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On thick translation in linguistic documentation

Anthony C. Woodbury

1. Introduction

In an important recent paper on translation in linguistic documentation, Nick Evans and Hans-Jürgen Sasse (2006:11) enumerate some of “the sources on which a translation can be based”. They include:

- “fragments of rendition, before and afterwards...,”
- the accumulated understanding, by the investigator, of how the language works,
- information from gesture,
- relevant information from tellings of the same story by others;
- other contextual information that was not recorded but is relevant to the translation, and
- subsequent interpretive remarks made after the story.”

They emphasise the ongoing, contingent, interpretive, hermeneutical quality of the documentation of meaning.

My goal in this paper is to exemplify and elaborate their point on the basis of my own experience grappling with meaning in field-recorded text, and on the basis of that, to propose recommendations for documenting textual meaning in such a way as to offer maximum transparency to those who may interpret the records we make in a context highly different from that in which we ourselves work: the ‘philologist 500 years from now’. I will label this ‘thick translation’. My basic is that to do this best, the documentary record must show not one ‘finished’ translation, but as many tacks into the translation of an original language entity as can be documented, each representing a certain theory of inter-language correspondence.

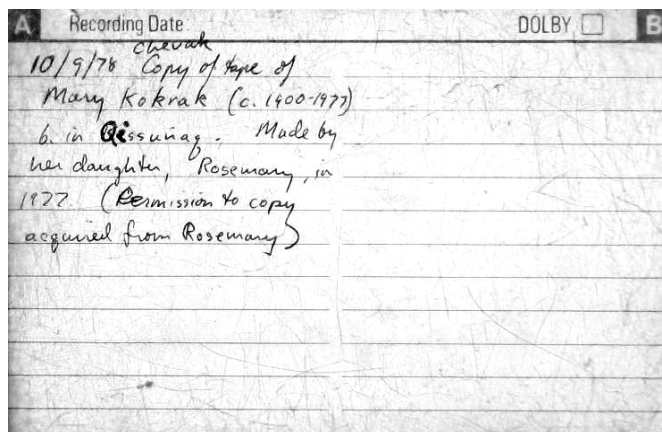
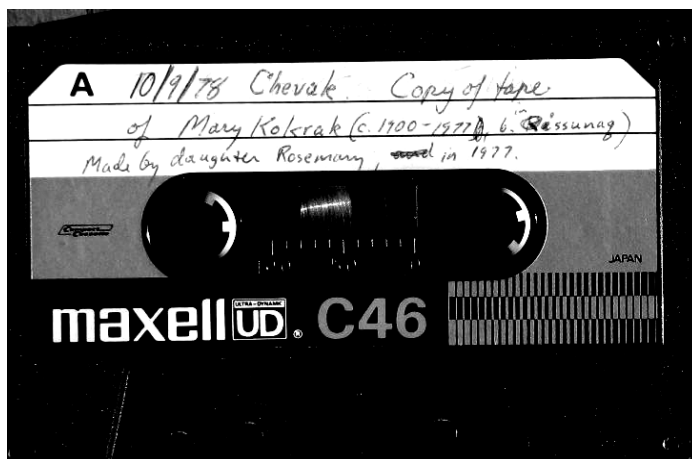
2. Rosemary Sylvester’s tape

I began doing linguistic field work in October, 1978 in the village of Chevak, on the Bering Seacoast of south-western Alaska. My goal was to document and describe a little-studied variety of Central Alaskan Yupik spoken there

(where it is called Cup'ik) and in nearby Hooper Bay. I wanted to do this by making (or otherwise obtaining) recordings of naturalistic texts, including stories and everyday interaction, and then transcribing, translating, and analyzing them together with interested Cup'ik speakers.

Not long after I arrived on what was to be a 10-week first trip, Rosemary Sylvester (the younger sister of Harold Chanirak, with whom I was staying), let me copy a 30 minute tape she had recorded the year before of their late mother, Mary Kokrak, telling a story. Because this is a story about documentation — which has a tangible, physical aspect to it — a picture of the copy I made is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *My copy of Rosemary Sylvester's Tape.*



By the time I received the tape, I had begun working with Leo and Mary Moses on the transcription, translation, and analysis of the recordings I was obtaining. It was the start of a long collaboration. Figure 2 shows us together at their house in Chevak around that time.

Figure 2: *Mary Moses, Tony Woodbury, and Leo Moses, February, 1980.*



In the following sections, I would like to present the history of our work with Rosemary Sylvester's tape, especially as it led to a series of translations and other interpretive artefacts.

2.1 Leo Moses' UN-style real-time free translation

Our first translation artefact was a recorded UN-style real-time free translation by Leo Moses.

We worked with two tape recorders. One was for playing back the tape, the other for recording our work sessions. As we played the tape through on the play-back tape recorder, Leo produced a translation in real time which we

captured on the session tape. In case it isn't obvious, let me point out that not everyone can produce a seamless translation in real time: it takes practice, and even with practice, some people are better at it than others. In Leo's case, that practice went back to his childhood, when he learned to translate from English to Cup'ik and Cup'ik to English for travelling Jesuit priests; and throughout his adult life, he has been a much sought-after translator for public events.

Here is an excerpt from a transcription I made of his UN-style translation ('..' and '...' mark short and longer hesitation pauses):

(1) And one summer so, just when it was starting to get cold, in the summertime, .. at the approach of the winter, that sister of theirs she was the only one that was walking around, because the brothers were all confined, to the qaygiq [men's house]. When she went out, she could see..the mouth of a little river, leading inward,..and the mountains could be seen..she saw a person, traveling alongside of the mountain. When she was out, early in the morning, and the brothers of hers, were not even moving any... when she went out,...the kayak, ..the old kayak! Both ends were turned up... The OLD kayak!.. coming, approaching their..little village. An OLD man was in that old kayak... and each time she pulls that paddle, the kayak would...practically turn around. That's how poorly the kayak was made... and just before they..he approached them, when he was out, a little further away from the bank, they called out, how are you? How you been doing?

2.2 Transcription/translation sessions

Next, we went over the tape bit by bit, first to transcribe each word, and then to decide on word-level and, occasionally, phrase-level translations. These I recorded in a string-bound notebook. Figure 3 shows where a part of the passage translated above is treated:

Figure 3: Notebook page.



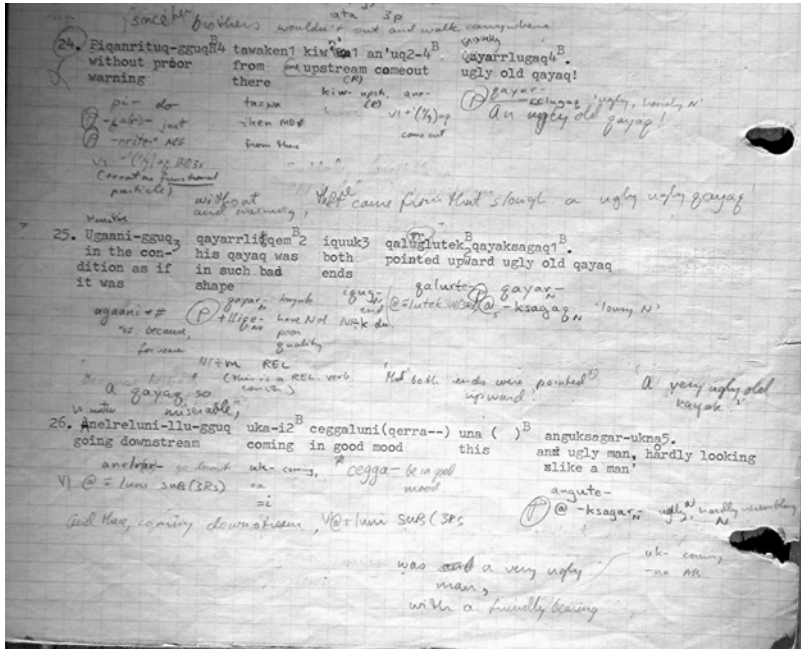
As can be seen, the notebook entries are dated November 20, 1978 and consist of transcription, translation, and lexical notes in pen; plus some pencil inscriptions — made by me much later — notating some features of prosody, and numbering what I took to be sentence units.

2.3 Analysis and morphological calquing

Back home, I retyped (using a typewriter!) the notebook entries, leaving space beneath each line for morphological analysis. Since most Cup'ik words are morphologically complex, and since the meanings of whole words are productively composed of the meanings of the component bases, derivational suffixes, and inflectional endings, morphological analysis becomes an exercise in calquing — for each formative identified, there is a putative meaning; and the meanings of all the formatives in the word ought to add up to the meaning of the whole word, given a proper understanding of the principle of Cup'ik semantic composition. I will discuss this point concretely below. For now, Figure 4 shows a part of the same passage treated earlier. The morphological analyses are added in pencil, along with various attempts at

semantic reformulation. The morphological identifications were partly emergent from the text analysis; and partly based on a considerable body of lexical information which was at that time already available about Cup'ik and, especially, Central Alaskan Yupik more generally (see Jacobson 1984 for a published dictionary.)

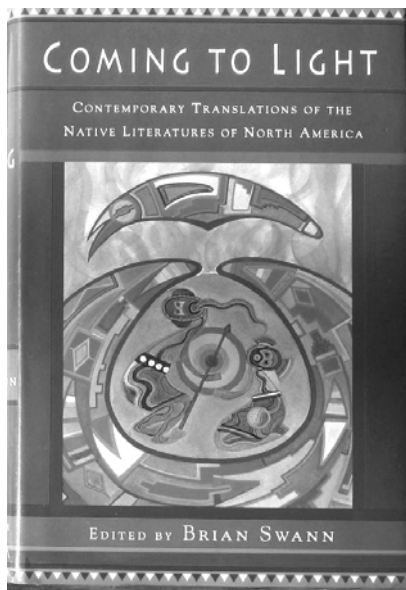
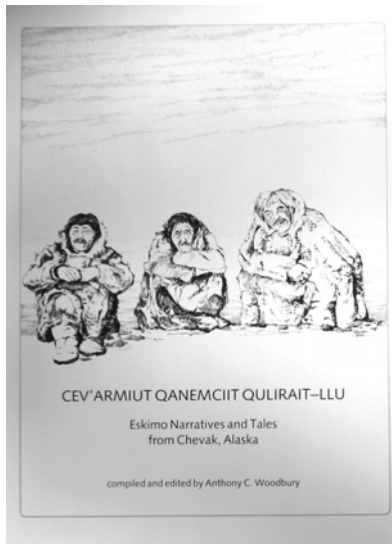
Figure 4: Analysis and morphological calquing.



2.4 Free literary translations

In 1984, the Alaska Native Language Center published our transcriptions and translations of Mary Kokrak's story from Rosemary Sylvester's tape, and several others (Woodbury 1984). The translation style represented a stage of interpretation that was based on Leo's UN style translation, the word translations, the morphological calques, and on further discussion among ourselves. In 1994, at the invitation of Brian Swann, we published a retranslation of Mary Kokrak's story, along with a literary and comparative analysis (Woodbury and Moses 1994). These are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: *Publications containing literary free translations of the story.*



2.5 Analysis matrix

Let us now turn to the interpretive process itself. We can see some of its workings by comparing our resources for portions of the passage translated in (1).

2.5.1 Comparing sources and interpretations

Consider first Figure 6:

Figure 6: *Beginning of the passage*

Leo Moses's Real Time Translation: And one summer so, just when it was starting to get cold, in the summertime, ... approach of winter, that sister of theirs she was the only one that was walking around, cause the brothers were all confined, to the qaygiq [men's house].

Text	Leo Moses' word gloss	Morphosyntactic parse	Parse rendition
Piqerluni	so, at one time	do-just-APO.3Rs	S/he, at one time (doing)
ʔtawa=ll'	then	there.R=and	and so
kiagumainanrani	in one summer day	be.summer-be.in.state.of-C20.3s	while it was done being summer
qakemna	the weather	outside.O-ABS	(the) outside, from perspective of inside
nenglengqercilluku	when it got cold	cold-have-let-APO.3s	letting it (=weather) get cold
cilla,	weather	weather/cosmos-ABS	weather
nengelmeng	some cold	cold-MDs	with cold
waten	like this	here.R-EQ	like this, in a restricted location
uksuryungqercilluku.	at the approach of winter	winter-iness-have-let-APO.3s	letting it have winteriness
Al'qaat	their sister	older.sister-AB.3p.s	their older sister
ʔimn'	that one	that.O-ABS	that one, aforementioned
Al'qaat=gguq	their sister	older.sister-AB.3p.s=QUOT	their older sister, iis
tawaam	only	but (only)	but (only)
un(a)	one		this, in restricted location
ʔpekintgunaurtuq;	was the only one walking around	walk-er-be-customarily-IND.3s	s/he would be the one walking (around)
Anluni.	she went out	go.out-IND.3s	s/he went out

Woodbury/Moses 1984 Translation: Now one day at the end of summer, the weather was getting cold and winter was approaching. Their sister was the only one who was up and about, and so she went outside.

Woodbury/Moses 1994 Translation: And then one day as summer was ending and outside the cold was coming, the cold of winter was coming, their sister alone was up and about; So she went out.

Figure 6 shows Leo Moses' real-time translation from (1). Below that are four columns. The first shows the text transcript, in standard orthography, as in Figure 4, not the phonemic/phonetic orthography of the notebook in Figure 3. The second column shows Leo Moses' word glosses as recorded in the notebook shown in Figure 3. The third column shows the morphological parses from the analysis sheets shown in Figure 4. These consist of short-hand glosses for each formative, separated by hyphens. The formatives themselves are not shown. Because every Cup'ik word begins with a base, the first element of each parse is the gloss for the base. The various abbreviations represent inflectional categories whose details will not concern us; but, for

example, ‘APO.3Rs’ means appositional mood, third person reflexive singular subject; ‘there.R’ means the so-called restrictive form of the the demonstrative adverb base meaning ‘there’; ‘=and’ means an enclitic (joined by ‘=’) ‘and’; and so on. For more detail on this system, see Woodbury (2003) and Jacobson (1995). Finally, the fourth column shows the ‘parse rendition,’ that is, a formulation or calculation of the compositional meaning of the constituent formatives. Thus in the third word, for example, the base means ‘to be summer’; the aspectual suffix meaning ‘to be in a state of’ renders a complex base meaning ‘to be in a state of having been summer,’ or ‘to be done being summer’; and with the ‘contemporative 2’ mood — ‘while’ — with 3rd person singular subject (C20.3s), we get ‘while it was done being summer’.

Finally, at the bottom of Figure 6 are the two literary translations for the passage mentioned in Sec. 2.4.

At this point, I will only make a few gross, qualitative observations:

- the real-time translation has a coherent flow but involves quite a lot of interpolation, for example, it spells out that the brothers of the sister remained in their men’s house, whereas this is only implied in the passage itself;
- many details that are evident in the parse and parse rendition are absent in the word glosses and the free translations: for example, the parse rendition ‘outside from the perspective of inside’ come out as ‘the weather’; the lexical reference to an ‘older sister’ comes out as ‘sister’; and the indication that the sister was ‘aforementioned’ is missing in the free translation
- the word glosses by themselves are choppy, lacking many of the clues for syntactic composition that are provided by the inflectional designations shown in the parses
- comparing the free translations, it is clear that in our 1994 effort especially, we sought to get closer to the lexical parsimony of the original, e.g., ‘as summer was ending’ instead of ‘at the end of summer’; an anacoluthon ‘So she went out’ instead of conjoined ‘...and so she went out’.

2.5.2 Inconsistency

Sometimes, there is inconsistency. Consider for example the underlined portions taken from a part of our passage a few moments later:

Figure 7: *An inconsistency.*

Leo Moses' Real Time Translation: leading inward...and the mountains could be seen...
she saw a person, traveling alongside of the mountain.

Text	Leo Moses' word gloss	Morphosyntactic parse	Parse rendition
Awatmun	going away from = southward	going/over.there.E-TM1	to over there, extended location
Tak'legmeng	its length	length-having-3Rp	they (mountains) having length
ingriineng	mountain	mountain-MDp.3s	from its mountains
agaa=i,	across there	across.E=voilà	voilà! across there, extended location
ingrit	mountains	mountain-ABp	mountains
^agkut	those across there	across.E-ABp	those across there, extended location
<u>cinirrluki</u>	<u>going alongside (the mountains)</u>	<u>tracing edge-APO.3p</u>	<u>tracing the edge of them (mountains)</u>
natetmun	which way	some-TM1	toward some part
awatmun.	leading going away from	going/over.there.E-TM1	toward over there, extended location
Ingringqerrun(i)	having mountains	mountain-have-APO.3Rs	it had mountains
kelulirneq;	the backside of the river (from where they lived)	behind/away.from.river-area-ABs	the area back away from the river
kuigaaraat	slough	slough-ABs.3p	their slough
^taman(a).	that	that.E-ABs	that one, extended (stretched out)

Woodbury/Moses 1984 Translation: It followed a ridge of mountains just beyond it, flowing in front of the mountain ridge. The mountains and the slough were both behind the camp.

Woodbury/Moses 1994 Translation: It followed the length of the mountains beyond, flowing in front of the mountains there. It had mountains behind it; the slough.

Here the real-time translation specifies that a person who is travelling alongside the mountains. The glosses and parses, however, show no mention of a person. The implicit subject of 'going alongside; tracing the edge' is instead the slough set up as subject and topic in the immediately preceding sentence; whereas the person — a man — is explicitly introduced in the next episode. Nevertheless, the early mention of the 'person' offers an explanation for the rather elaborate geographical description: means that someone approaching by kayak could be observed from a long way away.

2.5.3 Fieldnote philology: Help from the session tape

Another kind of inconsistency can be observed in Figure 8:

Figure 8: *A lexical inconsistency.*

Leo Moses' Real Time Translation and each time she pulls that paddle, the kayak would...practically turn around. That's how poorly the kayak was made...

Text	Leo Moses' word gloss	Morphosyntactic parse	Parse rendition
Anguarutni	his paddle	paddle-ABs.3Rs	his-own paddle
pakigaqaku	when he paddles	stroke-habitual-CQO.3s.3s	when he would stroke it
<u>aglurtem</u>	<u>(the boat) pitches</u>	<u>yaw(-ing)-RLs</u>	<u>of yawing</u>
ugaan(i)	in the way it was shaped	such.is.extent-LCs.3s	such is the extent of it
^man'(a)	this	this.E-ABs	this one here, extended
qayaksagaa;	his ugly kayak	kayak-ugly-ABs.3s	his ugly kayak
Qayarrliqem	his kayak was so bad	kayak-have(ing).poor-RLs	of having a poor kayak
ugaani!	in its shape	such.is.extent-LCs.3s	such is the extent of it

Woodbury/Moses 1984 Translation: At each stroke of his paddle, his old kayak yawed; that is how miserable it was!

Woodbury/Moses 1994 Translation: With each stroke of his paddle, <inaudible> it yawed so badly, his ugly little kayak; So shabby a kayak it was!

According to the word gloss, *aglurtem* indicates that the kayak was pitching (i.e., the bow moved up and down, as it would when heading into the waves); whereas both the real-time translation and the parse indicates yawing, i.e., veering back and forth left and right. A look at Jacobson (1984:47) shows no verb *aglurte-*, only a noun *agluq* meaning 'ridgepole; center beam of a structure,' which allows an etymology 'do (+te-) with respect to *aglur-* (stem form of *agluq*) but gets us no closer to solving 'yaw' than to 'pitch' as a possible meaning. It thus wasn't clear what made me decide to go with 'yaw' in the parses or the translation; or indeed where 'pitches' came from.

I then turned to the tape of the session in which I had written ‘pitches’. Here is a transcript:

- (2) Tony: Ang — Aglurtem...
 Leo: Ah, the kayak was, heh, you got another pen? The kayak was..shaped..in this form....
 Tony: Oh yeah.. [Responding to gesture?]
 Leo: It was hardly riding...It was unbalanced...So each time he goes like this..
 Tony: Uh huh..
 Leo: It makes an almost complete eh... sixty degree turn.
 Tony: OK...Oh! See because you have three words in-- in English for that Let’s say you have a boat... [launches into discussion of *pitching*, *yawing*, and *rolling*]

After my enthusiastic lemma — Leo was eager to learn obscure words in English and I was more than eager to take on the role of language teacher for a change — we decided, rather carelessly, on ‘pitch,’ even though the explanation in (2) clearly entails ‘yaw.’ I must have realised this when preparing my analysis and culling lexicon from it; however — carelessly again — I never notated my evidence that ‘pitches’ was, in fact, an error.

2.6 Poetics

We have considered, only very briefly, the relationship among different translation artefacts. Their nature and uses can be connected in part to the strategies they employ: real-time interpretation, word by word glossing, and morphological analysis and deduction. In our work, another key strategy was to study and analyze the prosody and poetics of the original, and to try to render it, as well as we could, in our translations.

2.6.1 Parallelism

Consider the parallelism evident in the final part of our passage. In Figure 9, this parallelism is rendered, first of all, by our interpretive transcriptional practices (following Tedlock 1983 and others): each pause in the oral delivery is marked by a line break; each ‘cascade’ of declining pitch peaks and successively lower pre-pausal lows is marked as a stanza-grouping; and macro-prosodic groupings or scene shifts are rendered with a large initial capital letter. In terms of content, the three stanza groupings in Figure 9 are

parallel: each contains two medial pauses; and in its content, each ends with a low, raspy exclamation about the sorry state of the little man and his kayak.

Figure 9: *Rendering parallelism (Small caps indicate a harsh, raspy voice quality in a lower pitch register). Translation from Woodbury and Moses 1994, along with the unpublished transcription on which it was based.*

Piqanrituq=gguq, tawaken kiugn(a) an'uq QAYARRLUGAQ.	Not long after, there came from upstream A SHABBY OLD KAYAK.
Ugaani=gguq qayarliqem, iquuk qalurlutek; QAYAKSAGAQ.	A kayak so shabby that both ends pointed up; AN UGLY LITTLE KAYAK.
Anelreluni=llu=ggur uka=i, ceggaluni una, ANGUKSAGAR UKNA.	And floating downstream in it, bright and alert, WAS AN UGLY LITTLE MAN.

Our translation sought to diagram the prosody and content-based parallelism of the original by a parallel parallelism in English. It yielded a translation closer to the original. On the other hand, it rendered three English words (*shabby/ugly old/little kayak/man*) in place of one word of Cup'ik (*qayarrlugaq, qayaksagaq, anguksaga[q]*), and presumed an equivalency between the English adjectives and the Cup'ik suffixes.

2.6.2 Prosody, enjambment, and voice quality

Likewise, we rendered situations where prosody, voice quality, and content worked across purposes. In Figure 10, as in Figure 9, each pause is rendered by a line break, and modulations of voice quality are carried by the choice of type face. This is done both in rendering the original, and in framing a parallel translation. In this case, however, pauses don't automatically mark the ends of major syntactic and content units: thus, in the second line we find an enjambment, where a normal-voice-quality sentence is followed, with no pause, by a new sentence in a different voice quality. By a kind of iconic ostention, the lack of pause creates urgency, while the pause after 'but down there a ways out' creates dramatic tension.

Figure 10: *Rendering prosody, enjambment, and voice quality; (Small caps indicate a harsh, raspy voice quality in a lower pitch register; italics indicate a mild voice quality in a higher register).*

Tawa=llu=gguq apurpegnaku=ll(u).	Well he didn't land.
Apurpegnak(u). KANA=I KETEQVANI,	He didn't land. BUT DOWN THERE A WAYS OUT,
keteqvaareni:	a little ways out he went:
“ <i>Waqaurluq?</i> ”	“ <i>Why how are you?</i> ”
<i>Qaill' taw' piaqtessi?'</i>	<i>Are you all right?'</i>

Does this (and the rendering of content parallelism in Figure 9) make for better translation? It may or may not. But it uses parallelism, prosody to explore a little more of the semantic and literary territory that the original creates.

2.8 Other literary analysis

In a paper written at the same time as our 1994 translation, I examined the use of demonstratives in the story by Mary Kokrak. Cup'ik has about 28 demonstratives that render information along a number of different axes. One of these is a distinction between an upstream vs. a downstream direction. I wrote (Woodbury 1993):

“..Up to [a certain point in the story], the ‘upstream’ forms are effectively indexed [through repetition] to the ominous village [from which the shabby man comes] ... while the ‘downstream’ forms are indexed to the little family’s village, in its primordial innocence. That is, by an effect something like psychological priming, the telling of the story to this point creates some highly specific but temporary referential and emotive associations for the forms, well beyond their generic meanings or use conventions.”

Likewise, we engaged in some literary analysis in an article accompanying our translation of a different kind, where we interpret the meanings of certain behaviors described in the story in the context of a wider literary tradition (Woodbury and Moses 1994:19):

“When their youngest [brother] is lost, they are helped by a disheveled man and his grandmother who live in the large village to which the boy has been taken. These two evoke an important family of [myths], known from Alaska to Greenland, about an orphan who is abused by all in his community but an old

grandparent. The orphan secretly acquires supernatural powers while carefully retaining his reserve and humility... In this story, the Grandson bears all these qualities. Although not overtly abused, he is a marginal man, with poor clothes and equipment.. [H]e may have acquired [some of his grandmother's supernatural powers: when he keeps his kayak back from shore ... he is acting as one who wishes to avoid the potentially dangerous consequences that actual physical contact between the real and spirit worlds might invite.”

I present these not to belabour the analysis of this particular text, but simply to indicate the open-endedness of the interpretive processes which translation sets in motion.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, we may say that ‘thick translation’ involves at least the following curatable artefacts:

- Audio recordings of real-time oral free translations
- Word-by-word and sentence by sentence translations by an original-language speaker (written by the speaker or represented in field notes or on tape)
- Linguists’ morphosyntactic parses, with invariant glosses for minimal elements
- Linguists’ compositional renditions of parses
- Drafts of (ever-more) refined literary translations by source-language speaker, target-language speaker, or a collaborations of both
- Formal poetic analyses of the original that were factored into translations
- Alternative versions of the same text
- Literary exegeses, discussions, footnotes, hypertext (written, or in notes or tapes of interactions leading to any of the above)

It follows, then, that all of them should be made, handled, and used with care.

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