

TRANSLATING THE “NO MAN”

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Abstract

On the premise that language is untranslatable a priori into another (Ricoeur), this essay suggests that the task of the translator is not only to translate what words express, but likewise what they do not express. The translation of the expressionless word (Benjamin) leads the translator into the realm of the self, imagined vis-à-vis language and culture. It is through the imagination that the self encounters the non-self (Fichte), i.e. the expressionless self that complements the expressed self. The ultimate task of translation—it is thus argued—equally requires the translation of the non-self, i.e. the poetization (Novalis) of the human confined in exact language. Poetization—the dynamic act of overcoming oneself—discovers the untranslatable, irrational, non-self uttering the expressionless word. Translation as poetization frees language from being deceived by itself, and the self from being confined in language.

Keywords

truth, meaninglessness, imagination, non-self, poetization.

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Introduction

Traditional translation studies time and again point to an underlying clash of theories rooted in varied philosophical presuppositions. Whereas philosophy—more specifically language philosophy—is said to “...show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (*Philosophical Investigations* 309), it is itself not immune from turning into another theory of translation that may well trap language in yet another fly-bottle. Heuristically supplanting linguistic essentialism/idealism with the conception of ordinary language as a game (*Preliminary Studies* 18), form of life (*Philosophical Investigations* 19), or linguistic habit that follows rules (*Philosophical Investigations* 142) and has a point (*Philosophical Investigations* 564), cannot entirely claim victory over the contention that language—be it the grammar of a language game (*Philosophical Investigations* 373, 371)—points to an essence; whether to be found in pure ideas (c.f. Descartes, Leibniz) or direct experience (cf. Hamann, Wittgenstein). And essences—if we follow Aristotle—as distinct from appearances or accidents, are one and singular (Z 4). The apparent sequitur of this line of argumentation is that the essence of language, by nature, remains incommunicable and thus, in theory, languages constitute truths—claims that are philosophically incommensurable. In other words—freely borrowed from Ricoeur—“language is untranslatable *a priori* into another” (13).

Applied to culture—purportedly an exemplary form of language (Alexander 297)—this conviction is poetically expressed in Rudyard Kipling’s belief concerning the ostensible irreconcilability of Orient and Occident. The first stanza of his famous “Ballad of East and West” reads:

East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat

Then again, notwithstanding the hypothetical incommensurability of languages, cultures and religions, humanity has never ceased in the attempt to live together and converse across cultural, social, linguistic and religious borders. While Kipling’s impression of the fundamental differences of culture is indeed spot-on, his poetic wisdom does not stop there as the ballad reads on:

But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
tho’ they come from the ends of the earth!

Intuitively, Kipling understood that East and West can breach their boundaries of truths on the common ground of humanity. Ultimately, mutually exclusive truths-claims share a common origin that is embedded in the depth of the human condition. Language and culture, along with religion, have a mutual gestation,

cradle, and upbringing. Thus, before East and West could think and speak, they could and did communicate. About what? As a matter of fact about nothing! And there we find the common source of all diverse and distinct truths—they have their beginning when and where disparate renditions of truths did not yet exist. Where myth is not yet displaced by philosophy—and nonsense stood face to face with sense in one and the same universe. That is the aeon of the paradox; the time anterior to truths (Gans 54). In his seminal study *Paradoxes of Faith*, the French theologian Henri de Lubac reflects, “For paradox exists everywhere in reality, before it exists in thought. It is everywhere in permanence. It is forever reborn” (10). In this world beyond worlds, William Blake muses, contradictions are not obstacles, but “positives.” Blake writes in his poem *Milton*,

There is a place where Contrarities are equally True
 This place is called Beulah. It is a pleasant lovely Shadow
 Where no dispute can come . . . (Milton 30.1-31.11 cited in Bindman 181)

Thus, the contention of this paper is that long before languages attempt to communicate by searching for formal correspondences, a common set of linguistic codes together with the right communicative intention (Sperber and Wilson 164), or the interplay of dynamic equivalences, they already communicate by not communicating at all, i.e. not by what they say, but by what remains unsaid in saying something. Languages, thus, firstly correspond not by what words, phrases, sentences and texts express, but by the unlimited possibilities that remain unexpressed. Thus, what has to be translated before any translation is what cannot be translated at all. Or freely adapted from Wittgenstein, silence has to be translated before the spoken word. This silence, however, is not found in words, sentences or texts, but in the unity and wholeness of *dasein* behind the diversity of day-by-day existence and utterances. Hence, every word that differentiates meaning likewise communicates a unity of meaning from which all meaning originates.

This paper, then, moves beyond questions of particular translations, or translation theories, and goes into the foundational paradox of language, speech and translation. There it encounters a realm of language before language, i.e. what Benjamin calls the “expressionless” word. It is the expressionless word that has to be translated before actual expressions can communicate with one another; or before the translator will have to recognize that any attempt of languages to communicate with one another—like the task of translation itself—will never be able to retrieve the pure meaning of language. Yet the continuing task of translation remains essential to prevent language from being seduced by the sirenic lure of discovering its singular pure form, and thus to enable non-discriminatory cross-cultural communication in today’s post-post-modern world that once again forwards the insinuation of superior narratives. Indeed, “Benjamin...would conclude that reality consists in ‘as many translations as languages’” (Baltrusch 118). The ongoing—and indeed never

ending—tasks of translation, therefore, saves reality from being deceived by itself, i.e. from the preposterous contention to be derived from only one—the so-called original—language.

Then again, the point that this paper hopes to make is equally practical and truly palpable in daily speech, where often the most basic expressions, like “yes” or “no,” do not only convey concrete meaning by what they state, but likewise by what they do not state. Thus, even in ordinary speech, meaning and meaninglessness stand in a paradoxical relationship to one another. Indeed, the demand that “your ‘yes’ be a ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ be a ‘no’” (cf. James 5:12)—taken out of context—continues to force languages and cultures to exchange mystery for certainty, the numinous for the commonplace.

The paradox that meaning is found alongside meaninglessness finds its illuminating analogy in the quantum world. Werner Heisenberg observed that the particle-wave duality—exhibited by quantum particles in the double-slit experiment¹—and the created superposition of all possible states or probabilities² mysteriously collapses if an observer is introduced (Berman 22). Thus what a quantum particle is in truth can never be seen at once. In fact, looking at it reduces its appearance to only one possible state. A quantum particle is what is and what it is not at the same time. Similarly mystifying is Schrödinger’s cat locked in a contraption with a fifty-fifty chance that a device that is triggered by radioactive decay causes its death (Brown 24). Left unobserved, the cat remains suspended between equal possibilities, but as soon as we open the contraption to take a look, the universe is altered into only one possible state, and the cat is either alive or dead.

In returning to language, Walter Benjamin in his famous *Task of the Translator* calls this original state—what could be called the quantum state— of language “pure language (die reine Sprache)...which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages.” Rendered into utterances, however, Benjamin continues, “All information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished.” Benjamin concludes with his well-known advice, “It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language” (Venuti 82). In other words, the task of the translator is not only to translate what is said but what remains unsaid. This task, however, moves from the particular to the general, from the linguistic to the anthropomorphic, reaching into the translation of the untranslatable self. Following Benjamin’s train of thought, the task of the translator—this paper will argue—is to prevent the inexhaustible self of the translator from extinction, by overcoming oneself and reaching into the non-self, the “no man.” By breaking through the barriers of the self, the self will be liberated from its self-delusion, i.e. the belief to be established by one language alone. This

breaking down of barriers is accomplished by an endless play of translation, or what Novalis calls the “poetization” of languages.

From Analogy to Paradox (From What is Possible to What is Impossible)

Eve Tavor Bannet demonstrates persuasively that a somewhat similar line of thought can be traced in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ordinary language philosophy (667). Contrary to the view that words have exact definitions—like a football field (Wittgenstein’s most favored analogy is football) is bounded by lines—Wittgenstein keenly observes that, “Many words don’t have a strict meaning” (*Preliminary Studies* 27). In fact, “the proper(ty of) language [is] always ready to be inexact” (Bannet 667). In due course, “The grammatical rules for terms of the general proposition must contain the multiplicity of possible cases provided for by the proposition” (*Philosophical Grammar* 258). Words and their meaning enjoy a “freedom of movement” by “having no end of possible meanings and applications” and “can be jumped analogically, by family resemblances, from case to case” (Bannet 669).

To translate a word is to transfer it into another region and context, i.e. to give it an analogous use. Analogy, Bannet explains, is open-ended and sometimes not similar at all (667). Indeed, Wittgenstein will tell us, “We can’t see where an [analogy] ceases to hold” (*Lectures* 109). The investigation as to where an analogy has become misleading, therefore, is a “...grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language.” (“Philosophical Investigations” 90).

Grammatical investigations, for that reason, “show that there is always a multiplicity of other untapped possibilities already in language itself” (Bannet 668). “Grammar is not the expression of what is the case, but of what is possible” (*Lectures* 2). “Language can only say those things that we can imagine otherwise” (*Philosophical Remarks* 54).

It is in imagining other possible analogies, respectively, other ways of translating analogies from case to case, Bannet notes, “that we break the bounds of closed and finite grammars what otherwise would narrowly circumscribe what is—more aptly said, what we allow—to be possible” (668). Bannet concludes, “And it is by imagining endless, other, unthought possibilities of language use, that we play the same finite set of cards, and extend to the infinite the idea that ‘the boundaries of my language are the boundaries of my world’ (TLP 5.6)” (668). The grammar of analogy is a grammar of possibilities as “Language can only say those things that we can imagine otherwise” (*Philosophical Remarks* 54). To further Wittgenstein’s point, the grammar of analogy can be said to be the grammar of impossibilities since we can always imagine the translation of words otherwise.

The Realm of Paradox³

What lies at the heart of analogy is not what the analogy reveals, but that what it conceals; not the similarity to its object, but its *infinitely* greater dissimilarity. What, accordingly, lies at the heart of translation, is imagining the possibilities of grammar alongside its infinite, indeterminate and uncertain impossibilities.

This hypothesis can yet be developed further. If the communication of languages requires the imagination of grammatical impossibilities, it likewise requires the imagination of the "impossible" vis-à-vis the possible. This is the realm of paradox. Paradoxes—most basically defined—are undomesticated truths that do not seem to have a regular place in the fabric of unequivocalness. Paradoxes—realities beyond (para) belief (doxa), contradict common sense and expectation. Paradoxes are truths that stand on the head (Faletta 9)—seemingly—of the diablo, the devil himself, the antithesis of Hermes who Baudelaire calls the wisest of angels, who mischievously turns God's perfect truths upside down.

Paradoxes are truths that evidently cannot be true. They torment the sanctimonious intellectual. How can a liar speak the truth in lying? How can the 'set of all sets' fail to include itself? How can a human being subsist in a divine person possessing a divine and human nature? How can the measurement of the wave-function of an electron cause the collapse of this function for another electron that simultaneously emanates from the same source, at a distance, without noticeable connection and faster than the speed of light?

What then do logical, religious, and physical paradoxes tell us about the world? One thing at best: what, and how, the world is not in its completeness. Paradoxes unmask the claim that the universe is unambiguous and free of contradictions as *petitio principii*, whether motivated by religious, political, or economic concerns. A world stripped of paradoxes is a world ruled by material concerns without an underlying spiritual complement. Its today has no tomorrow, and allows for only one conclusion reminiscent of unabashed Epicureanism: "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor 15:32 RSV). Indeed, controllability and predictability are hailed as the glue that holds the universe together by providing the necessary order and meaning for our lives.

Contrary to the claims of Isms, language stripped of paradox becomes what Northrop Frye calls technological language (Frye 22); a language that reduces the self to a quantifiable object; the mystery of existence to banality. On the contrary, paradoxes are exceptional and precious glimpses of logical and ontic ambiguity that disclose the foundation of the universe; i.e. our world resting on, and drawing meaning from, an undivided whole. The fragments of our *Dasein* are embedded in the whole of Being; or as Hegel puts it aptly: "Das Wahre ist das Ganze" (Hegel, Vorrede 20.15). Ontic paradoxes point to an ontological Paradox from which inexhaustible meaning flows. Paradoxes inject this world with endless possibilities and offer the promise of immortality. Paradoxes invigorate the mind and allow the

soul to breathe. Resistant to analytical judgment, it is paradoxes that give rise to the immortal works of architecture, literature, music and the performing arts. Through paradoxes we find ways that lead from the bounds of our temporal existence back to the extra-temporal space of imagination.

Paradoxes in language, Michael Cronin points out, are often highlighted in fiction and force readers as well as writers to reflect on framing procurers that make innovation and evaluation possible (235). As evaluation makes the reader aware of the invented nature of fiction, “Innovation takes place where paradox makes one aware of assumptions, premises, the taken for granted, the rules that govern the organisation of the sense.” As regard translation, Cronin concludes, “A translation is paradoxical because it both is and is not the original. It only exists because of the original...The original is simultaneously absent and present.” The awareness of the paradoxical status of a translation, for Cronin, allows for redrafting the rules of translation and accounts for the awareness of *all* the assumptions that are taken for granted in the daily use of language (236).

Translation and the Impossible; Positing the Impossible Self

Translation, it can be argued, is born from paradox; it flows from the imagination of that “what is” and moreover from that “what is not.” Thus, a translation advances from what Kant calls the “re-productive” imagination to the “productive imagination.” Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* reads,

As a power of [producing] intuitions even when the object is not present, imagination (*facultas imaginandi*) is either productive or reproductive—that is, either a power of exhibiting an object originally and so prior to experience (*exhibitio originaria*), or a power of exhibiting it in a derivative way, by bringing back to mind an empirical intuition we have previously had (*exhibitio derivata*). (28)

While for Kant the productive imagination—the imagination prior to experience—remains a “production” of the subject and is posterior to the reproductive imagination, John Rundell points out that Fichte in his *Science of Knowledge* argues that the work of the imagination is at first found in the “self-positing self” (2). The constitution of innerliness precedes and grounds the constitution of the outside world and its objects (Rundell 7). The faculty of the imagination, for Fichte, represents the three-fold value of freedom: (1) The freedom of self-creation or self-positing, (2) the capacity for a reflexivity regarding its self-constitution and condition ...and (3) the creation and interaction of the world of, and with others (Rundell 8).

In relation to the Kantian question of how synthetic judgments may be possible, Fichte argues that "no synthesis is possible without preceding antithesis" (Fichte 24). Rundell quotes, "...Just as there can be no antithesis without synthesis, no synthesis without antithesis, so there can be neither without thesis – an absolute positing, whereby an A (the self) is neither be equated nor opposed to another, but is absolutely posited...it must be one" (9). This "one", Rundell explains, is a process and can refer to anything other than itself. It is where the self is posited. In Rundell's view, Fichte's critical philosophy is strictly immanent if not autistic—the self exists, because it posits itself, and posits itself, because it exists—the self can only posit itself opposite the "not-self." The self and the not-self exist co-extensively. The not-self is not something existing externally to the self, but is supposed by it (Rundell 9).

Self-positing is limiting, yet limitless; it asserts, opposes and negates at the same time. The activity that causes self-positing is the productive imagination that "unites the opposite self and not-self" (Rundell 21). Imagination, thus, is creative in producing the indeterminacy of the human being; the creative imaginary that constitutes the universality of the human condition.

At this point, Rundell introduces Cornelius Castoriadis' thesis of the *Imaginary Institution of Society* that challenges what the Greek philosopher deems inherited or identitarian thinking (23). In his multilayered critique against Marxism, structuralism and "the teaching of reason of the West," Castoriadis postulates that the subject is not "one of and by reason, language, or intersubjectivity—he/she is an ontological creation, the ontology of which originates from the imagination" (Rundell 3). As Rundell explicates, "The subject is constituted through two imaginaries which, in terms of their deployment, co-exist and compete with any other subject, and yet are irreducible to one another. These imaginaries are the radical imaginary of the psyche and the social instituting and instituted imaginary of society" (4). Castoriadis radically questions the productive power of the solitary individual as thought of in Western philosophy.

... the imagination of the singular human being is defunctionalized. Hegel has said that man is a sick animal. In truth is a mad animal, totally unfit for life, a species that would have disappeared as soon as it emerged if it had not proven itself capable, at the collective level, of another creation: society in the strict sense, that is, institutions embodying social imaginary significations. (148)

For Castoriadis, the imaginary of the psyche does not exhibit the rationality of the human animal, but its dysfunctionality. "We are the animal for which nothing is taken-for-granted. We can create and give form to anything" (Rundell 5). Thus, there exists likewise a dysfunctionality of the imagination and the forms through which it is represented. This dysfunctionality, Castoriadis believes, inevitably breaks open the "autistic closure" of the imagination and creates spaces of new

symbolic and institutional forms. This breaking open—Rundell explains with reference to Fichte—is tantamount to a “shock” from the outside, i.e. “an activity that is curbed from without” (34). While this shock originates from the feeling of dissatisfaction, it leads to what Fichte calls “a striving, the work of the not-self, which is wholly independent of the self for comprehension and understanding against the restrictedness and limitation of the outside.” The shock from the outside moves or opens the self to “a longing [that] aspires to realize something outside the self” (Rundell 34).

While for Fichte, this shock—to avoid falling under the spell of a political rule by a demos, as Castoriadis would describe it—remains part of what can be called second-order reflexivity (Rundell 35). Its resonance may be found in the paradox of imagining the self in an unimaginable God. The theologian Thomas J. J. Altizer provides the philosophical background for this understanding.

We can evoke an actual or real identity only by embodying difference, a real and an actual difference, a difference making identity manifest, and making it manifest as itself. Only the presence of difference calls identity forth, and it calls it forth in its difference from itself, in its difference from an identity that is eternally the same. (37)

Thus, the paradoxical revelation of God as ‘I am that I am’ (Altizer’s translation) is a tautology that establishes presence but not difference, and therefore, no identity. In Altizer’s somewhat controversial theology that shows noticeable indebtedness to Nietzsche, this insight leads to the conclusion that assigning to God an actual identity is, in effect, the death of God. Where then, Altizer surmises, lies the true identity of God? The answer is found in the paradox that ‘I am,’ if it does not establish God’s identity, implies ‘I am not.’ The negation of God’s eternal and non-differentiable identity embodies a paradoxical identity that is both, itself, and its own other (Taylor 576). According to Altizer, it is this ‘I am not’ that marks the act of God’s self-communication and embodiment. The ‘I am not’ is an act of self-emptying in which identity is self-enacted and self-actualized. God’s paradoxical embodiment in the ‘I am not’ fully reveals his irreducible identity and self (Altizer 71).

Conversely, being created in the image of God—as the book of Genesis poetically reflects—may be not, as it is commonly understood, an assertion of a self, but the act of positing a not-self. Not the alleged self, but this not-self mirrors God’s image and the human freedom of irreducibility and non-objectifiability. Thus, the irreducible otherness of God—a God whom we must not make a grave image of (Exo 20:4-6 RSV)—grounds the otherness of the self, that—and arguably only in this way—allows for the otherness of the other—who truly images God.

In terms of translation, this insight leads to an understanding that contrary to intuition, translation is not simply an act of the self but, through the imagination,

constitutes the self. This self is found in the paradoxical play of the self and the imagined not-self. It is the not-self of the translator that imagines the impossibilities of meaning that grounds all possible meanings of a translated text.

Conclusion

Translation in general, it is argued, is embedded in the *Ganzheit*, the totality, of language, or—as Hamann expresses it—in its poetry. The entirety of language reveals itself in the totality of human life, i.e. the paradoxical human life of the self in communion and conversation with the not-self. This life of “no man”—the Odyssean “outis”—is the ground of translation that—according to Novalis—is “the act of overcoming (*sich selbst überspringen*) oneself...as genesis of life” (Baltrusch 117).⁴ At this *Urpunct* the linguistic and anthropomorphic dimensions of language converge. Proceeding from the *arche*, the “in the beginning” of language, translation takes to the form of Novalis’ project of the poetization of the sciences—in particular Fichte’s *Science of Knowledge*—which is based on the conviction that by representing indivisible categories, all scientific ideas are related and transferable. Similar to Fichte, the “I” for Novalis is only understood in so far as it is represented by the “non-I.” To make one science, like mathematics, intelligible, it has first to be represented by another science, which in turn has to be represented by yet another science. Poetization is an ongoing and reciprocal process. Novalis introduces here the *Umkehrungsmethode*—the method of reversal—that results in a ‘poetry of mathematics’ and a ‘mathematics of poetry.’ This schema is further redoubled by reflexivity, revealing a poetry of poetry, and a mathematics of mathematics (Berman 84). Antoine Berman explains Novalis’ enigmatic concept: “The self-reflection of a science is the other side of its reflection in another science, of its symbolization by another science” (84). In the words of Novalis, “Every symbol can be symbolized by what it symbolizes—countersymbol. But there is also a symbol of symbols—intersymbols . . . everything can be symbol of the other—symbolic function” (Bermann 84). Poetization, however, has a super-structure. It follows the law of potentiation, “from the low to the high, the empirical to the abstract, the philosophical to the poetic, into the state of mystery” (Berman 95). Poetization, thus, is the ascending translation of the concrete into the abstract and back, the empirical into the universal and back. In the words of Novalis, poetization requires that the magician uses the language of mathematics, and that the poet, the rhetorician and the philosopher play and compose grammatically. A fugue—Novalis points out—is entirely logical or scientific. To conclude with a quote from Novalis: Our language—it was very musical from the beginning. It should once again become a song.

Translation, this paper argues, is foremost and primarily the poetization of the human confined in language, i.e. the apparent rational, logical and precise human. A poetization that discovers the untranslatable, irrational, non-self uttering the

expressionless word by losing it in the paradox of truth. There the self and the untranslatable non-self "stand face to face," translating one into the other, and the other into oneself. In translation—adapting the famous words of Blanchot—"what dies gives life" to translation,

"...the life that endures death and maintains itself in it"(Hegel). What wonderful power. But something was there and is no longer there. Something has disappeared. How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists before, if all my power consists of making it into what exists after? ... My hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature.... Just now the reality of words was an obstacle. Now, it is my only chance. A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of ink, the book. (Blanchot 237)

Notes

1. The single electron leaves its source as a particle; becomes a wave of potentials; interferes with itself and goes through both slits to hit the screen like a particle.
2. The electron goes through both slits, and it goes through neither, and it goes through just one, and it goes through just the other.
3. The section closely follows the unpublished PhD thesis of Markus Locker, *The Power of Paradox*, Monash University, Melbourne, 2010.
4. “Der Act des sich selbst Überspringens ist überall der höchste—der Ursprung—die Genesis des Lebens” Novalis, *Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs* (Berlin: Hanser [2002], 345).

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