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**THE AUTHOR'S PALE AND GLARING HEAD ON A PLATTER:  
THE INTRICACIES OF THE CONCEPT  
OF UNTRANSLATABILITY**

**Abstract:** the article deals with the issue of untranslatability, a concept frequently re-emerging in the translation discourse. It seems that in many cases the possible search for the equivalence between the source language and the target language does not consist in a binary choice between the possibility and impossibility of performing a translation, but can be better described as a cline of translatability or the latent potential for linguistic transposition. In view of the inherent anisomorphism between linguistic codes i.e. the fact that there are no exact correspondences between words in different languages, it is important to cast off the misleading illusion of linguistic symmetry for the purpose of translation theory and practice. In other words, it seems essential to perceive the translation process in terms of the reincarnation metaphor rather than the transfer metaphor which presupposes the notion of absolute translatability. The article includes also an attempt at a categorisation of types of translation from the epistemological or phenomenological point of view.

**Key words:** untranslatability, translation discourse, anisomorphism, metaphor

**The Babel conundrum**

To fathom the issue of untranslatability of translation, first, it is necessary to determine the very necessity of translation: in other words, the initial impulse that sparked the basic need to mediate between languages. By tracing the origins of the convoluted process, it will be possible to draw more general conclusions about the possible success or failure of the translation project.

The beginning of the whole riddle can be traced back to the myth of Babel (the biblical confusion of tongues), which constitutes a symbolic explanation of

the primeval linguistic diversification found in every civilisation. The inevitable divine intervention eliminated the Ur-Sprache, *the Adamic vernacular* (Steiner 1975:77-78) and Mankind abandoned by the angry God needed to find a way to function in the communicative vacuum.

Since that time the human kind had to confront the multiplicity of its linguistic systems with their inherent incompatibility. Steiner, from the hermeneutic vantage point, describes this phenomenon in a detailed way, concluding that the reason for the diversity is the necessity of cultural secrecy and isolation. Now it seems difficult to reverse this need to be separated from others and seeking a communicative reunion e.g. in the form of translation might prove quite a demanding task. Nevertheless, true reunion cannot be achieved as the original meaning is irrecoverably lost. Angelus Silesius, a German mystic, declared that God has uttered only one word since the beginning of all time. Such a word contains the entirety of reality, yet cannot be decoded after the fall of Babel (Steiner 1975:81-82). The remaining question is whether anything has changed after the long period of time after the Babelian disruption, and whether mankind is still perching on the smouldering rubble of the communicative paradise forever lost or whether this state of affairs can be remedied. Seemingly, the discipline of translation has been locked in the haunting dichotomies: the extent of possibility or impossibility of translation, the fidelity to the requirements of the target language or to the original etc. The presumptions and expectations regarding the intricacies of the translation process might provide an answer: some scholars long for the lost perfection of linguistic expression and cannot stand any deviation from the original, others are ecstatic when illuminated with any minute titbit providing information about the other side of the communicative shore i.e. the source text.

Walter Benjamin rejected the pessimistic approach to the aftermath of Babel by introducing the messianic concept of *pure language*:

*A suprahistorical kinship among languages in the intention underlying each language as a whole – an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realised only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language. (1992:75)*

While particular expressions and words might change, the meaning is present in all languages and only the outside form shows discrepancies. The philosopher Andrew Benjamin offers the following conclusion:

*The task of the translator is to therefore rewrite the passage that has already been cited, to 'release' by translating that which is essential to language – to all languages – namely the unnameable essence of all language, which is the precondition for the possibility of translation. (1989:103)*

Here the omniscient dichotomies consist in the ‘ultra-babelism’, a condition of extreme communicative confusion, and absolute messianism, the possibility of discovering a semantic hard core within the linguistic multiplicity (the rift between linguistic universalists and relativists). Seemingly, it is sufficient to take a more discerning glance at the intricacies of the translator’s task and inherent duality emerges. Accordingly, there are many contrasted approaches offering multifarious attitudes towards the post-Babelian condition of the discipline of translation. Cervantes emphasises the deficiencies of translation through the disillusioned Quixote, who declares that:

*translation from one tongue into another (...) is like viewing Flemish tapestry from the wrong side; for although you see the pictures, they are covered with threads which obscure them so the smoothness and the gloss of the fabric are lost. (Cervantes 1615; chapter LXII)*

Nabokov presents yet another disappointed opinion, famously mocking any notion of ‘good translation’, being suspicious of the content of the target text in translation:

*What is translation? On a platter  
A poet’s pale and glaring head,  
A parrot’s screech, a monkey’s chatter,  
And a profanation of the dead. (1955:34)*

Nevertheless, there is a host of enthusiastic voices. For instance, the English poet Ben Jonson comments on George Chapman’s translation of *Illiad* in 1618 in the following laudatory words:

*What treasure hast thou brought us! and what store  
Still, still, dost thou arrive with, at our shore,  
To make thy honour, and our wealth the more! (Gillespie 2011:10)*

It is possible to present a multitude of opposing views to support both sides of the argument. Moreover, it seems highly unlikely to find a consensus regarding the feasibility of the project of translation. The translation discourse is, seemingly, extended between two extremes of translation dichotomies, suspended in the insurmountable precipice of the translatability scale and characterised by various preconceptions in reaction to the aftermath of the annihilation of the primal unity in the form of one pre-Babelian language. The question remains whether this state of affairs is a threat or an opportunity to communication via translation or, in other words, whether it constitutes *the burthen and curse of Babel* (Shelley 1840/1992:56) or it provides a chance for linguistic blessing.

## A cline rather than a binary choice

The question of the presumed possibility of impossibility of performing an act of translation might seem to be a purely academic issue as translation is a social, cultural and linguistic fact. Nevertheless, the answer to this question may provide insight into the nature of the translation process and its validity. From this perspective, the inherent dichotomies of translation become embodied in the relativistic vs. universalistic approach, linguistic pessimism vs. optimism or the opposed poles of extremes only providing a cline, to which the dualistic cleft could be applied.

Upon closer enquiry, the issue of the possibility of translation appears to be invalid: it offers a yes/no answer which is locked in the binary opposition, while the truly valid questions might be asked about the place on the scale of translation potential (to-be-translated valency): after fathoming the nature of the process, the truly relevant question is about the *translatability* of a text, the latent, dormant potential of linguistic transposition. The opposite extremes of ‘absolute’ translation (total unfeasibility) are utopian: *a word is a sign of a concept and in all languages the concepts are different* (Stolze 2011:24). However, despite the *indeterminacy of translation*<sup>1</sup> people speaking different languages manage to communicate effectively and not to live in linguistic ghettos finding *equivalence in difference* (Jakobson 1959/2000:116).

In this case the misconceptions regard the assumed *isomorphism* between languages: the view that all languages are similar and that there is an inextricable correspondence between them, a statement easily contradicted by linguistic theory and practice. *Each language must be thought of as having its own semantic structure, just as it has its own phonological and grammatical structure* (Lyons 1963:37; Saussure 1916/1974:116), which makes the whole issue of impossibility not a binary choice, but a placement in a continuum of translatability dependent on the density of the linguistic matter and its anisomorphism. Nida (1975:75) also rejects the possibility of perfect communication as there are no exact correspondences between related words in different languages, no semantic unit or a word has exactly the same meaning in two different expressions and there are no complete synonyms within one language. Even though Pym endeavours to defend the notion of symmetry in equivalence as *an operative illusion necessary for the definition and social function of any translation* (1995), Snell-Hornby declares that it *hardly exists*

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<sup>1</sup> Quine coined the terms *inscrutability of reference* and *holophrastic indeterminacy* to rule out the possibility of precise interpretation of individual phrases, words or larger chunks of discourse. He advocates the view that it is impossible to determine beyond any doubt whether a particular translation fully corresponds to the original meaning of a text (Quine 2008:368-386).

*beyond the level of vague approximations and distorts the basic problems of translation* if it is excessively relied upon (1988:22-26).

Once the illusion of symmetry is dispelled, it is vital to highlight the analogies between languages that might be the essence of translatability. Certain universal features that languages possess result from the obvious fact that they are being utilised by one species, the human kind and can describe *the equivalence of experience* (Tabakowska quoted in Hejwowski 2004:2). Similarities may be found in prototype semantics, which focuses on the fact that the representation of the world in the human mind concentrates on just several features of a particular phenomenon (Lipiński 2000:172) and the extent of the potential resemblance between languages heavily relies on the extent of the linguistic instruments available within a given language (Lipiński 2000:172-173). Wojtasiewicz offers a definition of translation which presupposes *the same reaction (a set of associations) in the recipient* of the source text and the target text. Acknowledging its imprecision he states that ‘the same reaction’ can be construed only as *a relative indication of high degree of similarity* (Wojtasiewicz 1957/2000:20-22, trans. Ł.B.). The common characteristics of languages cannot be dismissed even from the perspective of Sapir, who proposes linguistic relativity: the fact that people perceive their reality only through their own language and communication between different languages is doomed to failure as they live in fact in separate worlds (Sapir 1929:69).

### **The preconceptions of the translation discourse**

Another aspect which is essential for determining the nature of translation is the preconceptions related to the perception of the translation process. Such preconceptions appear to be soaked in figurative language inherent in the translation discourse, substantiated even by the very basic translation terms: ‘source’ or ‘target’ text or culture. Accordingly, translation theory has been conditioned by the underlying presumptions of metaphorical nature, providing insight into the interaction between translation theory and practice. Hermans claims that the manner in which translation concepts are expressed *makes us aware of the profoundly metaphorical nature of our current terminology (...). It allows us to appreciate the significance of that terminology and to redescribe and thus to re-think translation*. Metaphors might be seen as investigative probes into the most intimate aspects of translation (Hermans and Steconi 2002:1-2). Tymoczko states that for Western Europe the presuppositions were driven by the sacralisation of the word with far-reaching consequences, leading *pervasive orientation towards literalism in modern Eurocentric expectations about textual translation* and to the ubiquitous strength of related metaphors (Tymoczko 2010:109).

De Leon acknowledges the inherent metaphoricality of the translation discourse and prepares a list of conceptual metaphors that dominate the realm of translation, which illustrates how a seemingly convoluted theoretical construct might be pinned down to its conceptual roots. The first type: the TRANSFER metaphor (a version of the CONDUIT metaphor) consists in transporting the contents from one container to another or rendering the meaning of the text from one language to another (de Leon 2010:82-84). In various approaches the emphasis is placed on different elements of this process – sometimes on the initial container/text in the source language, sometimes on the process of transfer, often on the target container/the text in the target language. Also Hermans describes two versions of the TRANSFER metaphor: one focusing on *unlocking, uncovering, removing obstacles, bringing into view* – the pivotal element being the source container and extracting its contents (1985:117); and the other where translation is depicted by Renaissance scholars as *jewel in a rough casket* or *poor garment* focusing on the target container, that is, the target text in the target language (1985:119). Other analogous metaphors are *body and soul, matter and spirit, garment and body (...), husk and kernel, the vessel and the liquid contained in it, chest and its contents*. The basic concept consists in the opposition of *outside vs. inside or perceptible vs. imperceptible* (1985:120). The underlying presumption is that even though *the casket is rough and the garment poorer* than in the source text the subject matter remains the same so *the loss is negligible*, the detachment of meaning and form is possible (de Leon 2010:84).

The second type, the FOOTSTEPS translation metaphor, can also be found in the Renaissance: *we have not wanted to follow too closely on the heels of the Latin, nor to stray too far from our distinguished predecessor* (Van den Vondel quoted and translated by Hermans 1985a:108). The target text is derivative and the source text and target text are products of different, though congruent actions (de Leon 2010:91).

The third type, the TARGET metaphor, describes translation as a movement towards a specified destination. It might refer to the Skopos Theory by emphasising that all factors are taken into account *as far as the skopos of translating allows/or demands* (Vermeer 1996:13).

Ultimately, de Leon offers the ASSIMILATION/REINCARNATION metaphor, which shows translation as a process in which the translator *devours* the source text writers, *digests* them and *converts into blood and nourishment* (Hermans 1985a:104). The conceptualisation of reincarnation is illustrated in Tytler:

*How then shall a translator accomplish this difficult union of ease with fidelity? To use a bold expression, he must adopt the very soul of his author, which must speak through his own organs* (1813/1978:212).

More elaborations of REINCARNATION metaphors include the aggression of Campos's Brazilian cannibalistic approach, *parricidal dismemory* (1981:209) or the messianic concept of the *afterlife (Fortleben)* of a text undergoing transformation consisting in *the renewal of something living* (Benjamin 1923/2000:17). Nonetheless, all the above mentioned concepts share the same preconception that, contrary to the TRANSFER metaphor, content and form are not separable, but are inextricably merged into a new whole.

The prevailing metaphors conceptualised above seem to come in handy in deciphering the mystery of the translation process. The metaphorical self-reflexivity of Translation Studies facilitates the examination of parameters which provide a benchmark for translation practices (Tymoczko 2010:137-139) as well as for the investigation of the inherent presuppositions that make translators veritable *hostages of history* (Hermans and Stecconi 2002:1).

In light of the metaphorical foundations (conceptualisations of the translation process), in the discussion of the (im)possibility of translation, the pivotal issue is the assumptions, conscious or unconscious, which underlie the analysis of the translation process. As long as the preconceived ideas are a perfect fit into the conceptual metaphors of TRANSFER (the separation of form and content, the translation process as automatic transfer, the intactness of the core semantic content), the whole process can be expressed as a failure/success scenario with the activation of the threat of absolute impossibility. This attitude approach represents longing for perfection in reaction to the fall of Babel, the desire for lost unity that can still be regained. Nevertheless, provided the assumptions become more insightful by acknowledging the dichotomic meanders of the translation process and the inevitability of anisomorphism, (a more transformational metaphor of ASSIMILATION/REINCARNATION), the question of impossibility disappears as replaced by the notion of *translatability*: the extent to which a given text or an item of translation can be rendered into a text in another language, expressed on a scale of translatability potential and limited by the existing word-hoard of the target language.

Special cases (at the extreme end of the translatability cline, bordering on untranslatability) are items where form is inextricably connected to sense, where the word (the representation of a concept), is related to the abstract concept it represents, or where *phonemic similarity is sensed as semantic relationship* (Jakobson 1959/2000:118) such as puns or experimental forms. The meaning of wordplay is rooted in the unique signifier of the source language. Given a high level of isomorphism between languages, wordplay might be translatable; nevertheless, as long as the level of isomorphism of the source language and target language is relatively low, it may not be possible to find a corresponding lexical item in the linguistic treasury of the target language and, as a consequence, a pun *per se* cannot be faithfully rendered. However, it is possible to replicate the very mechanism according to which a pun functions, which

presupposes a multiplicity of versions of the translation product (unthinkable for those who seek absolute translation equivalence and apply the preconceived TRANSFER metaphor – in this sense wordplay is untranslatable). The advocates of the REINCARNATION metaphor, in turn, would see this process as an extreme form of transformation (still a form of transubstantiation), which allows of the translator's creativity. According to Jakobson, such items require special treatment: *creative transposition* (1959/2000:118) and pose a serious challenge in literary translation, especially in the rendition of experimental texts.

### **The definition of translation – an attempt at precision**

Another aspect of the question of untranslatability is the accuracy of the concept of *translation* as regards the present discussion i.e. what is the extent of translation practices regarding additional or new information provided in the target text. Wojtasiewicz states that supplementary explanation in the form of e.g. footnotes cannot be considered to be translation proper (1957/2000:57). It is possible to create a tentative classification of translation types according to the criteria of the extent of the interference in the source text with external intrusions taking into consideration the epistemological or phenomenological impressions of target text recipients:

- translation proper – relatively translatable items recreated in the target language
- invasive translation – domestic replacements in the form of domestic cultural reality or purely domestic wordplay if there are no readily available target language equivalents
- retentive translation – forced transplantation of items non-existent in the target language
- explicitative translation – according to Dąbrowska's typology (2001:156), this category includes within-the-text explicitation, paratexts (footnotes and endnotes), peritexts (dedications, introductions, front covers, prologues and afterwords) and epitexts (auto-commentaries, interviews and critical elaborations). Explicitative translation provides equality of cognitive perception of mutually remote recipients also in terms of intellectual distance. Wojtasiewicz uses the term *erudition allusions* to describe culture-bound items specific for source text recipients (1975/2000:176-177).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lefevere states that owing to problems with representing the Universe of Discourse (customs, objects known to the source text writer) and the influence of patronage and ideology, some

Again, if the preconceptions used as a benchmark for evaluation are liberal, all the above mentioned types might be deemed *translation*. However, according to stricter judgements – only the first ones might be beyond suspicion. To clarify the scope of the definition of translation, it is necessary to provide the following assumption: translation presupposes two autonomous worlds depicted in two separate linguistic systems (the source language and the target language). The characteristic feature of the systems is their anisomorphism; still, they share a common origin (a closer affinity – being members of the same language family or a further affinity – the symbolic fall of the Babel Tower) and, consequently, they are compatible (based on the premise that human beings are compatible in the manner of their communication). The underlying presumption is that one system can be articulated in terms of another one with the necessary interference of shifts to stave off the anisomorphism that is inherent in cross-linguistic transfer. Under this condition (shifts within one system may express the meaning transported from another one), translation becomes a possible act. However, special cases of translation seem to be in breach of the above mentioned pattern (which might be referred to as *translation proper*). These include: culture-bound items, proper names, language variety (e.g. dialect and slang), intertextuality (horizontal and vertical) and wordplay. Their speciality entails also their referentiality to unique items in the source language system which do not exist in the target language one (for many reasons e.g. geographical, cultural or historical). In such cases translation proper no longer becomes applicable and the ‘translation’ of uniqueness perceived in this way seems to depend on the erudition of translation recipients or the possible application of sociolinguistics. Based on the function of translation, such special cases may be culturally transplanted by utilising various degrees of retentive, intrusive or explicative techniques. Finally, the concept *translation*, seems to be used to describe a wide spectrum of communicative processes of various nature throughout cultures.

To conclude, it may be safely declared that the untranslatability of a particular text (as perceived by the recipient) relies on the preconceptions regarding translation process which underlie any evaluative judgements related to the product of translation. The preconceptions, although frequently implicit, also shape the very understanding of the definition of the complicated process referred to as *translation*. As a result, the above considerations may serve as a recommendation for translation scholars not to pass premature judgements about the quality of the translation product without first carefully examining the presumptions which might heavily influence the outcome of their analytical

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translation practices once deemed not to be translation proper (for instance abridged, simplified versions and adaptations,) have been included in translation studies (1992:142).

process and which might make them perceive the translation product as not just the author's pale and glaring head on the translative platter but help them notice a slight blush of translatability there.

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