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The translation problem

Walter Benjamin:

As a preamble, the reason the translation problem cropped up is that initially it was thought a simple matter to translate architecture to music, to map across similarities between the two disciplines, find a common language, find some mechanism, such as data sonification, possibly with the use of an algorithm or two, and simply translate away, making music that is in some way something of architecture, or a specific architectural element, or more than one, translated into a musical form or language.

The difficulty then arose when considering the ontological aspects of this phenomenon, whether in theory this was, in fact, possible, without some form of kidology, that is, telling oneself that one had literally translated some aspect of architecture into music.

How was this to be done? This then brought in consideration of: what exactly *is* translation? This led to a starting point of Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* (2000) originally published in 1923 in an introduction to Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, standing 'on its own as a manifesto' (Archipelago, 2013).

Much has been written about interpreting what Benjamin meant and the import for translation, Rather than reiterating other's interpretation, an attempt is made here to express thoughts about this in an individualised way, straight from the top of one's head, off the cuff, without further recourse to others' writing, other than Archipelago's (2013) few yet pertinent remarks and readings some time ago. Here goes: the difficulty is about linguistic, or textual conversion from one language to another, a book, an article, or some text. Ideally, a poetic feel for the original is needed, although the text may not actually be poetic. In the final analysis a spiritual feel is necessary, where the acme of texts is biblical.

The author married to someone who studied Russian, Czech and Polish and undertook a translation course with French added in, as another string to one's bow, nominally about technical translation, discussed certain technical terms to do with science and technology. Even though technical translations deal with facts that must be transmuted across from one language to the other empirically, there was an admonition always available that a translation even under these circumstances is not transliteration, it must be a translation; the words must be different in the new language to resonate best, to fit, colloquially, to ring true in a new syntactical sense relevant to the language of translation; a poor translation is a transliteration where the words are mapped across to their nearest equivalent in the new language. This happens in multi-language translations of instructions for commercial goods for perhaps electrical or electronic goods made in a country where cheap labour is used and translation is not necessarily a top priority. This can be obvious and sometimes confusing: sometimes one has to carry out another mental translation to correct the printed one to understand what batteries to use, how long they will last and so on. Conversely when a 'good' translation is encountered, if one is aware of both languages, one detects subtle changes, sometimes more than subtle, although the meaning is somehow kept, and improved in the more correct translated version over the perhaps cheaper transliterated version. This can be subjective; readers must judge for themselves. Herein lies one of the rubs, if this comparison bears out, and it is assumed so: the wording needs to be changed from a direct one-to-one literal correlation. So, theoretically, it is different in the new state, although the, as it were, correct version, preserves the original meaning more so than a poor literal one. This was for

Benjamin the conundrum. The issues are firstly, technical proficiency: one must at least be very conversant in both languages; there is the issue of translating from one syntax to another. Then there is the issue of feel for the two languages, then the meaning in the original translated into the new form. Then on a higher level there is the poetic element even if it is not poetry being translated. Then because the task is so difficult, the imperative must be that the translator is committed to the task in hand and feel, almost passionately, about the original and equally so for the new language form. This is almost in a mystical, ecstatic realm. He realises that pragmatically there will be words that are sacrificed, because of the transliteration issue; also there will to an extent be new words added in, in order to fit in the new scenario. This is almost describing an impossibility. The saving grace is the spiritual feeling. This somehow gets squeezed through the funnel of translation and comes out on the other side intact. Saying that it does not necessarily have to be poetry, if it *is* poetry involved then this imposes particularly challenging decision making, self-editing, creating, possibly almost going into a trance like state at times in order to transmit the meaning as condensed into the chosen words in the chosen format of the original. For Benjamin the reader is paramount, and according to Archipelago (2013) there is even an onus on the reader, similar to the translator, that they must be as committed to the text with sincerity and passion. This is a relativistic situation. There seem few if any absolutes here. Again, making the translation task difficult, to say the least. One redeeming feature for Benjamin is if the translation settles into a new milieu of a new culture. The frames of reference will be different and then have a chance of a new life. He then countenances against repeated translations. This will be like the Chinese whispers syndrome where the original message is frequently mutated beyond recognition in the end. Of course this is a frequent issue of bible translators, behaving like detectives, forensic scientists, redacting, looking for original documents, languages and wording to seek the true meaning or interpretation of words. The claim is that the whole meaning should be taken so as to obtain the spirit of the aggregated meaning. This is pure Benjamin.

An example is the poetry of Sappho. Kat Peddie[1] (2015), in her own attempt at translation of fragment 31 and ruminations on the problems involved, exemplifies so many of the issues in translation per se and in the case of poetry, especially, of well-trodden terrain such as the many translations over time of Sappho's fragments. Using her testimony one feels drawn to agreeing with her that where there is a personal connection the translation will be better as with her affinity for fragment 31. From own brief forays into best translations it seems that there is a male dominated and learned account that, from a personal perspective, seems to frequently miss the point, the subtlety, the beauty of what is available of Sappho's poetry. A purely subjective choice is Anne Carson. Peddie cites her which may signify a similar opinion. This male dominance even colours later translations by females in the opinion of Kat Peddie, a plain case of chauvinism and patriarchy, and a case of translation upon translation making for the difficulty of finding the true wording and meaning, a compounded problem of the remove of history, its faraway-ness, also the wealth of interpreters since. Peddie states that there have been more poems based on Sappho than there are original versions. Furthuremore the prejudices, mores and opinions of former translators bear upon successive translators as Peddie herself found, such as of Catullus, George Bataille and Jan Montefiore, sometimes with male-like slants of military aggression, even homoerotic inversions (if the true interpretation is the other way around, or even otherwise, such as not with lesbian overtones, but more of female openness amongst female company—this is just one example area of dubiosity that can arise and make for difficulty of truthful representation of the original; there may, indeed, be a mix of interpretive meanings: this would accord with the

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[1] The poet-singer in Nataraja in footnote 11.

multi-dimensional readings that can be obtained via the theory (ToT) yet to be outlined). Apart from the original wording translated into appropriate new wording, meaning-wise and language-wise, from ancient Greek to English and other languages, there are the issues of import, an extension of meanings of words as to the collective aggregation of words to provide a scene setting and intentional points, philosophical, aesthetic, social commentary all embedded within the context of the time, to be translated truthfully into other timeframes and as Peddie points out in the first instance without any thought of consequential readings and imputation of import. However, in situations like this one can never know for sure whether the writer was not only writing for a local audience and or for herself, or with one eye upon history, an unknown stretching far into the future distance. From a physics perspectival approach (observer and observed, and 'message in a bottle' thrown into a sea of the future) how could this be faithfully addressed?

There are other aspects, apart from wording and import. Peddie cites Page duBois in relation to the historical distance angle, as *hauteur* and 'more evocative of the *deliberateness* of this distance' [author's italics] referencing a frequent critical comment that 'the love poetry of Sappho is always, in one way or another, about the unobtainability of the loved one.'. This in itself could be debated. A very personal reading is that the poetry generally is semi naïve, self-exploratory, exuberant about matters of the heart and with some knowledge of classical (to us, more current to her) history and mythology, perhaps teasingly disdainfully. The matters of sadism and harshness may be partly attributed to subsequent male interpreters. There may be something in an Aphrodite-like chase after an inamorato or inamorata, but this could be innocent musings on love matters. The general points are illustrative of how extra dimensions of meaning and interpretation can become embroiled, further illustrating the difficulty of translation with accuracy in all departments of meaning and import.

A subtle point that relates to a later point of Lahav and Neemeh (2022) is as regards duBois's comment on Anne Carson's translation of fragment 105a '[…] the sweetapple reddens on a high branch […], where Peddie quotes duBois as saying: 'We can know the apple only through the poem. The poem cannot be the apple, can only realize for us its unobtainability.'. Peddie herself adds in a similar vein that: 'The genres of the love poem & the love letter are always at a remove, standing in for, but not, the person they talk of.'. Apart from the remoteness angle, which, if one subscribed to Peddie's point of view on this (which seems compelling), would have to be taken into account in a faithful translation, there is the delicate matter of the apple and knowing it. Anne Carson's translation seems sensitively to address this issue and without comparing this expressly with other translations, the point taken here is about the redness of the apple. This relates to Lahav and Neemeh's point yet to come about the difference between humans and facsimiles called Zombies by Chandler. The crucial point is here that the redness of the apple one can feel, or almost; the skilful poet has made it seem tantalisingly real, almost there, but out of reach, never tangible, only knowable within the poem. This acuteness of reality or near reality is something for the poet translator to consider, another immense subtlety to attain. For Lahav and Neemeh this is in a different ball game of translation, one between humans and simulacra-like robots. The terrain of translation is fraught with pitfalls, where at the very least an extremely sensitive approach is needed. All of this seems to fit with the sort of points that Benjamin was raising. In the end he did not say that it was impossible, just difficult.

Theoretical objection

 From a static ontological point of view, almost in a symbolic logical positivistic point of view of, for instance, Bertrand Russel and Alfred North Whitehead, the position is this:

If the object or thing to be translated is designated A, then how is it to be represented as B? If it is A, then it can never be B. If it is B it is not A. If A is to be translated into B, then the final translation should hold at least some property of A, otherwise it cannot be held as a translation, only something new altogether. For it to work, A, or A_0, becomes A_1, then A_2, then A_3 … B, or B_0, or at some point there is a transition between the transmuting stage of A when it becomes a precursive transmutation of B, such that, for instance, say, at stage A_4 it becomes synonymous with precursive B_4, or idiomatically to suggest precursion, $_4B$, so continuing A_5 is synonymous with (or equals, or =, or probably more accurately, equivalent = ≡) $_3B$, $A_6 \equiv {_2B}$, $A_7 \equiv {_1B}$ and finally $A_8 \equiv {_0B}$, or B. In the terminology as used earlier of biology some RNA or DNA of A is in B. Possibly there could be a weighting of retained properties carried over from one state to another, from A to B, so that B could be quite a lot like A. The obvious inference is of inherited genes. In nature the maximum would be a clone. In Lahav and Neemeh this would be a Zombie of a human. All of this is taken within the topology of the universe where every space-time position is taken as unique. Since what we are talking about is real things in a real universe (although later thought and abstract notions are considered as real within this context), a clone is not exactly the same as its parent and as regards Zombies the discussion will show a significant difference at maximum similarity as regards feeling the redness of an apple as discussed regarding Walter Benjamin's problematic view of translation. Maximum similarity may not happen, so differentiation may be more apparent, in both cases. This will most likely be the situation in most instances. So, the degree to which translation can truly take place where the measurement is inherited genetic material carried across the 'mode' of translation (Archipelago, 2013), varies. It could be graded from weak to strong, or not at all, if no traits are carried over. In positive cases, it still could be held that due to unique space-time positioning that each stage of the mutation-translation process is a different entity, with perhaps similar properties to as in the previous stage, but it is different. Under this viewpoint, translation cannot take place, that is, each translation is in fact its own unique entity and not a relatively translational entity.

The practical problem was in considering, say, an element of a ZH building. Take the projection of the MAXXI building in Rome, a notionally gravity-defying eye catching modernist statement of more than a simple cantilever, or a 'jetty' from classical times, a jutting out bit of floor to make further floorspace as a building went higher. Where does one start? The materials, the steel reinforcement, the concrete, other materials, the space around it, the space within, the sociological, political and artistic statement? From the 'modes' one could choose any one or a combination and then work out a device or pattern or algorithm to take parameters from the object in question, the sticking out bit of building, then apply numbers and or other information that pertain to the chosen aspect or aspects to translate. Whatever methodology is chosen, the residual query is: is this really translation? If yes, the strength of the translation rests upon the degree of compatibility with the original data or information about the chosen object, the RNA or DNA. Then partial answers started to appear. Does the strength matter? The answer comes back as: no. In simple terms, in human terms, as: who are we to comment upon another's translation according to translation strength? If they are happy, and if they believe it to be a translation, then that should be sufficient. Within this, however empirical one wants to make the determination of data or information, there is inevitably a subjective element involved. This is apparent in every case as outlined from the beginning of modernism in music as started from Darmstadt immediately after world war two, of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Karel Goeyvaerts and Pierre Boulez to fit their versions of total serialism (Iddon, 2013) and Luigi Nono (Nielinger-Vakil, 2016) and Peter Maxwell Davies to fit their magic squares (Roberts, 2018). Robert Laidlow definitely interacts with his computer learning program (RNCM, 2018). Invariably there is human input in some form or another in electronic computerised collaborations of human and

machine in live combinations. The point is that however scientific the translation there is invariably somewhere along the line some decision making inserted that could invalidate a pure translation. However, it is averred, as one emergent outcome of the theory (ToT) that this is the opposite of a deleterious matter, it is a beneficial outcome, something to be prized, like human input in computerised music as it stands today. Possibly in the future autonomous computer generated music will be perfectly respectable and appreciated by humans of exceptional quality and originality. This is argued to be the case under the Lahav and Neemeh discussion yet to come. This adds another valorisation of composers at any stage of their translation strength where a translation is averred. It is the subjective that, rather than subverting the outcome, actually adds valuable material. The composer sits in the universe and all sorts of material runs through the composer either in series or parallel during the translation process, thus rendering any such translation as discussed here valid.

Solutions offered for the translation problem

Apart from the humanitarian position adopted, endorsed by the theory (ToT), due to the supremacy of the subjective, the objections above are based on a static view of logical positivism, whereas in fact the world everywhere is in constant flux; it is moving even if it seems not to, from a local observer's position; it is dynamic. This then negates that argument, at least partially, that is, except for a normal aggregated viewpoint, in the same way that Newtonian physics works at a local level, whereas the refined reality is that movement occurs in an Einsteinian relativistic way. On top of this the theory asserts that ontologically everything in space is moving and connected in every direction in an infinitely smooth calculus. This makes for gentle gradations of movement possible and hence translation states. This basically describes in minutiae, theoretically, the fine translations occurring via evolution. Where translation bears analogy to evolution, the previously seeming impossible achievement of translation states are obtained, in the same way that Zeno's paradox is achieved. The paradox stated that if a tortoise started a race before a hare then for every increment of movement that the hare made the tortoise correspondingly made one also. This way the hare would never overtake the tortoise. From common sense it is known that the hare would overtake the tortoise. The answer came in the smoothing out of the paths of each using calculus.

There is a further diffusion of the argument by those who consider the fallibility of relying solely upon formalistic logic, such as of the analytical school of thought. An interesting conversation on these lines considering the possibility of concepts outside logical positivism, such as mysticism, is conducted by Gianrocco Tucci on Researchgate (2015). An earlier proponent is H. G. Wells (1908, book 1, pp, 3-43) who advises against putting too much store by the devices of formal logic, symbols, classes, encirclement and so forth, as inexact. The theory which is all encompassing in its full application provides for more meaning than as formalistic conventional definition.

The conclusion is that, theoretically, translation is possible, where it was initially doubted. The type of translation that Walter Benjamin envisaged, as of any text between languages, literary, especially of poetry, contained so many variables as to be ordinarily unquantifiable (only quantifiable within the theory (ToT) which involves totting up literally everything in the universe from the Big Bang up until the present together with a dynamic on-going account) and with certain inherent constraints conveying ideas and linguistic tropes using other words. He placed emphasis upon technical linguistic knowledge and dexterity, a poetic feeling and a divine spirituality. This is his partial real-world solution.

What does this mean for translating ZH into music? Any of the modes or a combination of them can be used as effective in whatever philosophical form or description: phenomenal,

existentialist, constructive, or otherwise and they will be real, valid.

Scholia

This text is extracted from a larger text. In order to explain certain points and terms arising they are (in order of appearance):

Footnote 1 refers to Nataraja, a piece not included explicitly in the final version of the PhD and a video of a performance (by the Free Range Orchestra) in which Kat Peddie appears as a narrator-poet-singer. A link to watch and listen is here or alternatively here.

ToT stands for theory of everything which as explained in this text as a multidirectional calculus smoothing out discrete steps as in Zeno's Paradox. There are many additional implications such as exigencies as in catastrophe theory (Jacobson, 2020; Roopnarine, 2008).

Mode stands for the modality of translation means such as atomistically electronically, or as adopted in this PhD, holistically. There are the other connotations hovering around the edges, such as outright musical modes, but the first definition given here is strictly the one intended. There is also a similar definition as given by Archipelago (2013) as the 'mode' of translation.

Lahav and Neemeh (2022) provided an interesting paradigm that turned subjectivity on its head with a hypothesis that inverted qualia feelings by people undergoing MRI scans where data read by attendants at machines outside the scanner could be relativistically swapped for the introverted thoughts. This could mean that decisions about possible brain death and other acute decision making could be fine-tuned. In the end if their syndrome works it means that subjectivity is brought out into the open and is not such a secret thing anymore; it is as commonplace as data that can be read on a machine. I argue that subjectivity is an exigence of the ToT and is something to be prized. In the process they conjoin the general debate about whether human facsimiles can be synthetically produced. In this vein, they refute an argument about so-called Zombies. Having entered into grateful email communication with Nir Lahav, whilst using their argumentation as a solidifying counter argument basis (and accepting plausibility of their hypothesis about being able to read and better communicate with people undergoing MRI scans) I state that I personally think that computers in effect can make an evolutionary jump to consciousness. Since that time, this fits into a general public debate about this sort of issue and whether AI might lead to extinction. On this issue I personally think that precautions are needed involving ethical decisions but that it is an exciting time of a new evolutionary jump that will happen and that we aught to enjoy and as Luciana Parisi intimates collaborate with our soon to be computer friends.

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