

CHRYSOLORAS ON TRANSLATION:

a note on the meaning of *proprietas graeca*



By Marianne Pade

Manuel Chrysoloras, the revered teacher of Greek of humanists such as Leonardo Bruni, Guarino Veronese and Francesco Filelfo, is often hailed as the founding father of humanist theory of translation. In my article I analyse the short description of his views on translation that we have from his student, Cencio de' Rustici. I shall argue that although he did influence later translators profoundly, Chrysoloras did not advocate the kind of radically domesticating translation that many of his pupils saw as the ideal.

The Byzantine scholar and diplomat, Manuel Chrysoloras (ca. 1350–1415), was the first successful teacher of Greek in Italy in the early Renaissance. He came to Italy at beginning of the 1390s to secure help in his country's ever more desperate fight against the Ottoman Turks. His main instrument was cultural diplomacy; working to restore the intimate bond between Greek and Latin culture that had existed in ancient times, he hoped to make the Latin West realize that the culture threatened by Ottoman expansionism was also theirs. Translation has always been one of the most intimate forms of cultural encounter, and Chrysoloras used it, as a pedagogical tool, but also to make West meet East. Less than forty years after his death Constantinople fell, but in other respects Chrysoloras accomplished what he set out to do. He effectively changed the course of Greek studies in the West, he instilled a fervent enthusiasm for Greek culture in his students, many of whom became translators of Greek literature, and Greek effectively became a new classical language. In what follows I shall first briefly outline the main facts regarding his Italian mission and then discuss in more detail the brief description of his views on translation that we owe to Cencio de' Rustici, a student of his in Rome.

Chrysoloras' Italian mission

In 1396 the Florentine chancellor and Nestor of the city's humanist *elite*, Coluccio Salutati, invited Chrysoloras to come to Florence to teach Greek.¹ After Florence, Chrysoloras taught in Milan and then in Rome. During his time in Italy, Chrysoloras unceasingly stressed the close community of religion and culture that once existed between Greeks and Romans. He often mentioned Plutarch as an example of this. In his *Parallel Lives* Plutarch had compared Greek and Roman public figures, sometimes favouring the Roman over his own Greek compatriot. Moreover, Chrysoloras again developed the theme of the cultural ties between Greeks and Romans in the 1411 Σύγκρισις τῆς παλαιᾶς καὶ νέας Ῥώμης (Comparison between the old and the new Rome). Here he dwelled at length on the Roman origins of the Greek capital as well as the Greek influences on early Rome.²

From what we know of his teaching, it seems that Chrysoloras made his pupils experience the encounter with Greek culture on many levels and translation was central to this.³ The first exercises in translation undertaken by his students would often be literal, perhaps interlinear translations, whereas stylistically satisfactory translations were reserved for a more advanced stage. Though Salutati himself only managed to follow lessons very intermittently, we know from a letter to him how Chrysoloras emphasized the benefits that come from learning another language and becoming familiar with a new culture, just as the Romans were once familiar with and profited from Greek culture, and as both Greek and Latin literature had benefited from foreigners.⁴

Cencio de' Rustici (c. 1390 – after 1445)

I believe that Chrysoloras' insistence on the mutual benefits of the cultural encounter between East and West, between Byzantium and Rome, also informed his views on translation, as we know them through Cencio de' Rustici.⁵ It is in the letter of dedication to Cencio's translation of Aelius Aristides' *Dionysius* that we find his famous description of Chrysoloras' theory of translation that is the point of departure for this article:

¹ The last edition of Salutati's official invitation to Chrysoloras (28 March 1396) is in Reeve 1991, 134–136.

² For Chrysoloras' years in Italy, see Pade 2007, 1, 89–96 with earlier literature.

³ For Chrysoloras' teaching methods, see Berti 1987 and 1988, and Bianca 2002.

⁴ See Salutati 1891–1911, 4, 341–343, Appendice prima.

⁵ For Cencio, see Bertalot 1929–30/1975.

Text 1

Sed ut de interpretis natura aliquid dicam, ferebat Manuel, homo sine ulla dubitatione divinus, conversionem in latinum ad verbum minime valere. Nam non modo absurdum esse asseverabat, verum etiam interdum grecam sententiam omnino pervertere. Sed ad sententiam transferre opus esse aiebat hoc pacto ut ii qui huiusmodi rebus operam darent, legem sibi ipsis indicerent, ut nullo modo proprietates greca immutaretur; nam si quispiam, quo luculentius apertiusque suis hominibus loquatur, aliquid grece proprietatis immutarit, eum non interpretis sed exponentis officio uti.⁶

(But to talk about the nature of the translator: the divine Manuel used to say that word-for-word translation into Latin is practically worthless. According to him, it is not only harsh, it may also completely fail to render the meaning of the Greek. Instead one should render meaning, he said. Those who took pains with matters of this sort should make it a rule for themselves not to alter the Greek *proprietates* in any way. For if anyone was to alter the Greek *proprietates* somehow, with the object of speaking better and more clearly to his own people, he would act the part of a commentator rather than that of a translator).⁷

These few lines have often been treated as the founding document of humanist theory of translation, as heralding a break with medieval translation methods, but what do they actually say? Cencio's wording in many respects echoes the classical *loci* on translation, especially (Ps) Cicero's *On the best kind of orator* (§ 14), Horace's *Art of Poetry* (vv. 133–134), and the passage in Jerome's letter to Pammachius where he quotes them. But one word sticks out, namely *proprietates*. Cencio uses it twice in these few lines, but it is not in any of the three classical texts just mentioned. The passage has of course been the object of much scholarly attention. An extremely influential discussion is found in Remigio Sabbadini's *Il metodo degli umanisti* from 1922. Sabbadini calls Chrysoloras's preferred kind of translation "traduzioni oratorie fedeli" (faithful rhetorical translation), which is contrasted with "traduzioni oratorie libere" (free rhetorical translation) that involve *immutatio*, changes. Seemingly ignoring that Chrysoloras had reservations about "traduzioni oratorie libere", Sabbadini concludes: "Siamo dunque avvisati: tradurre significa abbellire, abbellire, abbellire e soprattutto mutare, togliere, aggiungere" (So we are warned: translation means embellishment, embellishment, embellishment, and not least changing, removing, adding).⁸ Though Sabbadini's

⁶ Ed. in Bertalot, Ludwig 1929–30/1975, 2, 133

⁷ Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

⁸ Sabbadini 1922, 23–27: 26.

discussion is still quoted today, I do not find it very helpful and it completely dodges the issue: what does *proprietas graeca* mean here?

More recently Ernesto Berti, one of the greatest living students of Chrysoloras, discussed the passage in an article named *Traduzioni oratorie fedeli*, in honour of Sabbadini's influential treatment. Berti paraphrased Cencio, and unlike Sabbadini he made it clear that Chrysoloras did not recommend free rhetorical translation. He also addresses the question of *proprietas greca*, at first not offering a direct translation of the phrase: “egli ammoniva che non bisognava sovrapporsi all'originale a che gli scrittori greci dovevano essere tradotti nella loro integrità [...] e che non era lecito di abbellirli nello stile e di mutarne o ampliarne i dati testuali” (he admonished that *translators* should not superimpose themselves over the original and that the Greek authors should be translated in their entirety [...] and that it was not allowed to embellish its style and change or add to the *dati testuali*).⁹ In Berti's paraphrase the warning not to alter the *proprietas greca* is in the first instance it occurs interpreted as consisting of two elements. The translator must not ‘sovrapporsi’, superimpose himself on the original, nor he must leave out anything. The second time the phrase is used, Berti renders it with *dati testuali*, which the translator must not change in any way. I am not completely sure what is meant by *dati testuali*, in spite of Berti's explanation: “con *proprietas greca* è evidente che qui non si intendono le caratteristiche idiomatiche del greco come lingua ma i dati concreti dei testi greci in lingua originale” (evidently *proprietas graeca* here does not signify special characteristics of the Greek language, but the concrete data of the Greek texts in the original, *ibid.*). However, I find the warning to the translator, not to superimpose himself on the original, interesting. In Berti's interpretation, Chrysoloras so to speak asks the translator to leave some aspects of the original in peace. I shall return to that later on.

A few years later, Mariarosa Cortesi returned to Cencio's description, rendering *proprietas graeca* in yet another way: faithful rhetorical translation “rispetta il contenuto ideologico dell'originale e non ne muta gli elementi con abbellimenti retorici”, i.e. it respects the ideological content of the original and does not alter any of its elements with rhetorical embellishments.¹⁰ Thus, according to Cortesi, *proprietas graeca* means ‘ideological content’, but she does not offer any further explanation of this.

Both Berti and Cortesi paraphrase *proprietas graeca* rather than translating it. In his monograph on *Umanesimo e traduzione*, Stefano U. Baldassarri has a very close paraphrase of the passage in which he renders the phrase with “le

⁹ Berti 1998, 254–255.

¹⁰ Cortesi 1995, 145

peculiarità e le caratteristiche del testo greco”.¹¹ ‘Peculiarity’ and ‘characteristics’ are undoubtedly entirely plausible translations of *proprietas*, but to me *proprietas graeca* is still in need of explanation, and I believe that to get any closer to a clearer understanding of the phrase, it will be necessary to play “the part of a commentator rather than that of a translator” (see above Text 1).

Proprietas in ancient texts on translation

Even if we only have Cencio’s Latin rendering of Chrysoloras’ tenets, it may still be fruitful to examine his lexicon, especially with regard to *proprietas*. The word occurs in a number of passages in ancient Latin that have to do with translation. The first I have found is in a letter of Pliny the Younger:

Text 2

Utile in primis [...], vel ex Graeco in Latinum vel ex Latino vertere in Graecum. Quo genere exercitationis proprietas splendorque verborum, copia figurarum [...] paratur (PLIN. *ep.* 7,9,1–3)

(The most useful thing [...] is to translate Greek into Latin and Latin into Greek. This kind of exercise develops in one a precision and richness of vocabulary, a wide range of metaphor, *tr. Betty Radice*).

In this passage *proprietas* is used with regard to the target language, whether it be Latin or Greek, and it is taken to mean the precision of vocabulary that one develops by translating. Chrysoloras/ Cencio used the term about the source language, and I have found some interesting passages in ancient Latin where this is also the case. The first is from the *Noctes Atticae*. Writing about his own translation of Plato, Gellius remarks about the wording of some passages in the original:

Text 3

Verba ipsa super hac re Platonis ex libro qui appellatur Gorgias scripsi quoniam vertere ea consilium non fuit, cum ad proprietates eorum nequaquam possit Latina oratio aspirare ac multo minus etiam mea.

(I have written down Plato’s own words on this subject from the book called *Gorgias*, not attempting to translate them, because no Latinity, much less my own, can hope to render their qualities, 10,22,3, translation based on that of Rolfe in the Loeb series).

Gellius here uses *proprietas* about something in the source language, about some qualities of Plato’s words that he is not able to translate. But it is not just that he himself cannot “render their qualities”, their *proprietas* actually seem to be untranslatable, at least into Latin.

¹¹ Baldassarri 2003, XIII.

The last passage I want to examine here is from St Jerome's preface to his translation of Eusebius' *Chronicle* where he also talks about *proprietas* with regard to the source language:

Text 4

Significatum est aliquid unius uerbi proprietate: non habeo meum quo id efferam, et dum quaero implere sententiam, longo ambitu uix breuis uiae spatia consummo.

(A meaning may be conveyed by a single word: but in my vocabulary I have no comparable word; and when I try to accommodate the full sense, I take a long detour around a short course, HIER. *chron. epist.* 2,6–9).¹²

The English translation here avoids rendering *proprietas* explicitly; perhaps the translator thought that it did not add further meaning to *unius uerbi* 'a single word'. However, Jerome says that sometimes the *proprietas* of one word has no equivalent in the translator's language – and that makes it impossible to translate it directly. Like Gellius he seems to comment upon an instance of (near) untranslatability.

Chrysoloras: a plea for foreignizing translation?

I believe that the key to understanding Chrysoloras' use of *proprietas* lies in these passages from Gellius and Jerome (texts 3 and 4). *Proprietas* signifies something that is so special to a language or a culture that it may be impossible to render it satisfactorily in another language without radical changes. In modern terms, Chrysoloras addresses the issue of untranslatability, of something that may be explained in a commentary but cannot be rendered by a 'faithful rhetorical translation'.¹³ When he impresses upon the translator the importance of maintaining the *proprietas graeca*, he actually asks him to leave something in the translation that will seem Greek to the reader. Or to use the words of Ernesto Berti, he asks him not to superimpose himself, or his Latinity, on the Greek original. Chrysoloras certainly wanted to avoid the aesthetically displeasing in a translation, but he would not at all costs have the translator aim at "the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities [*that make the translation*] seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the 'original'," as Lawrence Venuti phrased it in his influential *The Translator's Invisibility*. And he goes

¹² Translation from Copeland 1991, 47.

¹³ For the concept of untranslatability in modern translation studies, see Bassnett 1980/2014, 37–41.

on, “the illusion of transparency is an effect of a fluent translation strategy, of the translator’s effort to insure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning.”¹⁴ The result of fluency as a translation strategy is domestication, that is a translation where the reader is confronted with the foreignness of the original as little as possible. That was definitely not what Chrysoloras wanted. As in his other cultural projects, the promotion of Plutarch, his “Comparison between the old and the new Rome”, he wanted the West to acknowledge the East. With his call to translators not to change the *proprietas graeca*, Chrysoloras is advocating what we today would call foreignizing translation.¹⁵ Or as Schleiermacher famously said in an 1813 lecture on the different “methods” of translation, “there are only two. Either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him.”¹⁶ Chrysoloras, who was proud of his country’s cultural heritage, wanted Western readers to experience it. Though Chrysoloras in other respects influenced his Italian students profoundly, it seems that he did not convince them of the need to preserve *proprietas graeca* in translation. In the generation after Chrysoloras, humanist translation would be characterised by radical domestication.¹⁷

¹⁴ Venuti 1995/2008, 1.

¹⁵ For an overview of this, see Lefevere 1977 and Koskinen 2012.

¹⁶ Quoted from Lefevere 1977, 74.

¹⁷ For this, see Pade, forthcoming.

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