Introduction

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Untranslatability has never had a higher profile than at present. Indeed, it is positively fashionable:

> Did you know there is an Arabic word for the kind of conversation you have in the evening as the sun sets? Or that there is a Spanish word for the flowing conversation around the dinner table after everyone has finished eating?
>
> *UN*TRANSLATION is an installation that explores and celebrates the many languages spoken in Brixton. In lexicons worldwide, words exist that are untranslatable to the English language. Not any old words either. Magic words that seemingly have the power and ability to express and define complex emotions and situations which we all feel but have not developed the vocabulary to express in English. (Furness and Hollis 2017)

So runs the description of a large, flag-based installation by Sam Furness and Toni Hollis hung in Brixton Village and Market Row for a week in September 2017 during the London Design Festival.[1] It is symptomatic of a culture fascinated by such "magic words," shibboleths that are claimed to express something unique about another, ineffably different culture (Wierzbicka 1997). It is but the latest demonstration of how our popular culture savours instances where

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English (and not just English) meets its limits. Over the last decade, popular books celebrating lexical multiculturalism have sold very well,[2] both in English and (ironically) in translations,[3] and in just the last few years books devoted to explaining the supposedly "untranslatable" Danish words *hygge* and *lykke*, the Swedish *lagom*[4] and *fika* or the Japanese *ikigai* have proved trend-surfing bestsellers, both on the English-language publishing market (Flood 2016; Higgins 2016; Green 2017) and beyond.

This (layman's) view of untranslatability as something cool and fashionable, to be marvelled at and celebrated, suggests at least a couple of interpretations. At a time when increasingly high-quality translation is available instantly, at the touch of a screen on our handheld devices, it is a way of acknowledging that there are some things for which there will never be a quick technological fix. It is also one way of registering a linguistic resistance to globalisation (and especially the spread of global English or globish), for acknowledging a foreign word as untranslatable is at the same time to acknowledge the irreducibility of cultural difference, granting a peculiar, unassimilable otherness to the culture that the foreign language represents. In other words, in its respect for cultural relativism this contemporary preoccupation with untranslatability is a retread of the previously fashionable argument that the fifty words "the Eskimos" have for snow demonstrates they have a different way of viewing the world and carving up reality.[5]

Except the term "untranslatable" is usually an exaggeration. Natalia Gogolitsyna, author of *93 Untranslatable Russian Words*, is surprisingly candid when she admits in her preface: "the words contained in this book are not, strictly speaking, 'untranslatable.' Instead, they are words which are 'very difficult to translate because they are so imbued with cultural or historical meaning'" (Gogolitsyna 2008, 6). All that it usually means to describe a word as "untranslatable"

is that English (or whichever target language is intended) does not have a single-word equivalent which can be agreed to cover all the senses of the source-language word. Yet as Roman Jakobson spelled out in 1959, no translation can be expected to achieve that level of comprehensiveness: "on the level of interlingual translation, there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code-units" (Jakobson 2012, 127). In other words, if that is the level at which you are setting the bar when you define translation, then all words are effectively untranslatable and successful translation is an impossibility.

What counts as a successful translation is usually taken to be rather less than some impossibly exacting degree of "full equivalence," though. Part of what *hygge* represents is doubtless the warm glow of supposed untranslatability in which the word wraps itself, but what books like *The Little Book of Hygge* (Wiking 2016) demonstrate is that just because a word lacks a one-word equivalent in another language this does not mean that it must be dismissed (or acclaimed) as untranslatable. Among translators the term "untranslatable" might be applied to a particularly thorny translation problem, but translators are eminently pragmatic language users, and they usually find some way through the densest of thickets. This is acknowledged by award-winning translator Lucy Greaves when she defines "untranslatable" as "a word in one language that has no single-word equivalent in another, yet can be translated using various different strategies" (Greaves 2014). "Untranslatable" words are always at the same time a challenge to the translator to paraphrase them adequately, and paraphrase can go a surprisingly long way towards conveying a notion. Salman Rushdie demonstrates this in his novel *Shame*, even as his narrator labels the Urdu word *takallouf* untranslatable:

To unlock a society, look at its untranslatable words. *Takallouf* is a member of that opaque, world-wide sect of concepts which refuse to travel across linguistic frontiers: it refers to a form of tongue-tying formality, a social restraint so extreme as to make it impossible for the victim to express what he or she really means, a species of compulsory irony which insists, for the sake of good form, on being taken literally. (Rushdie 1983, 104; cf. Ramone 2013, 45-68)

"Untranslatable" words may yet be adequately paraphrased, "untranslatable" phrases and idioms, too (see e.g. Vanderplank 2008; Bhalla 2009; Sanders 2016b). Nevertheless, the spectre of untranslatability has haunted translation theory for at least the last two centuries. Theorists have often explored the limits of translatability and claimed that certain text types – whole genres of writing, especially poetry, philosophy and scripture – are "untranslatable." Historically, attitudes towards untranslatability have swung like a pendulum between anxious theoretical resignation and bluff pragmatic dismissal. At the moment the term has currency in popular culture, as we have seen, and within academic translation studies the term has also acquired a topical urgency in recent years, thanks largely to the influential work of French philosopher Barbara Cassin and American theorist Emily Apter. Taking her cue from Jacques Derrida's post-structuralist exploration of the limits of translatability, Cassin edited a pioneering French-language dictionary which highlighted the multilingual inheritance of European philosophy (Cassin 2004). Its English edition (Cassin 2014) – which elevated the French subtitle "Dictionnaire des intraduisibles" to the main title so as to place even greater emphasis on the key idea – was edited by Apter, who had already opened up a major debate on questions of translatability through her book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*

(Apter 2013). For Apter, untranslatability is not just a linguistic, cultural or philosophical issue but a political one, as well, and she argues that it is in the interest of "minor" languages and literatures to resist ready translatability in an age of world literature and globalisation.

The work of Cassin and Apter provides the backdrop to the present volume, which aims to explore the notion of untranslatability from a wide variety of comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives that go beyond traditional comparisons of target texts with their sources. A handful of previous books on the subject of untranslatability have addressed particular aspects, such as cultural untranslatability (Budick and Iser 1996), or the untranslatability of poetry and scripture (Stewart 1969; Robinson 2010; Blakesley 2014; Long 2005). Article-length pieces – and one collection (Levine and Lateef-Jan 2018) – have already begun to appear which have been inspired by Apter to consider the untranslatability of specific authors in the context of the "world literature" debate (Boehmer, Ng and Sheehan 2016; see also Venuti 2016), or inspired by Cassin to consider the untranslatability of philosophical concepts (Polt 2014; see also Wiggin and MacLeod 2016). Two conferences inspired by Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables* and hosted by the French Department at Nottingham University have led to special issues of Edinburgh University Press journals (Batchelor and Gilonne 2010; Syrotinski 2015). So the present volume makes a historically-informed intervention in a burgeoning contemporary debate, for the time is ripe to bridge the nascent divide between philosophy and literature in elaborating the term "untranslatability," to extend its reach to encompass a broader range of application (Dünne *et al.* 2013). Half of this volume's contributions focus on the theme as a theoretical or philosophical construct, seeking to ground the term but also to question it and extend its conceptual remit. The other contributions present a variety of case studies in which the term is

applied (and, again, contested) in considering examples from poetry, prose and scripture, by European, Latin American and Chinese writers.

The first two chapters take us back to the origins of modern concerns about untranslatability with analyses of two classic texts in translation theory by the German Romantic writers Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Schleiermacher respectively. **Barbara Cassin** focuses on Humboldt's "Introduction to the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus" (1816), where he prefaces his translation of Aeschylus' play by describing it as "untranslatable." As Cassin points out, the apparent paradox of this claim is resolved by recognising that for Humboldt translation is always an incomplete, imperfective activity ("Translations are works-in-progress […] rather than lasting works"). It was this dynamic quality of translation which in turn inspired the project that would become the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, where Cassin defines the key term "untranslatable" as "not what one does not translate, but what one never ceases to (not) translate" ["ce qu'on ne cesse pas de (ne pas) traduire," Cassin 2004, xvii]. **Theo Hermans** also goes back to the German Romantics, with an analysis of Schleiermacher's 1813 lecture "On the Different Methods of Translating" which suggests that he "shies away from confronting untranslatability." Hermans explores three historical examples from the Early Modern period when translators faced great problems but came up with practical solutions, cross-lingual equivalences, thanks to, not despite, the implication or "entanglement" of the participants in their own presuppositions and agendas.

Kirsten Malmkjaer argues that with untranslatability the stakes are so very high because translation itself is so central to the dissemination of information in a globalised world. She reviews twentieth-century contributions to untranslatability theory by W. V. O. Quine and Donald Davidson before dismissing "translational relativism" and arguing that there is always

sufficient foundation for mutual understanding, making "'untranslatability' an interesting concept of investigation rather than an obstacle to our efforts." **Duncan Large** begins by contrasting the top-down problematisations of translatability by translation theorists with the bottom-up solutions to translation problems offered by practising translators. He argues that the more hard-line theorisations of untranslatability among the German Romantics are haunted by the prospect of there being some kind of ideal of "translation proper" which any kind of real-world translation falls short of living up to. He concludes that untranslatability acts as a kind of Kantian regulative idea spurring on practical translation attempts to approach it asymptotically "from below."

The first part of the collection concludes with two counterblasts that highlight untranslatability's political implications. **Klaus Mundt** critiques post-structuralism's conceptualisation of the term, arguing that it serves as an ideological tool and acts as a cover for neo-colonialist oppression. For Mundt, the contemporary understanding of untranslatability is essentially a Eurocentric concept anchored in a very narrow definition of translation itself. **David Gramling** begins with a history of uses of the term "untranslatability" before Cassin and Apter, then proposes ten theses problematising the now consensual understanding of the term. He dubs our "age of global simultaneous translation" the *linguacene* and develops Apter's notion of a "right to untranslatability" in the interest of global semiodiversity.

The second part of the collection opens with **Philip Wilson's** study of the ineffability of mysticism, from Meister Eckhart to Wittgenstein. Using two examples of mystical writing from the medieval period (Marguerite Porete and Julian of Norwich), Wilson seeks to understand why such writings have flourished in translation. He argues that the untranslatable is a useful heuristic in translation studies as long as it is recognised that we are talking about indeterminacy in

Quine's sense ("relative ineffability") and do not assume that there is some sort of pure ungraspable essence to be translated behind the text. The next three chapters all argue for the untranslatability of particular kinds of material. **Simon Everett** takes us out of Europe to focus on translations of Classical Chinese poetry. Specifically, he focuses on the eight-line regulated verse form *lǜshī* and examines various English-language translations and reimaginings (by Ezra Pound and others) of the T'ang poet Li Po's "Taking Leave of a Friend." Everett argues that although the Chinese tonal system really cannot be translated, or even approximated very well, that is not to say that creative responses are not worth while. **Helen Gibson** takes a very different kind of poetic case-study, analysing what Matthew Reynolds calls the "cultural clutter" in Belfast poet Ciaran Carson's translation of Dante's *Inferno*. Using Bakhtinian notions of heteroglossia and the "double-voiced" text, Gibson argues that Carson's heterogeneous English resists what Apter terms the assumed cultural substitutability of texts. For Gibson, Carson's translation is a "revealing introspective act" which signals the inherent heteroglossia underlying English itself in its relations to other languages. **Wanda Józwikowska** focuses on a corpus of inter-War Polish-Jewish fictions, and suggests reasons why they have not yet been translated into English. She argues against J. C. Catford in favour of the texts' "cultural untranslatability" owing to the particular shared circumstances of their production. The chapter concludes with practical suggestions for publishing these texts and attracting the interest of new, contemporary readerships in both Poland and target cultures.

  Emily Rose reaches further back in history to a Spanish-language transgender memoir from 1646 by Catalina de Erauso, who self-applies both masculine and feminine gender markers. Whereas the text's most recent translator considered such switches to be untranslatable, Rose conveys them in English with the aid of a specially developed "gendered font." Using post-

structuralist ideas from Derrida and Judith Butler, though, Rose argues that a translatable text can nevertheless still display sexual and textual undecidability. **Andrea Stojilkov** uses the example of a contemporary Serbian novel to reject Dubravka Ugrešić's characterisation of the "untranslatability" of Yugoslav cultural memory. Like Rose, Stojilkov considers her material ultimately translatable into English, in spite of the significant difficulties posed by particular dialect and very culturally specific terms.

The final chapter in this collection takes us beyond the confines of literary translation altogether. Using examples from international migration and UK maternity health care, where the biggest barriers to translatability are concrete and contingent, **Joanna Drugan** focuses on the economic and practical aspects of providing translation and interpreting. She argues that in these contexts untranslatability becomes a political and ethical issue as well as a linguistic, cultural, economic and practical one.

Many of the chapters in this collection were first presented as papers to the Sixth International Postgraduate Translation Symposium held at the University of East Anglia in November 2015 (and have been revised and updated for publication). The volume as a whole brings together established and emerging scholars from the UK, USA and continental Europe. It does not adopt a single, unified line on the question of untranslatability; instead, contributors explore the concept from a wide range of historical and contemporary perspectives, espousing a strong or weak interpretation – or rejecting the notion altogether. As such, the volume aims to provide a snapshot of the current state of interdisciplinary research in an area which represents one of the most provocative but productive concerns for translation studies today.

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[1] For an earlier art project inspired by untranslatability, see de los Bueis *et al.* 2009. Two recent collections of poetry inspired by "untranslatables" are Singer 2015 and Cay 2017.

[2] See e.g. Jacot de Boinod 2005, Moore 2009 and more recent examples like Schott 2013, Sanders 2015, Mak 2016 or Edwards 2018. The trend can be dated back to Rheingold 1988.

[3] Jacot de Boinod's *The Meaning of Tingo*, for example, had been translated into a dozen different languages by 2013 (Éditions Assimil 2013); Sanders' *Lost in Translation* is already available in at least six translated versions (Sanders 2016a). For "home-grown" non-English examples of the phenomenon, see e.g. Montes 2014, Tripolina 2017.

[4] "There is no direct translation of the Swedish word *lagom*, but on the available evidence we may take it to mean 'lifestyle publishing fad'" (Private Eye 2017, 34). See also Moore 2017.

[5] The linguistic relativity hypothesis is usually traced back to the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas, whose time among the Inuit of Baffin Island in the 1880s is documented in Boas 1911. See also the work of his successor Bronisław Malinowski, who meticulously documents the "untranslatable words" used for gardening in the Kilivila language of the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski 2002, 11-23).