

The Task of the Poet and the Task of the Translator Comparing Two Types of Discourses

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Abstract: The essay joins together the concepts of transformation, negotiation and adequacy with the concept of translatability. Firstly, I conducted my research on Walter Benjamin's text about translation. What stands out is the difference between the poet and the translator, but mainly the concept of pure language as described by Benjamin. Secondly, I reviewed Benjamin's text through a poststructuralist perspective (Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Paul de Man and Paul Ricœur), finally reaching the acknowledgement of the impossibility of a perfect translation. Lastly, the paper gives an example of the reason why a text can be difficult to translate (Derrida's letters).

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The following essay intends to compare and contrast the poetic work with the act of translation, touching both upon the convergent and the opposing elements which configure these two types of discourse. A first undertaking would require a reading of the German theorist Walter Benjamin.

I. The perfect translatability

In his 1930 essay "The task of the translator", Walter Benjamin distinguishes between two types of discourse, proposing that the translator's intention is *derivative*, *ultimate* and *ideational*,¹ therefore it is predetermined by an intention of the writer, the latter being *spontaneous*, *primary* and *graphic*.² By analogy with translating, one can state, assuming the writer does make a translation, that he is actually dealing with *pre-language*, a concept which in Benjamin's point of view is equivalent to *specific linguistic contextual aspects*.³ Pre-language, namely that which does not yet exist in language and which, at the same time, can represent a

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 76–77.

² Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 76.

³ *Ibid.*, 76.

source of an originating language, but not *non-language*, if this concept excludes the possibility of communication.

In my point of view, pre-language is the writer's intent of expressing a referent through language; as such, joining these specific linguistic contextual aspects targets a dialogic feature. Once these specific linguistic contextual aspects are brought together, a decrease in what the work of art seemed to convey happens, due to the materialization in language of the numerous combinations which existed in pre-language. In other words, by uttering the work of art loses some of the potential it initially had in the first stage of creation, namely in pre-language.

The task of the translator, unlike that of the poet (**pre-language**→**language**), is already limited by a language which has to be converted into another language (**language** → **language**). Besides the fact that the translation follows the original text (*derivative*), it must also render the intended meaning. Benjamin asserts that there is a similarity between language and meaning. In fact, the text under discussion aims to recover the perfect language, as in the Bible, where "meaning has ceased to be the watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation. Where a text is identical with truth or dogma, where it is supposed to be «the true language» in all its literalness and without the mediation of meaning, this text is unconditionally translatable".¹ The German theorist thus creates the perfect pattern which should serve as a guideline for every translation. This pattern is based on the perfect match between language and revelation, the latter representing, in my opinion, the writer's purpose.

Walter Benjamin's theory considers translation a failed attempt, with the exception of the Scripture, a text which is defined by the strong bond between signifier and signified. When it comes to translating literature, accessing the perfect language can be done by detecting the differences which stem from the incongruence between the original text and the translation. These differences reconstruct the language spoken before the time of Babel. Even though the perfect language can be attained only as a metaphysical construct, the purpose of translating is not to emulate the original but to make the differences between the translated work and the original one stand out. Moreover, even the language in which the work of art is rendered for the first time, is in its turn a "translation" of the perfect language. Before the Tower of Babel there was only a sole language. The beginning of its construction ended those times and started another epoch. The latter is defined by language pluralism.

Before I go any further with my analysis, I must distinguish between two types of translation: *the profane translation* and *the sacred one*. On the one hand, I define profane translation (**profane text** → **profane translation**) as the translation of any text into another language, except for the Scripture (**sacred text** → **sacred translation**). "Profane" should not be understood as a malicious translation of the Bible; I have not been using this adjective with its standard meaning but to describe the translation of any text that is not related to the Bible. I think this is the meaning that Benjamin should attribute to any fallible translation because Benjamin does not nominate the type of translation he makes reference to throughout his text. Instead,

¹ Ibid., 82.

he uses only one term (signifier), when in fact he renders two meanings (signified). On the other hand, the sacred translation is perfect at all times, even when it is not. In other words, it is never fallible because its perfection consists in the numerous alternatives it grants.

The biblical message does not lose the potential it can access in the first stage of creation – in this respect, there is a great difference between the sacred language and the profane language. In other words, the sacred language, even when it is uttered, it maintains the same characteristics as in pre-language. The numerous content combinations available in pre-language should not be mistaken with language pluralism. In the Bible, there is a unique meaning which can have a multitude of signifiers. To conclude, the signified has the greatest importance of all because it stays the same irrespective of the various signifiers which are attributed to it.

II. The belief effect

The perfect translatability can be achieved, as I have previously demonstrated, if the signified and the signifier merge into an inseparable entity. In “Positions” (which later on became the manifesto of the deconstruction movement), Jacques Derrida claims that the perfect translatability can be validated only as long as it is in connection with the concept of a *transcendental signified*. This transcendental signified is either an entity of the biblical text or an entity of a literary text. As an entity, it ensures the cohesion between language – what is being communicated – and the precise rendering of the content.

Like translation, described by Benjamin as *ideational*, the transcendental signified falls into the same category as intuition. The signifier and the signified form an inseparable entity, especially in the case of the sacred translation. As opposed to the sacred translation, I would state that the profane translation uses intuition to a lesser extent. However, even in this instance, I would identify two meanings of “intuition”. On the one hand, profane translation forms itself on a *reason-based intuition*. On the other hand, the sacred translation is *determined by an epiphany*.

Another example of an unmodified conveyance of meaning is when the *belief effect* becomes active, as in Pierre Bourdieu’s notion: “The sensitive translation conceals the structure, in the very form in which it presents it, and thanks to which it succeeds in producing a *belief effect* (more than a reality effect). And it is probably this which means that the literary work can sometimes say more [...] But it says it only in a mode such that it does not truly say it”.¹ In his study, Bourdieu refers evidently to the social dimension to which he belongs and that he inherently renders for the reader. In fact, this highly plausible rendering either of the social background or of other constitutive elements of the text, is a consequence of the belief effect. By analogy with semantics, the writer can create this effect which guarantees him universal understanding, thus transcending meaning, even in the case of a limited sequence of words. Moreover, one must bear in mind that perfect

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 32.

translatability seems to appear in the biblical text or in the literary one, on the condition that the latter has the aforementioned effect on the entire structure.

The belief effect pertains, in my opinion, mainly to profane texts and it is a consequence of the epiphanic intuition that is specific to the sacred text. Although the reader's intuition in respect to the profane text is lessened (**profane text**→**the belief effect**), the belief effect is still a reminiscence of the belief that the sacred text succeeds to render (**sacred text**→**belief**). As one can notice by comparing the diagrams in the brackets, the belief effect deals with profane texts and it indicates more likely an apparent cohesion between the signified and the signifier. Regarding the sacred text, I would argue that it has a universal meaning, despite the numerous alternatives of the signifier. All the same, in the case of profane texts, just one signifier receives multiple meanings, hence the belief effect enables the occurrence of a transcendental signified effect. The latter is an elusory feature because it does not function properly, due to the multiple understandings it authorizes on its behalf.

The perfect translatability theory is overruled by Jacques Derrida. The French deconstructivist refers to the difference (which in fact is never pure) between the signified and the signifier. Translation always disrupts the entity constituted by these two components. Thus, if translation cannot be perfect (due to its disruptive feature), then "for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another".¹ The perfect translatability is a concept which does not match reality. Translating cannot reveal the equivalent pairs of signifiers relating to one another. Instead, it reminds us that it is rather a process, like thinking, like deconstruction (because this is the philosophical field from which it emerges). It is an endless process which questions not only translation's finality but also its starting point. The deconstruction movement subverts perfect translatability and, at the same time, it affects the literary work and its creation stage.

The notion of transformation suggested by Derrida expresses simultaneously that any translation is an ongoing procedure since the interpretation of a text is never completed. Translation is a hermeneutical act which can always undergo transformations. Last but not least, Derrida discredits, on the one hand, the perfect translatability theory and, on the other hand, the creation stage as a compatible conveying between the referent and the signified. The writer's intention and the translator's intention are, for Derrida, fallible notions.

III. The disarticulation of the original

In the third part of my paper, I will refer to Paul de Man's article "Walter Benjamin's «The Task of the Translator»". Even though the article was first published in 1983, my aim is not to emphasize the time period that passed until De Man's thesis but to highlight the conceptual contrast between these two theorists, De Man being, first and foremost, a poststructuralist philosopher.

Paul de Man notices a major difference between what Benjamin attributes to poetry as compared to translation. The poet, unlike the translator, does not have any

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 20.

restrictions regarding her/his understanding by a reader. Namely she/he is not limited by an intralinguistic activity, an activity that is bounded to language. The emitter, in our case the poet, does not depend merely on the receiver, certainly the reader. In this respect, Paul de Man asserts the existence of a “naiveté” of the poet which is characterized by that fact that “he has to convey a meaning which does not necessarily relate to language.”¹ Instead, the type of relationship that translation has with its object is predetermined because “the relationship of the translator to the original is the relationship between language and language.”² The desire to utter something is absent or at least it is diminished. Translation has the same configuration as a *paraphrase*, a *clarification* or an *interpretation*; a *copy* in that sense.³ Therefore, De Man states that the poetic act is per se an original occurrence, having both the meaning of an authentic act and of a primary one. Also, I would argue that it is an activity which is related more to external features, excluding linguistic components.



What do you need? To run. But the way you ask
makes me want to stay

Patricia Todoran, *Run*
40 cm x 50 cm, lambda print, 2015

Throughout his analysis, Paul de Man likens translation to literary theory, literary history and critical philosophy (generated by Kant), suggesting that these types of literary and philosophical investigations resemble translation due to their relationship with language. Literary theory, for example, has an *intralinguistic* type

¹ Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 81.

² De Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 82.

of relationship with the work of art because it only uses the existing words from the original text. In a deconstructivist manner, De Man demonstrates that both translation and its similar types of literary and philosophical investigation ultimately reveal their failure to read the text because paradoxically they focus too much on the written text. Paul de Man identifies this failure with an intrinsic disarticulation already at work in the original. One can consider that the reading's failure is an effect of excessively focusing on the written text. Hence, it can be said that one is dealing with a textual reading. More importantly, what should be clear to us is the fact that primary disarticulation never leads to a perfect coherence of the text. The original poetic act alludes to another meaning which is *extralinguistic* and it cannot be grasped only by a textual reading. This is the point in which De Man's theory and Derrida's coincide; if Derrida replaced the notion of translation with transformation, Paul de Man would also overrule the idea of a primary and resolute language.

Moreover, the disarticulation of the original is more obvious when translating into another language rather than in the stage of just reading the original text. When translating, the junctures where the text breaks itself become obvious. The translation's ambiguity is a result of the junctures in the text, the points in which meaning becomes loose. This is precisely the moment when one can recognize that the original text was already a "corrupted" text. Also, one can infer how difficult it is to translate a text whose meaning is equivocal.

Thus, the (profane) translation of any work of art will eventually prove that translating is fallible not only because of the language in which the original text is translated but also due to the primary language in which it was written at first. The specific linguistic contextual aspects, in my opinion, are lost once "the first translation" (**thinking→language**) is performed. The specific linguistic contextual aspects cannot be restored by another translation because they are already diminished through uttering. If there is indeed a case in which they could be flawlessly restored, one should bear in mind the belief effect that a profane text can inspire to its readers. Nonetheless, for De Man, the sacred translation (a term he does not mention explicitly) shares the same connotations as profane translation, namely that both are disarticulated.

Understanding a text can be quite demanding in the absence of the external factors that triggered the text's creation. But the translation's failure and also the text's failure to assembling a structure as a meaningful entity has a more profound reason: "Translation, to the extent that it disarticulates the original, to the extent that it is pure language and is only concerned with language, gets drawn into [...] something essentially destructive, which is in language itself".¹ Language seems to be the disruptive element of the text. Language is indeed the component which binds the text but it is not altogether its source (maybe with the exception of metatextual works of art). In other words, language is productive up to the point in which it cannot render what it initially wanted to.

To conclude, one can notice the following structure: firstly, according to the romantic paradigm (Walter Benjamin's theory), the sacred text's entity between the signified and the signifier will be rendered irrespective of the signifier. This leads to

¹ Ibid., 84.

the belief effect which occurs in profane texts. Secondly, due to deconstructivist thought, once humanity was aware of the original text's disarticulation, the profane texts' belief effect is undoubtedly lessened. We are part of a postromantic stream of thought in which the language crisis begins with the mistrust in any primary forms of speech (as when casting a spell) and ends with the modernist language crisis visible in any cultural work but especially in the poetic one because it deals, first and foremost, with language.

IV. The negotiation of meaning

In contrast with the concept of perfect translateability, Paul Ricœur's theory on translation is another step forward. The French philosopher brings to our attention the necessity of finally accepting the impossibility of perfect translatability.

Once one can accept that perfect translatability is impossible, one can adopt the pair of terms "fidelity/betrayal" at the expense of dismissing the pair of terms "translatable/untranslatable". It can be proved by a deconstructivist analysis that in such a binary opposition, none of the terms could prevail over the other. One cannot state for a fact (unless one is dealing with a very poor translation) to what a degree a translation is faithful to the original text or it betrays it because, in the first place, any translation depends on the language it is translated into. Namely every language has its specific peculiarities. Secondly (and vice-versa), the conditions through which a work of art emerges into different languages also depend on the peculiarity of the work of art. If such a binary opposition is disproved, one can state that there is always a constant negotiation between these two terms and inferentially between the two languages above-mentioned. The meaning of *negotiation* should be understood as the acknowledgement of having to lose something in order to gain something else. The perfect overlapping between one language and another would be the equivalent of a *non-translation* and it would exclude the possibility of negotiation. Negotiation is the fundamental part which enables translation. Analogously, the uneven overlapping between one language and another is a mark of misinterpretation, an act that even deconstruction does not acknowledge.

Another reason (and, at the same time, a resemblance between Derrida's approach and Ricœur's theory) which supports the idea of a constant negotiation between the original text and its translation is the absence of a *third text* (the pure language). This third text would offer the possibility of a collation between two existing versions. Walter Benjamin assumes (from a romantic thought point of view) that (the sacred, I would add) translation is in fact *ultimate*. From Ricœur's perspective, negotiation develops as a series of *retranslations*: "In the absence of this third text, where the actual meaning would lie, the semantic original, there is only one recourse, i.e. the critical reading of a few, if not polyglot then at least bilingual, specialists, critical reading equivalent to a private retranslation, where our capable reader redoes the work of translation, for his own purpose, taking on, in turn, the test of translation and meeting with the same paradox of an equivalence without adequacy".¹

¹ Paul Ricœur, *On translation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 7.

Retranslations are one and the same with Derrida's notion of transformation. I would argue that there is also a distinction regarding this particular aspect: unlike the sacred text which does not require any retranslation due to its complete understanding, the profane texts are instead committed to all sorts of revisions and reinterpretations.

Both translation and the poetic act can have two distinct influences. In his essay Paul Ricœur makes reference to George Steiner's *After Babel*, one of the first substantial works on translating. Steiner classifies translation in two categories: there are translations which are directed towards the **target** (the language **into** which the work is translated) and translations which are directed towards the **source** (the language **from** which the work is translated). The French philosopher prefers to embrace the source translations because (and this is a major philosophical theme of the paper) the image of oneself can only be created in relation with alterity. Ricœur has in mind a united Europe, but since this is an underlying aspect of his paper, I will not approach it now.

The prototype of target translations is the equivalent of a *bourgeois art*, as it is called by Ricœur in his *The Rules of Art*. The bourgeois art, in contrast with *art for art's sake*, is a mercenary type of art, focused on consumerism. In my judgement, the prototype of source translations corresponds to the idea of art for art's sake and it should be adopted by the poetic act as well. From an ethical standpoint, these two types of discourse resemble each other because they have the ability to stay true to the source. In the case of translation, on the one hand, such a tendency is inferred by a respect for the original language of the text. It is, in a manner of speaking, a "hosting" of the source text by the target language. This aspect is amply discussed by J. Hillis Miller in his *Ethics of Reading*. In our case, translation can be regarded as a form of reading, due to its hermeneutical viewpoint. In the case of the poetic act, on the other hand, the creation of the poem would be more authentic if it would bear in mind the *source* rather than the *target*. Whether one speaks about translation or about poetry, both of them should undoubtedly negotiate as well as they can their emanation.

V. Encoding and decoding

The poetic text, most of all, is the one which attempts to create a proper, unique, authentic language. In order to succeed in doing so, namely in creating an *idiolect* (a type of language which bears the distinct signature of its addresser), the poetic text has to encode its meaning. Hence, the difficulty of translating. If the **poetic text** is an **encoding**, then its **translation** should therefore be seen as a **decoding**.

A powerful example of this is the first section ("Envois") of Derrida's *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. The deconstructivist philosopher makes an analysis of the post card. In this first chapter he includes letters that most likely are fictitious because the identity of the addresser is not revealed. Nevertheless, the author signs himself under various disguises such as: **j'accepte** (*Jacques sept*); **derrière les rideaux** (*behind the curtains*); by using the suffixes **der** (a variation of the German definite article), **id** (*immediately* or *idiom*) and **da** (the German adverb of place) and by employing the mirroring initials **JD** (Jacques

Derrida) and **DJ** (from *déjà*), a typical opposition by which deconstruction manifests itself. These methods belong to encoding. The poetic text becomes difficult to translate once it is doubled (enriched) through encoding, something that also happens in the aforementioned poetic-like section.

The difficulty that lies in translating, especially when it comes to the profane texts, is a consequence of encoding. The profane texts lose some of their specific linguistic contextual aspects that they would have conveyed if there had not occurred a weakening of the entity between the signifier and the signified which is a consequence of the separation from the sacred text. Only the addressee can at once decipher what the addresser meant. A translation is needed only for a different reader than the addressee. For the latter, translation has sacred features, meaning that the connection between the signifier and the signified is indistructible. For the common reader, the encoded aspect of the text is opaque. At the same time, the translation of the very same text has, for an ordinary reader, profane characteristics.

Still, the profane translation succeeds to a certain extent to decode the signatures which belong to the author. There are cases, as the previous one, when the translator correctly infers the encoded signs. Even so, the translation has to choose which meaning to convey and eventually to add a footnote to indicate other possible interpretations. This proves that there is no perfect translation. Having to use annexes is an argument that supports this statement. The sacred translation has no need for annexes. The profane translation, however, relies on these. The modern crisis of language previously discussed in this essay stems from a failure of the poetic act to render a full meaning without resorting to annexes (foreign elements). One, thus, witnesses an external immersion that occurs in the original text; the text's inability to assert itself in the outside world and to create it with words.

If the strategically placed signs cannot be decoded, what ensues is a loss of meaning, invariably risking that some of the meaning is lost to the reader, just as letters (private and deliberate messages) can be lost: "letters can always not arrive at their destination, and that the mail, in all languages, does not always tell the truth, even the most certain one"¹. This neverending wandering of the meaning, similar to Ulysses' journey (which is the modern man's plight), is caused by the dissolution of the entity formed by the signifier and the signified. Meaning always goes back and forth between these two elements.

When it comes to literary works, the path from **pre-language** (**subconscious**) to **language** (**conscious**) is impeded. Translation is a temporary practice, being influenced by adjustment and transformation. The only option left for such speeches is adequacy. The concept of adequacy must be borne in mind both by the poet and the translator. The addressee, nevertheless, must get acquainted with the text on his own. Adequacy also implies negotiation because the former determines what does not get included and what is kept as a constituent of the text. Adequating these types of discourse (to encode and decode) implies focusing on the source (if one also considers its ethical aspect), such an endeavour resulting in a stronger bond between the signifier and the signified, a more authentic and, at the same time,

¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 515.

simpler discourse for the reader, i.e. alterity. This can be achieved by an epiphanic intuition rather than by a rational one.

VI. Drawing conclusions

Initially, the purpose of my research was to thoroughly understand Benjamin's "The Task of The Translator" in order to have the knowledge that would enable me to make a comparison between his theory and its subsequent interpretations by other philosophers. During this endeavour, I noticed that Paul de Man discovers a striking difference between the act of translation and the poetic one. Namely, translation converts a language into another one, whereas poetry expresses in language something that does not belong to language – and it is in this aspect that the poet's freedom lies.

All the same, not even the poetic discourse is as independent as it may seem. Both the poet and the translator must make their discourse suitable to their sources: the **referent** (for the **poet**) and the **original language** (for the **translator**). If they adhere to this principle, the end result of their work will be an ethical one. Even though Benjamin argues that there is such a thing as perfect translatability, all other philosophers who came after him were of a different opinion. Derrida, Paul de Man and Paul Ricœur each develop their own concepts despite Benjamin's. Derrida, for example, favours the concept of *transformation* over Benjamin's *pure translatability*. Paul de Man claims that a *disarticulated original* text can only produce a *disarticulated translation* (hence it is flawed). Lastly, Paul Ricœur asserts that one should not focus on the pair of terms "translatable/untranslatable" but instead employ "fidelity/betrayal" because the latter better reveals the fact that translation misleads from the very beginning.

My personal contribution to the article was enriching Benjamin's concept of translation with two new meanings and then transferring these two understandings to the other theorists I referred to. The meanings I advanced are the following: *sacred translation* and *profane translation*. By making a comparison between poetry and translation, I reached the conclusion that the sacred text can be promptly read and translated, while the profane text is more difficult to conceive and to be apprehended by readers because of the reasons I previously stated throughout the paper.