

Here are some comments on the outstanding English edition, translation and analysis of the Rabinal Achi produced by Alain Breton (2007, University Press of Colorado). Its strengths speak for itself, and I have previously affirmed them in praising the book on the Aztlán email list. When Breton is focused on structural analysis, he normally arranges the text in an ideal form to show its literary structure, as on pp.44-45. But under the practical limitations of narrow pages, it was not possible to show all of the structural parallelisms. With a larger page publication format, it would be possible to achieve much more of this.

Here I focus rather on some of the not very many problems in translation, where the meaning is not accurately rendered in English. Sometimes the meaning was accurate in the French edition, but is not accurate in the English edition. Sometimes it is accurate in neither. If a purported translation **makes no sense** in the native language of a reader, then it is probably not an accurate translation. This is important, because it affects the people whose culture is being represented. If passages in the text make no sense, this will often unconsciously be attributed to the people and culture by many readers, instead of recognizing that it is the translation which has failed, that the people and culture are more sophisticated than the "translation" presents them as being. This is in no way to fault Breton, who has done a marvelous job. It is rather just the nature of translation. It is a real pleasure to read and to learn from a work which has so few errors of this kind.

Here follow a number of remarks, grouped roughly into several different types:

1. Items which were appropriately translated in the French edition of 1994, but where the English edition of 2007 has a different meaning inappropriate in context.
2. A couple of very common vocabulary items (*Oyew*, *Saq*) whose glossing is extremely jarring, inappropriate to the context. These clearly need better translations ("valiant, brave, courageous" rather than "angry"; something like "true" or "excellent" instead of the color "white", or other workarounds).
3. Other vocabulary items
4. Where sticking to the Quiché word order ("glossing" instead of "translation") causes ungrammaticality in English (and French). First some cases involving cleft sentences, where they should or should not be used. Many readers are rarely consciously aware of what the meaning differences are in this subtle type of case. Then follow some where grammar requires that subjects must come before verbs in English (and French).
5. An interesting case of parallelism
6. Instances from the discussions not the text of the Rabinal Achi itself.

1. Items which were appropriately translated in the French edition of 1994, but where the English edition of 2007 has a different meaning inappropriate in context. In each of these, the comment on the English was derived from context. It was then checked against the French edition, which was seen to be a better translation in these cases.

p.125 line 22, instead of "owned by", "property of" is easier. (French has "possession de")

p.147 line 261 The English word "regained" is most easily read as a transitive, implying a re-conquest of their fortress. The meaning here seems rather to be "returned to" their fortress, an intransitive. (French has "ont rejoint" "have rejoined")

p.173 "regain" should be "return to", as for p.147

p.147 line 273 "purge" can sometimes convey a medical nuance, though that is not forced here. Would "let the desire pass from your heart" match the Quiché? (French has "faire passer l'envie" "let the desire pass")

p.169 line 619 "even when they sleep" as a verb -- Would "even when they are asleep" (positional stative) be better? (French has "...même dormant" "even (while) sleeping")

p.169 line 634 "when the other looks front" should be "forward" (French has "quant l'autre regard vers l'avant")

p.169 line 643 "malignancy" -- This tends to be used mostly today about cancer. If conceived metaphorically here, it is an odd metaphor. (French has "malveillance" "malice; evil intent; etc.")

p.247 line 2053 "malevolence of my heart" See note on line 643.

p.163 lines 526, 557 "machinations" -- Phrases including /k'ux/ physically "heart" are of course very difficult. I tend to think that "will" is sometimes good as a translation (as in Popol Vuh "the Will of Heaven" (perhaps with capital "W" since almost personified?) but in English that is more a temporary wish than a permanent being-like entity. "Machinations" seems slightly jarring, as if from another domain of discourse. (French has "intentions du cœur")

p.179 line 787 "clambered down" adds something not in the original. English "descended down" works. (French "dévalai" "descended down")

p.187 line 916 "pulled apart" has a passive sense, where we may need a frequentative to match the Quiché? I don't have such a suggestion, but have considered "brushed out (across the sky)" and "stretched out". (French has "étirées" "stretched out")

p.189 line 961 "creeping" should be as in p.187 line 916? (same verb in Quiché, different French "rampant")

2. A couple of items which occur many times in the Quiché-Achi:

It is very good that Breton has footnotes explaining the problems early.

OYEW (note 22 to the text)

Despite the nearly universal testimony of the dictionaries cited in the glossary, I do not think "angry" can be a good translation for it. Rather "valiant" as Breton sometimes does, or perhaps even better "brave" in English, since it is used so often as an appellation of high respect, and "brave" fits that, while "angry" implies loss of self-control. "Brave" can also be a constant characteristic of a person, while "angry" is more often a mere temporary state. "Courageous" would also be conceivable, but that is more an objective description from outside, not as simple an honorific as "brave". (I am not sure about "bravo" or "brave" in Spanish or French, do not know whether the nuances are the same as in English.

SAQ (notes 62 and 57, 82)

I very much liked seeing Breton's suggestion to translate /saq/ sometimes as "true" and as referring to "excellence" p.35. For the Popol Vuh, I came in part to that same conclusion ("true"), but that does not work comfortably in all contexts. "Excellent" is closer, and perhaps there is something still better we can find. Breton's comparison with the widespread "true people" is right on target. His translation of "saq al, saq k'ajol" as "our children" is very good in some contexts, since "our" children are the true people, unlike those "others". What seems very clear is that the color term "white" is (almost?) never a correct translation -- it leads the reader wildly off into wrong domains of thinking.

3. Other vocabulary items:

Lines 94-95, notes 38 and 39

"are arrogant as they concern me", or glossing the Quiché as "sting my mouth, my face". For English, how about "insult me"? It reads more naturally, and seems to fit the pattern of a number of expressions having to do with "saving face", as we say in English, a number of which are most easily rendered in English with one word. The Popol Vuh has I think something like "grind" my mouth, my face which Allen Christenson translated as "punish" or something similar (not citing exactly here).

passim "before Heaven and Earth" to convey the reverence, rather than the physical "facing the sky, facing the earth"

p.237 line 1831 Here an unusual context, very physical, so the less common translation "in the presence of". "He is in the presence of King Job Toj"

passim "Dignitary" for /u-q'alel/ -- this is too impersonal and analytical a word in English to be used as an honorific. Perhaps "Eminent person" but that's not exactly right either, still a bit too analytical, just less so.

passim "child of my spear, child of my shield" -- This seems odd to an English speaker. Would not a literal translation conveying the same **meaning** be rather "power of my spear, power of my shield" ? Common sense?

passim (p.187 line 123 and many other occurrences) -- "This is what I said" seems more natural in English than "this is my word". Perhaps "These were my words", even that would also be more natural English. Is "this is my word" matching Quiché morphological structure rather than translating (meaning)?

p.181 lines 834-5 "that I came to exhaust the face of my heart, the face of my shoulders" perhaps "that I came to exhaust my will and my strength" (same problem in French)

p.187 lines 930-931 With /pam/ often "inside" rather than "in", so "from inside the great fortress, from inside the great wall"

p.189 line 979 "great walls opposed him" -- That feels too active, like an agent. Perhaps "great walls blocked him" (positional stative) or "great walls faced him"

p.189 line 981 "forced my way in" in your footnote is closer to the meaning?

p.213 line 1432 "inside lords" -- Should this be "lords inside each fortress ..."

p.223 line 1469 "inside the storehouse" (instead of "in...")

p.247 line 2035 "recommendations" has a very beaucroatic tone. In ordinary life, how about "the advice you have pronounced is true."

4. Where sticking to the Quiché word order ("glossing" instead of "translation") causes ungrammaticality in English (and French). First some cases involving cleft sentences, where they should or should not be used.

Many readers are rarely consciously aware of what the meaning differences are in this subtle type of case. Then follow some where grammar requires that subjects must come before verbs in English (and French).

p.151 lines 339-344 Is this a sentence with a predicate nominal at the beginning? If so, translate with an added "is the" (technically a kind of "cleft sentence").

"Balam Ajaw ... is the name of the threshold,
of the face of my fortress here,
of my wall here."

Also perhaps add "here" end of each of the last two lines corresponding to the /la/? I think /la/ was handled that way somewhere else, and it seems to fit here. So (without perfecting vertical alignment)

p.213 lines 1411-1414 This appears to have a predicate nominal with an imperfective verb form (often called "antipassive"). Correspondingly, perhaps a cleft sentence: "It was this ferocious one, this man, who exterminated nine/ten of our children"

p.231 line 1730 Predicate nominal with imperfective ("antipassive")? So translate with a cleft sentence in English? "Perhaps it will be this man who comes to taste them."

Following are cases where the subject really does need to come before the predicate in English (or French).

p.153 lines 345-6 re-order to fit normal English word order. In my work on the Popol Vuh posted on this web site, a violation of English word order is to have Verb-Subject order too often for intransitives. Better to move closer to what Breton has done in other cases.

"That was when King Balam Ajaw
Balam K'iche' learned ..."

p.155 lines 394-6, similar comment to the preceding item

"And my master
my eminence let fly his challenge,
his cry..."

p.247 lines 2013-2016 This is a cleft sentence, but should be a simple sentence? So "We the masters and eminences took this action from inside each fortress, each wall"

5. An interesting case of parallelism may be the introduction of speaking **to** the Uxab and Poq'omab and **by** them, in lines 578 to 581. Here there are two introductions, then two speakings:

introduction to speaking *to* the Uxab and Poq'omab
introduction to speaking *by* the Uxab and Poq'omab
then
speaking *to* the Uxab and Poq'omab
speaking *by* the Uxab and Poq'omab

Other translations in the text of the Rabinal Achi

p.127 line 23 "Yellow" went with "Eagles" in the Quiché ??

p.175 lines 746-8 -- There is no exact match, but sentences with Quiché initial *mi* are often best translated using the English present perfect rather than simple past, because of the link of recency of event to the "current relevance" which is the core meaning of the English perfect. (French does not have a verb form with this same core meaning.) So here "Has it been in vain ... that I have come to lose numerous days ..." focus more on the relevance of the resulting situation.

6. Instances from the discussions not the text itself of the Rabinal Achi.

p.13 last line "transposes the title here" is odd, that verb requires a dual object, not singular. So "transposes the parts of the title here" if you mean that /holpop/ should be /pophol/. (That is the only meaning I could get from it. Is that what you meant?)

p.15 before quotation, the word "disposition" in English in isolation refers mostly to a person having a pleasant or difficult "disposition". To make it mean something like "physical arrangement of parts of the text, better to say that explicitly.

p.30 "Replaced within the context..." in English means "something else was substituted for it" or "it was replaced and eliminated". If the reverse is intended, replacing something else within the context, then "Substituted within the context for something else that was there...". This verb normally requires mentioning two things, not just one. The meaning is probably "Put back again in the context ...", which is in English very different from "replaced". In English "replaced" does not mean "placed again", though the two may be closer in French (replacer ?).

p.31 "Mother of the Green Paraphernalia" is very jarring, because "paraphernalia" comes from a very different tone of discourse, almost deprecating, things not important enough to actually say what they are by their individual names. I don't have any wonderful suggestion, but perhaps "Mother of the Precious Green Feathers (and Jewels)", with the parenthesized parts optional when needed, but the addition of "precious" giving the part which we do not take for granted in our culture but which was implicit to the authors of this text. In other words, in some contexts the proper **literal** translation of /rax/ is not "green" but "precious green". I emphasize the "literal" here, because that conveys the meaning of the original better, and that is the only criterion for a literal translation (as distinct from morpheme-by-morpheme representations or word-by-word glossings).

Do notes 67 and 68 contradict each other? Not sure I understood. I like 68 better, because it does not force one to hypothesize an emendation to the text.

Note 99 is puzzling. In a number of languages, a verb meaning "let, leave" also shares usages for a meaning "drop", so that does not seem odd. A verb can be completely glossed as "let, leave", without any sense of anything missing. It of course requires a subordinate verb to complement it in some uses, to find out what is being permitted to go free. I wonder etymologically whether there is any sense specifically of "into the distance" here? So I would rather say that the *translations* of this verb depend on accompanying adverbial forms, rather than saying that the "meaning of the verb" depends on those adverbial forms, simply because English vocabulary groups meaning elements differently in its lexicon than does Quiché.