ON TRANSLATING DURKHEIM

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In this essay I shall address two intimately related questions concerning translation. They both concern the range of permissible or legitimate translations. The first concerns what lies within that range. How—that is, on what grounds—do we determine which translations are acceptable? And the second concerns what defines the limits of that range. How do we determine which translations are not going to pass muster? Both these questions concern standards: that is what tests must a translation pass to be deemed legitimate, on the one hand, or illegitimate, on the other? I shall address these questions by looking at the specific case of English translations of some central works of Emile Durkheim and in particular I shall focus on his masterpiece, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

But as a way of approaching these questions, I first want to say something about the various ways in which particular translations can go wrong, or at least mislead. What are the typical ways in which we recognize a given translation to be defective? In his fascinating discussion of Weber and the ‘iron cage’ Peter Baehr has suggested four. First, there are straightforward cases of “simple incompetence, rendering terms incorrectly, eliding them or omitting them altogether”—errors due to “simple and ubiquitous human failings: carelessness, negligence, rashness.” To this list we should surely add ignorance and stupidity. The first English translations of *The Division of Labour* and *The Rules of Sociological Method* abundantly exemplify this first category. An appendix to my doctoral thesis on Durkheim consists in a list of some of the most egregious examples including the most egregious, namely, the omission in that English edition of *The Rules*...
of an entire paragraph crucial to the argument of chapter 1 ("What is a Social Fact?"), which, so far as I know, passed unnoticed by readers.4

Baehr’s second category involves “something deeper and more sociologically problematic: an inability to understand, or at least convey, the conceptual matrix in which the original terms are located.”5 This, as he remarks, can involve “pulling a work into an interpretive orbit that disturbs the original constellation of themes idioms and emphases.”6 Baehr gives the example of Parsons’s radically downplaying Weber’s emphasis on psychological Antriebe in his translation of The Protestant Ethic. An obvious example concerning Durkheim, discussed by Robert Jones and Douglas Kibbee, is the ubiquitous (and probably unavoidable) practice of translating Durkheim’s injunction to study social facts comme des choses as an injunction to consider them as ‘things.’ The flat term ‘things’ altogether fails to capture the cluster of ideas that ‘chooses’ conveyed to Durkheim and his contemporaries. As Jones and Kibbee point out, Durkheim’s phrase is to be understood in the context of the Third Republic’s admiration of German education (they cite Jules Ferry’s remark that ‘La leçon des choses [c’est] à la base de tout’) and Durkheim’s expressed hope that emulating the German special social sciences could encourage the French to treat philosophical questions according to the methods of the positive sciences. They would then be ready to acknowledge that ‘things,’ “whether human or physical, are irreducibly complex,” that “simple conceptual combinations” could no longer be mistaken for reality itself, and that education ‘à l’école des choses’ was “the only education adequate to the moral and spiritual needs of the Third Republic,” inducing in pupils “a pronounced feeling for the collective life, for its reality and its advantages.” Durkheim, in short, was seeking to replace the language of Cartesian rationalism with the “more inductive, more experimental lexicon of German empiricism—one that emphasized complexity over simplicity, the concrete over the abstract, inductive over deductive, and so on.” With this new perspective on social facts, the French would come to see that society was not reducible to its component parts, that it was not merely an idea but “a moral power more elevated than ourselves.” In short,