

How Do We Have Confidence In Dealing With Texts Written In Languages To Which We Are Not Native?

Post by "Cassius" of January 1, 2025 at 3:02 PM

Sometimes people are tempted to deal with conflicting translations of text by throwing up their hands and concluding that no certainty is possible. While that is definitely the right conclusion in some cases (such as texts which are clearly fragmentary or corrupted) it's not at all always true. Many times there are many texts making a similar point in a the different language, and the general point from many statements becomes so clear that you can be very confident what is being said even when a particular text is somewhat corrupted. At some point also the existence of many translators - especially those who are trained academics who compete against each other for accuracy and fluency - begin to converge on a consensus in which you can have confidence. It's necessary for us to have a reasonable approach on what can be trusted to be true and what cannot. To a large extent this is what "canonics" is all about.

If it were true that we had to be proficient in speaking a language ourselves before we could comment on a text, then no one could ever comment on a language that they did not grow up learning themselves. We're all relying on translators. Even when we take the trouble to learn a language ourselves, we're relying on the compiler's of the dictionaries. The compilers of the dictionaries we use today relied on generations of translators who came before themselves. We're all relying on what is essentially "hearsay" evidence - and that really applies to children learning, as well, because they are learning to use words *as others tell them the words should be used*.

This topic is dealt with in Lucretius and probably other places as well because it is o important. We are always relying to some extent on people more knowledgeable than ourselves.

We therefore need a logical system for approaching language or anything else that we don't already know ourselves. Just like with atoms, which we never see or touch, we have to make logical deductions from what evidence is available to us.

Especially in the case of relying on translations, we have to decide who we trust and who we don't. With translations, it seems to me that the general method is to validate as best we can what we're told by comparing translations against each other and against things we can validate -- perhaps for example against inscriptions where a picture accompanies a word. We never take anything totally on faith, but that means we have to compare translations and observations to see which are consistent and which are not and how everything compares with facts that we can observe ourselves. Ultimately that is as much a test as anything else for what we choose to believe.

I suspect that there's a parallel here with how "code-breakers" unravel encryption - they look for clues in the text and compare the text to experience on frequency of words and the like.

If we can't have some degree of confidence in our conclusions about translations and everything else, then we devolve into radical skeptics.

So I started this thread to discuss whether we can suggest a general approach to deciding what to have confidence in and what not to trust. Obviously the more time we spend trying to learn a language from standard dictionaries, the better off we are likely to be, because we have more points of contact by which we can check a translator's choices against literal text. On the other hand, I gather that it is widely recognized that familiarity with idiomatic terminology means that literal translation can sometimes be laughably off from the real meaning that was intended. Sarcasm and irony and all sorts of literary constructions cause meanings to shift.

Given that we are so heavily reliant on translators and the work of commentators who have come before us, is there any way we can develop a general approach that makes sense and responds to feelings of hopelessness that no conclusions we reach can be reliable?