spiritual or esthetic awards, will discover that in order to achieve a rudimentary understanding of the text, in other words, in order to establish the explicatures of the text, they will either need to study the original version or to consult more than one translation. The problem is that the relatively few Chinese characters used in the original have multiple meanings. This explains why the same characters have been translated in so many different ways, for instance why Feng-English’s “all mystery” should have been rendered as “all that is subtle and wonderful” by Legge and then become “all Secret Essences” in Waley’s version. While increasing the potential for misunderstanding, the inherently ambiguous quality of Chinese ideograms allowed for sophisticated word play impossible to reproduce in English with its alphabetic writing system.

7. Treatment of the key word *Tao*

Interestingly, the key word of the book, the word *Tao*, which refers to the underlying pattern of the universe, the way things are, is often left untranslated. This is what Legge, Feng-English and Mitchell opted for thus signaling the absence of the corresponding English lexical entry for the concept and the essential untranslatability of the Chinese word. Waley and Le Guin have both chosen to render *Tao* as ‘the way’ (spelled with either a capital or a small-case ‘w’), which in Waley’s case might reflect the sinologist’s conviction that he should “reproduce what the original says with detailed accuracy” (Waley 1958: 14), while in the case of Le Guin, the writer’s intention to provide a version with a timeless, universal rather than culture-specific appeal.

8. Major points of divergence

8.1. Legge (1886)

Examining the structural patterns employed by the five translators we will find that Legge’s version is most diverse, containing both paratactic and hypotactic constructions, including numerous thematic frontings, such as “Always without desire we must be found”, or “Much speech to swift exhaustion lead we see”. There is a rhetorical question in Chapter 5 and a pseudo-cleft sentence concluding Chapter 1: “Where the Mystery is the deepest is the gate of all that is subtle and won-

derful". Moreover, while others ignore the fact that fragments of the book actually rhyme, Legge's is the only version that does contain rhymes, crude though they may be. For instance, in verse 3 of Chapter 1, we have

3. Always without desire we must be found,
If its deep mystery we would sound;

Lexical items of low frequency of occurrence such as "trodden" in Chapter 1 or "benevolent" and "swift" as well as the archaic-sounding contracted form "'Tis" in Chapter 5 reinforce the impression that the piece is indeed very old. Nevertheless, the diversity of structures and the vocabulary chosen seem to hinder the perusal of the text as do the numerous parenthetical notes Legge's version is cluttered with.

Though *Tao Te Ching* started to be regarded as a sacred text many centuries after it was written, certain stylistic features of Legge's version as well as the choice of lexis trigger communicative effects indicating religious associations. In Chapter 1 Legge refers to the *Tao* as "the Originator", the agentive form and the capital letter used suggestive of the personal God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a concept alien to Chinese thought. Verse numbering, absent in the original version and reminiscent of a similar numbering of the verses in the *Bible*, give the rendition the appearance of an exhortation, a religious tract or treatise.

8.2. Waley (1934)

In contrast, Waley's work is a specialist publication. This is evident when we look at his translation of Chapter 5: the text is heavily annotated with footnotes explaining the meanings of individual words, providing references to other ancient texts and alternative interpretations of Chinese characters. The copious introduction, in fact longer than the translation proper, offers a historical perspective on the book and explains that Waley views *Tao Te Ching* as a polemical work, taking a stance on the numerous philosophical, ethical and political controversies of the times and written in opposition to other doctrines in ancient China.

Religious associations are less obvious in Waley, however the expedient of spelling "Nameless" and "Unvarying Way" with capital letters evokes the image of the *Tao* as some sort of divine force. The great care Waley took to make the translation as literal as possible renders the English somewhat clumsy and despite all the footnotes and comments some important expressions are left unexplained. For instance, the reader is at a loss as to how the phrase "Secret Essences" should be understood.

8.3. Mitchell (1988)

It is Mitchell's version that, in relevance-theoretic terms, exhibits the lowest degree of interpretive resemblance to the original. This is perhaps to be expected in a interpolation fashioned out of various translations. Compared with the other versions, the text is full of over-interpretations. While others have taken pains to preserve the cryptic quality of Lao Tzu's work, Mitchell tends to resolve the indeterminacies thus reducing the sets of assumptions triggered and the number of poetic effects resulting from them. In the opening lines Mitchell literally spells the mystery out for the reader: the distinction between the name *tao*, which is only a label and the *Tao*, i.e. unfathomable reality the label stands for, is highlighted by the use of small and capital letters. Where other versions of Chapter 1 offer questions Mitchell promises answers. For instance, while other translations indicate that the *Tao* is a doorway to "all mysteries" of the universe, Mitchell's version, actually promises "all understanding"! More examples of Mitchell's propensity to say more or something different than the original can be found in Chapter 5, which contains the enigmatic passage likening the world and people to sacrificial dogs made of straw.

Heaven and Earth are impartial;
They see the ten thousand things as straw dogs.
The wise are impartial;
They see the people as straw dogs.

[trans. Feng—English]

The idea that the wise, (Chinese: *shêng jên*, more commonly translated as 'the sage') impartially regard people as straw dogs is disturbing since it is uncertain whether they treat everyone equally because the apparent differences between people are illusory or whether they ruthlessly consider individual people to be imitation objects being used in some kind of cosmic ritual. Gutt argues that deliberate indirectness or vagueness is part of the meaning to be conveyed, intended either as information given 'between the lines' or intended to give leeway to the readers' imagination (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986: 235). In Mitchell's version the vagueness is gone and gone, too, is the disturbing puzzle with the implications it might induce. Instead, the poet rewrites the text and introduces concepts that do not exist in the original, concepts borrowed from the Western tradition: "good" and "evil", "saints" and "sinners". The word "Master" – Mitchell's rendition of 'the sage' - is yet another instance of over-representation since the ency-

clopedic entries for this lexical item include someone with the power to control others, a person preeminent in a discipline, or an esteemed religious leader, in other words, someone very remote who had achieved levels of perfection unattainable to ordinary people. By contrast, Le Guin's "wise soul" can evoke the image of a compassionate and accessible person, while the phrase "the wise", employed by Feng-English signals someone showing good judgment rather than arcane knowledge or exceptional talent.

8.4. Le Guin (1997)

While unquestionably poetic, Le Guin's rendition is most down-to-earth. Devoid of archaic words and convoluted structures, it consistently uses everyday language including contracted forms. The mystical- or religious-sounding adjective "eternal" is replaced by a mundane word "real", and we will not find the noun "manifestations" or "outcomes" with their potentially philosophical encyclopedic entries. As a result, we no longer feel that the text in front of our eyes was first put down in writing over two millennia ago or that it might have once inspired a new religion.

Le Guin's style is economical: the idea which Waley conveys via a verbose clause "These two things issued from the same mould" is expressed here by a succinct pair of noun phrases: "Two things, one origin". Sparing of words and with fragments removed, the text frequently under-represents meanings, though the liberties Le Guin took make it more coherent and easier to understand.

8.5. Feng—English (1972)

Feng—English's version seems to hang between the two extremes. Like the older two versions it is firmly grounded in the Chinese version and retains the original metaphors and imagery: the word *tao* is left in Chinese, which emphasizes its untranslatability, though by 1970s its alienness must have diminished. The retrieval of expressions like "straw dogs" or "ten thousand things", requires some processing effort but the reader is awarded by the feeling of being allowed to get a glimpse of another culture with its unique way of thinking.

In contrast to Legge's or Waley's wordiness, Feng—English favour concise vocabulary and compact structures, which makes their rendition more like the newer versions. While easier to process, fewer words indicate fewer cognitive effects but, unlike Le Guin, Feng—English never resort to deleting portions of the text. What is more, the terse phrasing triggers additional effects such as giving the reader a chance to experience the laconic style in which *Tao Te Ching* was appar-

ently written. Numerous parallelisms – “the nameless/the named” or “Ever desireless/Ever desiring” - create rhythm and give the rendition a poetic ‘feel’, the result being a piece that is both accurate and beautiful, erudite without being dry and detached. Though Lao Tzu himself declared “True words are not beautiful/ Beautiful words are not true” (Chapter 81, trans. Feng—English), the two authors seem to have gone quite a long way towards making the best of these two worlds.

9. Conclusions

The linguistic and stylistic choices made by the authors of the five renditions suggest a clear divide between the oldest two and the latest two translations, with Feng—English’s version somewhat in the middle. They also point to the changed relevance of the text resulting from the change in the attitudes and assumptions of the readership. Simplistically, the two kinds of audiences might be referred to as gentlemen scholars and New Age readers. Legge, whose language has been described by Le Guin as “so obscure as to make [the reader] feel the book must be beyond Western comprehension” (Le Guin 1990: 108), tried to give the well-educated English-speaking reader of his day a foretaste of what the Book of the Way meant to the 19th century inhabitant of the Far East Asia. Waley, the most distinguished sinologist of the 20th century, inevitably produced a scholarly translation, based on a thorough philological, historical and philosophical research. While there is no shortage of academic translations today (cf. LaFargue 1992, Henricks 1989, 2000), highly personal renditions, such as Mitchell’s or Le Guin’s would have been unlikely to appear a few decades ago when *Tao Te Ching* was primarily seen as a product of a very specific culture, rather than a piece with a personal or universal appeal. Even now they seem controversial and have received a fair share of both praise and criticism. Whether the criticism is justified or not, the fact remains that after twenty-five hundred years one of the most intriguing books of the world continues to be relevant to various audiences. And doubtless it will be translated and rewritten many more times.

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Appendix I:

The romanization of Chinese characters in this paper follows the so-called Wade-Giles system. The pinyin version of Chinese words quoted in the text is provided here for the sake of the readers more familiar with that system of romanization:

(Wade Giles) – (pinyin)
 Tao Te Ching – Dao De Jing
 Lao Tzu – Laozi
 Wang Pi – Wang Bi
 Ma Wang Tui – Ma Wang Dui
 wan wu – wan wu
 shêng jên – sheng ren

Appendix II:

The Chinese version of the text presented in this appendix comes from John C. H. Wu's translation of *Tao Te Ching* made available on the internet at: <http://www.cathoderaymission.freemove.co.uk/tao/>

Chapter 1

道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。天地之始，有，名萬物之母。故常無欲以觀其妙，常有欲以觀其微。此兩者同出而異名，同謂之玄。玄之又玄，衆妙之門。

ONE

Feng-English, 1972

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
 The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
 The nameless is the beginning of heaven and Earth.
 The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.
 Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
 Ever desiring, one sees the manifestations.
 These two spring from the same source but differ in name; this appears as darkness.
 Darkness within darkness.
 The gate to all mystery.

Ch. 1*John Legge, 1886*

1. The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.

2. (Conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things.

3. Always without desire we must be found, If its deep mystery we would sound; But if desire always within us be, Its outer fringe is all that we shall see.

4. Under these two aspects, it is really the same; but as development takes place, it receives the different names. Together we call them the Mystery. Where the Mystery is the deepest is the gate of all that is subtle and wonderful.

CHAPTER I*Arthur Waley, 1934*

The Way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way;
The names that can be named are nor unvarying names.
It was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang;
The named is but the mother that rears the ten thousand creatures, each after its kind.
Truly. 'Only he that rids himself forever of desire can see the Secret Essences';
He that has never rid himself of desire can see only the Outcomes.
These two things issued from the same mould, but nevertheless are different in name.
This 'same mould' we can but call the Mystery, Or rather the 'Darker than any Mystery',
The Doorway whence issued all Secret Essences.

1*Steven Mitchell, 1988*

The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.
Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations arise from the same source.
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.
The gateway to all understanding.

1: Taoing*Ursula Le Guin, 1997*

The way you can go isn't the real way.
The name you can say isn't the real name.

Heaven and earth begin in the unnamed:
name's the mother of the ten thousand things.

So the unwanted soul sees what's hidden,
and the ever-wanting soul sees only what it wants.

Two things, one origin,
but different in name,
whose identity is a mystery.
Mystery of all mysteries!
The door to the hidden.

Chapter 5

五章

天地不仁，以萬物爲芻狗。聖人不仁，以百姓爲芻狗。天
 地之間，其猶橐籥乎？虛而不屈，動而愈出。多言數窮，不
 如守中。

Five *Feng-English, 1972*

Heaven and Earth are impartial;
 They see the ten thousand things as straw dogs.
 The wise are impartial;
 They see the people as straw dogs.

The space between heaven and Earth is like a
 bellows.

The shape changes but not the form;
 The more it moves, the more it yields.
 More words count less.
 Hold fast to the center.

5. *John Legge, 1886*

1. Heaven and earth do not act from (the impulse of) any wish to be benevolent; they deal with all things as the dogs of grass are dealt with. The sages do not act from (any wish to be) benevolent; they deal with the people as the dogs of grass are dealt with.

2. May not the space between heaven and earth be compared to a bellows? 'Tis emptied, yet it loses not its power; 'Tis moved again, and sends forth air the more. Much speech to swift exhaustion lead we see; Your inner being guard, and keep it free.

5 *Steven Mitchell, 1988*

The Tao doesn't take sides;
 it gives birth to both good and evil.

The Master doesn't take sides;
 she welcomes both saints and sinners.

The Tao is like a bellows:
 it is empty yet infinitely capable.
 The more you use it, the more it produces;
 the more you talk of it, the less you understand.

Hold on to the center.

CHAPTER V

Arthur Waley, 1934

Heaven and Earth are ruthless;
 To them the Ten Thousand Things are but as
 straw dogs.
 The Sage too is ruthless;
 To him the people are but as straw dogs.
 Yet¹ Heaven and Earth and all that lies between
 Is like a bellows
 In that it is empty, but gives a supply that never
 fails.
 Work it, and more comes out.
 Whereas the force of words² is soon spent.
 Far better is it to keep what is in the heart.³

5: Useful emptiness *Ursula Le Guin, 1997*

Heaven and earth aren't humane.
 To them the ten thousand things
 are straw dogs.

Wise souls aren't humane.
 To them the hundred families
 are straw dogs.

Heaven and earth
 act as bellows:

Empty yet structured,
 it moves, inexhaustibly giving.

¹ Though ruthless nature is perpetually bounteous

² Laws and proclamations.

³ For *chung* as 'what is within the heart', see *Tso Chuan*, Yin Kung 3rd year and *Kuan Tzu*, 37, beginning. The comparison of Heaven and Earth to a bellows is also found in *Kuan Kuan Tzu* (P'ien 11, beginning).