The nature, place and role of a philosophy of translation in translation studies

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1 Introduction

The objective of the third UEA postgraduate symposium was 'to explore the current relevance of theory to the practice of translation' and to consider, among other things 'which of the current theoretical pronouncements on translation are most relevant to translation practice in today's society'. This applied angle is most welcome, and in this paper I take a step even further back, beyond translation theory, to the theory of meaning to see whether this discipline, in which translation has been a central issue since the middle of the 20th century, might be of some help to us in both our theorising and in our practice. I also want to explore the idea that our practice may have something to feed back to the theory of meaning about the nature of that very phenomenon. However, my overriding aim is to highlight what I see as the nature, place and role of a philosophy of translation in translation studies, because it is far from obvious from the state of the discipline as we tend to depict it today that a philosophy of translation exists, or what its place and roles might be, if it did exist.

For example the much rehearsed map of translation studies developed by Toury (1995: 10) on the basis of Holmes' famous paper (1972/1988), 'The name and nature of translation studies' has no place for a philosophy of translation:

Translation Studies

Pure   Applied

Theoretical   Descriptive

General	Partial	Product Oriented	Process Oriented	Function Oriented	Translator Pedagogy	Translation

Aids Criticism Policy

Medium Restricted	Area Restricted	Rank Restricted	Text-Type Restricted	Time Restricted	Problem Restricted

That may not be so surprising, because philosophies of x do tend to exist outside of x itself – within philosophy, in fact. For example, the philosophy of language exists outside linguistics, within philosophy; the philosophy of mind exists outside of psychology, within philosophy; and the philosophy of science exists outside of science, within philosophy. This is partly because philosophy is the original discipline from which many of the current academic disciplines have sprung, once the understandings that developed within philosophy began to be applied and it became clear that more needed to be done with reference to a certain topic than speculating about its essence, and as technological development made it possible to actually do more. But I want to argue that the case of a philosophy of translation is different, for the following reasons:

1. Philosophers do not in fact conceive of a philosophy of translation as such; for them, the question of translation is just one question, though a very central question, within the philosophy of language.

2. Philosophers are not especially interested in many of the issues that interest translation scholars, so we cannot expect to find in their writings any implications of their work for our discipline. These, we have to draw out ourselves.

3. The philosophical debate about translation has a direct bearing on the most fundamental questions in our discipline.

I therefore want to advocate that we lift the most pertinent aspects of the philosophical debate on translation into our own discipline and add the philosophy of translation to Holmes' map, or to whatever other map or outline that we might like to use to picture our discipline. The philosophy of translation is not identical with translation theory; it is more basic than that, and I would like to see it as a branch of translation studies in its own right, for reasons that I will outline in the following section.

2. Why bother with a philosophy of translation

Translation Studies scholars have made tremendous strides in recent years in describing the outward manifestations of the mental processes involved in translation in the shape of Think Aloud Protocol and TransLogging studies on the one hand (e.g. Börsch 1986, Dragsted 2005, Englund Dimitrova 2005, Fraser 1993, Gerloff 1986, Hansen 2006, Jääskeläinen 1993; 1999; 2007, Jääskeläinen and Tirkkonen-Condit 1991, Jakobsen 1999, 2003, Jensen and Jakobsen 2000, Krings 1986a; 1988, Laukkanen 1993 Lörscher 1986; 1991, Rothe-Neves 2003 Olshtain 1986, Séguinot 1989, Shih 2006, Tirkkonen-Condit 1989; 1992; 1993) and in studies of large collections of translations on the other hand (e.g. Baker 1993, Bernardini and Zanettin 2004, Eskola 2004, Gellerstam 1986, Jakobsen 1986, Laviosa 1996, 1997,1998,

Mauranen and Kujamäki, 2004, Tirkkonen-Condit 2004) and others). As a result, we know much about what happens in translators' consciousness as they translate, we know what kinds of text they produce and we know something of the connections between these two manifestations of translation. It may not be immediately obvious why we would need any other kinds of knowledge of translation; it is not unreasonable to assume that translation is more likely to be illuminated by these insights into translators' mental activity than by speculation about translation in the minds of philosophers.

However. I want to suggest two reasons why it is important to have a philosophy of translation. One is that it is reassuring to have a basic understanding of what translation is that underlies our various approaches to it and holds together our various theories of it and of its constituent concepts and descriptive notions. The other is that we need a philosophy of translation if we are to provide satisfactory answers to some of the challenges the discipline faces both from outside of itself and from within itself.

3. Challenges from the inside

3.i Challenging the practice

The possibility of translation has regularly been questioned from within translation studies itself, usually with reference to partial untranslatability and often with reference to the argument that literary translation is impossible; but it is not uncommon to see the translation of certain every-day concepts and notions described as untranslatable too, usually on grounds of cultural differences.

Consider Jakobson (1959: 238), who declares that

In poetry, verbal equations become a constructive principle of the text. Syntactic and morphological categories, roots, and affixes, phonemes and their components (distinctive features) – in short, any constituents of the verbal code – are confronted, juxtaposed, brought into contiguous relation according to the principle of similarity and contrast and carry their own semantic relationship. The pun, or to use a more erudite, and perhaps more precise term – paronomasia, reigns over poetic art, and whether its rule is absolute or limited, poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g. from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting.

Here, it seems to be assumed that a translation must be an equivalent text, in a sense of equivalence not specified, but obviously excluding 'interlingual transposition' from one language into another.

A less sophisticated statement of a similar position is to be found in Paris (1961: 57) according to whom the original is the 'traditional limit' of translation and who thinks that 'how close we can get to it is a problem which torments, or should torment, all translators'. He concludes that (1961: 57-58) 'it is obvious that Donne or Dylan Thomas lose everything when they lose their own language'.

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This statement is so sweeping that counterexamples positively crowd the mind. For example, Thomas' (1936) line 'Altarwise by owl-light' finds a very close equivalent in the Danish line, 'Altervis ved ugle-lys' as far as paronomasia is concerned, and the fact that is has one syllable more than the original hardly disqualified it as a translation.

Counterexamples like this and, more particularly, the fact that so many translations exist and are accepted as translations show the shortcomings of the definitional, Source Text oriented approach to translation studies adopted by Jakobson and Paris, which has in any case been dismissed by Gideon Toury (1980). But we can add extra strength to the Toury's Target Text oriented argument by considering the curious position that the argument for limited untranslatability commits its adherents to.

In the very same article in which we find the quotation above, Jakobson also declares that (1959/1987: 431-2):

All cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language. Whenever there is a deficiency, terminology can be qualified and amplified by loanwords or loan translations, by neologisms or semantic shifts, and, finally, by circumlocutions. … No lack of grammatical devices in the language translated into makes impossible a literal translation of the entire conceptual information contained in the original.

These two statements taken together commit Jakobsen to two views that seem untenable. First, if literal translation of "all cognitive experience and its classification"

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is possible, and if poetry in untranslatable, our experience of poetry must be something other than cognitive. But is not all experience cognitive? What kind of experience is poetic experience supposed to be?

Secondly Jacobson seems committed to the unlikely view that there are two quite different ways in which language relates to concepts in the case of people who use more than one language. One view (for non-literary texts) might be pictured like this:

CONCEPT

L1 term   L2 term   ... L^n term

The other (for literary texts) might be pictured like this:

L1 CONCEPT   L2 CONCEPT   L3 CONCEPT

L1 term   L2 term   L3 term

It can surely not be the case that some concepts – those involved in processing literary texts – are language specific while other concepts are not. There is no doubt that the translation of poetry can be challenging; but we must seek a different explanation for the opportunities to excel that translators of poetry and of literature are offered by their chosen text types.

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Of the two models of the relationship between a bilingual's or a multilingual's comceptual system and their languages, there are compelling arguments for the former; the second model, which would make concepts language specific, conflicts with for example the neurolinguistics of bilingualism. According to Paradis (2004: 200):

> the conceptual component of verbal communication is not language-specific and there is a single non-linguistic cognitive system, even though speakers group together conceptual features differently in accordance with the lexical semantic constraints of each language. The lexical items are part of the language system, but the concepts are not.

I will try to illustrate how the fact of the different groupings of conceptual features can affect translation below; of course, it is also possible – in fact, it is overwhelmingly likely – that meaning is more than this relationship between concepts and terms, and this will probably have consequences for translation. The philosophy of language has much to say about this, too, but the translation case that I will come to illustrates one such aspect with particular clarity.

3.ii Challenging the theory

The possibility of having a theory of translation has also been questioned from within translation studies, assuming that we think of George Steiner as a translation scholar. Steiner makes this challenge with reference to Quine's (1959; 1960) view of translational indeterminacy, remarking in a spirit of deep pessimism that (Steiner 1975: 279-280)

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the bare notion of a mature theory of how translation is possible and how it

takes place, of a responsible model of the mental attributes and functions which

are involved, *presumes* a systematic theory of language with which it overlaps

completely or from which it derives as a special case according to demonstrable

rules of deduction and application. I can see no evasion from this truism. But

the fact remains that we have no such theory of language.

It is only by examining the theory of translational indeterminacy, which is the theory

that has so unsettled Steiner, that we can lay this particular ghost to rest. It will also

help us choose between Jakobson's two views of how concepts relate to languages.

4. External challenges to translation studies

The challenges that translation faces from other disciplines can be discussed under the

headings, cultural, linguistic and ontological relativism (see Malmkjær 2005: 44-58).

Cultural relativism

A good example of cultural relativism is the anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski's

(1884-1942), view that (1923; Sampson, 1980, p. 225) that

> a European, suddenly plunged into a Trobriand community and given a word-
>
> by-word translation of the Trobrianders' utterances, would be no nearer
>
> understanding them than if the utterances remained untranslated – the utterances
>
> become comprehensible only in the context of the whole way of life of which
>
> they form part.

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This would have the curious consequence that speakers of the various varieties of English should be unable to understand each other and it would mean that the efforts of for example African writers who produce English language literature are wasted if they hope thereby to communicate more widely than if they wrote in, say, Giguyu.

Clearly, this cultural relativist stance is closely related to linguistic relativism, best known, probably, for the work or Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf.

Linguistic relativity

In Sapir's formulation (1929/Mandelbaum 1949: 69):

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

Sapir is clearly talking here about the *social* world, rather than of the physical world, which places him in a dilemma not unlike Jakobson's. In Sapir (1921, especially Chapter 5), he expresses firm universalist sentiments: We must have, he declares, ([1921] 1926: 98)

a large stock of basic or radical concepts, the concrete wherewithal of speech. We must have objects, actions and qualities to talk about, and these must have their corresponding symbols in independent words or in radical elements. No proposition, however abstract its intent, is humanly possible without a tying on at one or more points to the concrete world of sense. In every intelligible proposition at least two of these radical ideas must be expressed, though in exceptional cases one or even both may be understood from the context. And, secondly, such relational concepts must be expressed as moor the concrete concepts to each other and construct a definite, fundamental form or proposition.

Whorf's relativism is similarly half hearted. Even in the expression of what he refers to as (1940/ Carroll, 1956, p. 214) 'a new principle of relativity', he leaves open the possibility of translation:

No individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality, but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation … All observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated.

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But the possibility of radical relativism remains in the minds of a number of scholars of a relativist persuasion. For example Lakoff and Johnson (1980) maintain that (p. 181):

> People with very different conceptual systems than our own may understand the world in a very different way than we do. Thus they may have a very different body of truths than we have and even different criteria for truth and reality.

This takes us neatly into ontological relativism, where the external challenge meets the internal one from Steiner.

Ontological relativism

Within the language sciences, relativism with respect to how other people view truth is the most radical form of relativism because of the central role that truth plays in the theory of meaning.

Quinean questions the theorisability of the notion of meaning by showing that a listener can never be certain that a speaker means by an utterance the same as the listener would mean by it. Speaker and hearer may have radically different ontological commitments (Hookway 1988: 134) – that is, they may focus on radically different categories of item in dividing up the world -- so that context cannot be used, as in e.g. Catford (1965), as a measure of translation equivalence. Therefore, the central questions in the theory of meaning are unanswerable. These questions are, in

Davidson's terms (1973/1984: 125):

> Having identified [an] utterance as intentional and linguistic, we are able to go
> on to interpret [the speaker's] words: we can say what his words, on that
> occasion, meant. What could we know that would enable us to do this? How
> could we come to know it?

For an empiricist like Quine, the answer to the first question has to be "relationships
between words and the world". As he puts it (1960: 26) 'Surface irritations generate,
through language, one's knowledge of the world. One is taught so to associate words
with words and other stimulations that there emerges something recognizable as talk
of things, and not to be distinguished from truths about the world'. But the answer to
the second question is "We cannot come to know the associations that obtain for the
speaker between words and stimulations". This is because when a speakers says e.g.
"Gavagai" in response to what the hearer takes to be a rabbit-stimulation (a rabbit
running by), there is no knowing what the speaker's stimulation in fact is (1960: 51-
2); the speaker might experience, not a whole enduring rabbit stimulation, but a rabbit
stages stimulation, or a stimulation by temporal segments of rabbits, or un-detached
rabbit parts.

5. Meeting the challenges

Quine's work suggests that the notion of meaning is an unhelpful starting point in
setting up a theory of meaning; partly for this reason, Davidson (1967: 307-309)
suggests a different starting point for the theory of meaning, the concept of truth.

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Setting out from the notion of truth has the advantage that truth is (1984 [1973]: 134) 'a single property which attaches, or fails to attach, to utterances, while each utterance has its own interpretation'. This means that we might be justified in declaring some utterances true without claiming to understand them. For example, if we hear a speaker, Kurt, who belongs to a speech community which we call German, saying *Es regnet* when it is raining near him, then, instead of assuming that this sentence means "It is raining", we might more modestly take our observation of Kurt's behaviour (eventually together with evidence provided by a mass of other German speakers in similar circumstances) as evidence for the statement ([1973] 1984: 135): '"Es regnet" is true-in-German when spoken by x at time t if and only if it is raining near x at t', where x stands for any speaker and t for any time. Note that the notion of truth in use here is not of absolute truth; it is the notion of holding an utterance true, and speakers adopt that attitude to individual sentences only relatively to certain times and sets of circumstance. So it is a notion of truth that is relative to times, speakers, languages, utterances and sets of circumstances.

To make this theory function as a theory of translation requires us to assume enough similarity between speakers to make it likely that the utterer of the sentence in quotation (in this case 'es regnet') would agree with the description of the circumstances in which the utterance is held true *whether or not* the language of description is the same as the language of the sentence in quotation. In other words, regardless of the languages involved, utterer and interpreter must be able to agree, for any utterance U that '"U" is true if and only if C', where C is a statement of the circumstances in which 'U' is held true. In other words, the theory requires "dis-

quotation"; the second term in the equation is out of quotation marks; sentences are related to circumstances.

Quine's suggestion is that this dis-quotation operation is fundamentally and fatally (as far as the theory of meaning is concerned) unjustified because he denies us access to the description of the circumstances in which the speaker would hold the sentence true. But perhaps this denial is not justified (Davidson 1984 [1973]: 137):

> The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs or as saying anything.

According to Davidson (1974), to assume that someone is making noises that are part of rational speech behaviour is to assume that they have something that they want to express. In other words, it is to assume that they want to express something which they hold true, which is the same as to assume that they have beliefs.

So any creature whose noises we bother to interpret is thereby credited with a notion of holding something true. If we were to deny the attitude of holding true to the creature, we would at the same time be denying that it had beliefs. But the cultural relativist certainly does not want to do that; s/he just wants to deny that the creature has any beliefs which we could gain access to. According to the cultural relativist, the

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reason why we cannot gain access to the creature's beliefs is that we cannot translate its language into our own; the creature has beliefs, that is, it has a notion of holding something true, but it is impossible to translate from its language into ours. In other words, the creature's language is true (for it), but not translatable.

The trouble with this theory is that there does not seem to be any way in which the truth predicate can be explained without reference to the notion of translation, without disquotation. As Tarski (1956) points out, the predicate, 'is true' functions is such a way that for any sentence S of a language there is a statement of the form, 'S is true iff p', where p is the translation of S into the language of the theory. This is not because sentences must be true, it is because the truth predicate, "is true" is a kind of shorthand for an infinite number of sentences related to the circumstances in which they are true (Leeds 1978: 1210: 'Truth is … a notion that we might reasonably want to have on hand, for expressing semantic assent and dissent, infinite conjunction and disjunction'. It is encapsulated in the Tarski sentences, which express a theory of the truth concept. And this truth concept is inextricably tied into the notion of translation via disquotation: A sentence of the object language, in quotation, is related to a set of circumstance – expressed in a disquotated, operational sentence.

Tarski sentences assume translation. Davidson reverses the direction of explicitation; taking the attitude of holding true as given, the possibility of interpretation/translation follows. Either way, the notion of truth is inseparable from the notion of translation, and any theory that seeks to separate the two, as the theory of cultural relativism does in order to retain the idea that speakers have beliefs while maintaining the untranslatability of their language, is internally inconsistent.

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This theory has a number of consequences for translation. For example, if truth is relative to times, circumstances and speakers, then, insofar as truth plays a central role in the meaning relationship, meaning, too, must be particular to such a set of circumstances. And since circumstances are unique to the moment, meaning is not replicable and we can forget about trying to recreate it in translation.

Let me now return to the notion from Paradis (2004: 200) that bilingual speakers employ:

> a single non-linguistic cognitive system, even though speakers group together conceptual features differently in accordance with the lexical semantic constraints of each language.

In the following section, I would like to illustrate the notion of different groupings of conceptual features in different languages by way of an example of the kind that typically brings out the possibilities of differences at this level especially clearly.

6. On the different groupings of conceptual features

In the Viking Ship Museum in Bygdøy in Olso is the Oseberg Ship. It was built between 815 and 820 AD, and used as a grave ship for a high ranking woman who died in 834 AD. It was excavated in 1904 on Oseberg farm in Vestfold, a county to the west of Oslo Fjord.

Among the things found on the Oseberg Ship was a piece of wood with the runic inscription:

ᛚᛁᛏᛁᛚᚢᛁᛋᛘ

litiluism

The inscription is not clearly visible through the glass of the case where the wood is kept, but it can be seen on http://www.arild-hauge.com/innskrifter1.htm, which quotes Projektet Samnordisk runtextdatabas (2004: 163) and provides the following information about what these runes might mean:

> Tolkningen er usikker, men den mest vanlige er *litilvíss (er) maðr*. Den siste "m-runen" blir da tolket som *maðr - "mann, menneske"* - og "u-runen" blir lest som "v", og oversettes *"Lite vet mennesket"*.

> The interpretation is uncertain, but the most common is *litilvíss (er) maðr*. Here, the final "m-rune" is interpreted as *maðr - "man, human being"* – and the "u-rune" is read as "v", and the text is translated as *"Lite vet mennesket" [Little knows the human being]* (my translation).

So, what is written is something like (in English translation) "littlewh", which is expanded interpretatively as "littlewisehuman"; and the standard runological interpretation is a much further expansion into something like "Little knows the human being".

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But when I visited the museum on the 15th of June 2007, the inscription, in modern Norwegian, on the glass case where this piece of wood is displayed, in the finds wing of the museum, was "lite klokt menneske" (little clever human). It is not difficult to see how that derives from "littlewh" → "littlewisehuman". The English translation provided was "unwise person" and the German was "kleiner kluger Mensch". It is not difficult to see how both of those understandings are derivable from "Lite klokt menneske", "little clever human". But neither is interpretable as the original is interpreted on the website, which is as a sentence:

Lite   vet   mennesket

<u>Little</u> <u>knows</u> <u>the human being</u>

O   V   S   (sentence)

Each is only a noun phrase.

The Norwegian representation of the runic inscription has clearly been understood differently by the two translators into English and German, and the two interpretations are mutually contradictory. They are mutually exclusive; it is only possible for one of them to represent the Norwegian faithfully, as the metaphor has it, and probably neither does, in fact, represent what the author of the modern Norwegian had in mind, if he or she was knowledgeable about runic inscriptions, as it would be comforting to think that he or she was, since he or she had been entrusted with translating for the museum.

On the piece of wood with the runes, three concepts are referred to, according to the standard runological interpretation provided on the web site:

Limited quantity

Wisdom

Human being

The standard runological interpretation then arranges these concepts into a sentence by assuming predication, and by assuming that the reference to a limited quantity is meant as a modifier of the concept of humanity. The concept of humanity is general here; it is not a reference to one individual, one specific human being.

But the translation into modern Norwegian is ambiguous between this and a different interpretation: it is possible to understand this translation as a noun phrase denoting <u>a particular human being</u>; and it is this interpretation that has been embraced by both the translator into German and the translator into English.

But as their two very different translations show, this interpretation leaves a second question unresolved, which is about the relationship between the concepts involved; in particular, about what it is that is limited in quantity: The wisdom or the human being. In other words, what is the scope of 'lite'? is only 'klokt' or does 'lite' reach across all of 'klokt menneske'?.

There is simply no way of knowing, by only looking at the language here, what the correct interpretation of the relationships between the three concepts that the three terms refer to are.

This raises the question of what else is involved in meaning than the notion of holding true and the notion of reference between terms and concepts, and some light may be cast on this question by considering where translators might go to find help in cases like this.

A popular resource today is of course the internet, which increasing numbers of people are beginning to think of as the corpus to beat all others as a resource for information about general language, however that may be defined..

Here, 'lite klokt' turns up again and again in contexts where something or someone is not very clever, as in the following example which is a headline to an article by Johan P. Olsen published in the newspaper, *Aftenposten,* on 19.03.03:

Lite klokt å nøle med ny EU-debatt

This means that it is not very clever to delay the new debate about the EU.

In contrast, it is very difficult to find an example of 'lite klokt menneske'; the nearest I have found is

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Mitt postulat er at denne lite gunstige situasjonen er en konsekvens av at Mennesket som art er FOR intelligent, men FOR LITE klok

which came from http://debatt.aftenposten.no/item.php?GroupID=2&ThreadID=1389 which I searched at about 16.00 on Sunday 16 November 2008. It means roughly 'My postulate is that this not very beneficial situation is a consequence of the fact that the human being as a species is TOO intelligent but TOO LITTLE wise' (meaning insufficiently wise). This seems to support the interpretation on the runological website.

Another source of guidance about how to translate is of course the context of texts. The original runic text appeared on a piece of wood that was found on The Oseberg ship, which was used, as mentioned above, as a grave for a highborn Viking woman -- a queen, maybe. What would be the sense of placing in such a grave a piece of wood with either the German, or the English inscription, "unwise person" or "small clever person"? Neither makes any sense.

But the sense suggested by the web page makes perfect sense in such a context: The death of a highborn person might very well lead to a philosophical consideration of how little we know – to a reflection on the human condition. This, apart from being more appropriate to the context in which the text is used, also presents quite a different picture of the Vikings than the more trite interpretations do: It presents them as people who reflect in the abstract on vast topics such as wisdom and humanity and the limitation of the former, that is wisdom, in examples of the latter, that is humans, something which of course implies an ability to think beyond oneself to mysteries that

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are beyond us, to imagine that there is a lot more to be known, discovered and understood than we know, have discovered, and understand.

But whatever translation we end up with, we retain the three concepts in the original little text: limited quantity, wisdom, and humanity. So all is rarely lost in translation – in fact much more is gained from having translation than if there were no translation.

The philosophy of translation shows us that translation is always possible; but translation studies shows what else, apart from translation, is involved in translation.

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