

Benjamin's "The Translator's Task," translated by Steven Rendall

Interpreted by Introduction to Translation Studies (013:304, 195:303)

February 21-23, 2022

In this exercise, we divided into groups to interpret Walter Benjamin's canonical essay "The Translator's Task" paragraph by paragraph. Some groups chose to paraphrase key sentences, others chose to highlight key ideas in their own words, and still others decided to respond to Benjamin's ideas by adding their own thoughts.

Group 1: Lisa Frederick, Yebon Kim, Alina Smirnova

Paragraphs 1 - 3, pg. 151-153, "When seeking knowledge of a work of art...translatability must be essential to certain works.

- "Translation is a mode" (152), but texts can actually be "untranslatable to a certain degree" (153). The reading argues that translators face the dilemma of accomplishing an essential role of delivering a text into another language when languages differ that there are untranslatables to some extent. So the writer argues that translators need to give up the idea of making exact translation of word-for-word.
- "What then is there in a poem-... besides a message" (152) Benjamin says how in a lot of cases translators are trying to rewrite the poem word for word in another language for the reader to understand. However, the original was not written directly for the reader but rather it was written because the author had something to say. It is wrong to view a translation as a simple message because it would lose its value. For Benjamin, it is important for the translator to create their own piece of work rather than trying to rewrite the text for the audience otherwise it would end up being just a bad translation.
- Benjamin argues on page 151, that audience is not important. Everyone is different so it is impossible to create art, writing or translation that everyone will interpret the same way. There is no "ideal" receiver of art. However, the original may have been written with a specific audience in mind. Sometimes the audience guides the way a work is written in general. It feels wrong to disregard the audience completely. Is the work good if the reader cannot or does not respond to it? When readers are invested in characters in a novel for example, they often respond emotionally to anything that happens to this character. If we cannot relate to any of the characters or anything the author is saying, we don't get attached and the writing doesn't interest us. I think the author, whether the original author or a translator, has a certain duty to the audience to create something relatable or say something readers can react or respond to, whether positively or negatively.

Group 2: Vance Ceccon, Yahaira Smith, Timur Murtazin

Paragraphs 4-5, pg. 153-155, "Translation is properly essential...related to each other in what they want to say."

Once a translation of an original is made, that translation cannot directly serve the original as it does not physically add anything to it. However, it will indirectly serve the original by perpetuating the survival of it by carrying on its meaning. However, since it is a translation, it can never be exactly the same as the original which means it is not directly significant for the original.

Instead, translation serves not only as a method for communication but also as a signpost for a work—a way to tell when it has reached a certain point in its “lifespan” and to trace the path of its cultural significance—when a work is able to be translated not just in its base language, but in its concepts and underlying ideas, that work has reached a new point in its relevance, often associated with being more widespread or famous.

Translation’s fundamental purpose is to achieve the process of “unfolding” the original text—unfolding here meaning to pull apart the original’s linguistic framework using the translation and to attempt to reach the underlying pure, universal meaning shared across languages.

While a one to one convergence and direct translation is impossible, all languages are similar in that they are trying to say the same thing. Therefore, the purpose of translation is to display the hidden relationships between languages. Yet, it cannot explicitly do this so it must imply this complex relationship by being a symbol of the “pure language” it comes from.

(Translators’ note: Benjamin’s work presents an interesting challenge in attempting to distill its meaning—his arguments are labyrinthine and often contradictory, within one sentence arguing that languages are innately incomparable and separate sometimes being followed by one immediately afterwards stating that all languages are drawing towards a single common goal. On the same note, though, those contradictions often present his own argument better than their individual parts—that translation is a process of looking between contradicting and incompatible texts and finding the underlying common meaning. Benjamin brings up this paradoxical relationship that all languages have with each other, explaining that all languages are a tool to process and explain the world around us. Yet, the language we know influences how we perceive the world around us as two people will describe the same thing differently based on their native tongue, and in turn the world around us is different for the origins of different languages—the environment shapes each into something distinct and often completely different. This is why the common goal all languages share, to universally express and communicate with the world around them, can never actually be achieved.)

Group 3: Neha Aluwalia, Aidan Cronin, Gelmis Zmuida

Paragraphs 6-7, pg. 155-157, “With this attempt at an explanation...how close it might become with knowledge of this distance.

Languages evolve over time and translations should reflect that. Unlike traditional translation theory, translations cannot actually reflect the similarity of the original text. Instead, translations

become the afterlife of an original text and allow for its rebirth in new contexts and understandings. Context changes with time and can cause certain texts to assume an alternate appearance. It is the translation's duty to preserve the original intent of pure language itself. Translations reveal an essential relationship between languages that will not change, even as languages and their similarities do. This essential relationship is the kinship of languages, because all languages share a common purpose. A translation that relies mostly on similarity does not necessarily have a better connection to the original and become a better translation of the original. There is no reason why the words "bread" and "Brot" symbolize the same food item, other than the fact that language itself has assigned these meanings. When considering translation, there is an important difference between the mode of intending and the mode of intention. Pure language is not the language of communicating, but language itself as a symbolism for meaning. It is the assigned meanings of words like "bread" and "Brot" and their symbolic equivalencies that allows for translation. Ultimately, translation is a form of symbolism that recognizes the role of pure language in all texts.

Group 4: Laela Lanting, Nina Lewis, Douglas Melo, Nick Melillo

Paragraph 8, pg. 157-159, "To say this is of course to admit that translation...the translator's task may also be conceived as distinctive and clearly differentiated from the poet's."

Translation recognizes the vast differences between languages and the contrasts between each. There is no solution to how different languages are to each other, but religion is one of the things that brings languages closer together. Translation will never have a finished state because it is ever-changing. When something is translated, it is filtered and becomes a watered-down form of the original, while the original remains untouched, honored, and gains power. Translation also gets further away from the original and away from its truth. It breaks the barrier between understanding another language and points in the direction of what the original conveys. The original is more than a summary. Original texts are composed of the richest and most authentic meanings. The precise details of the language within the original cannot always be represented in a translation. Regardless of the language barrier, anything can be translated, but the meaning of the translation will never match the original. In an original text, everything corresponds to the other naturally, but in a translation, the content does not match as precisely. Sometimes translations can be a disservice to the original by replicating instead of capturing the exact essence of the original, which is impossible. Even so, people value translation because it passes on important information of other cultures, languages, and studies regardless of how far it comes from the original. And many translators are receptive that they cannot and will not ever be able to translate every single fragment of an original text and therefore make their best interpretation of it. Furthermore, certain words remind us of their historical relationships and refer to the time period in which the words were created or translated. People may think that translators are merely recreating ways to transfer language symbols, but they have been quite successful in their endeavors to translate the meaning in history, not too far from the poet's goal to articulate meaning through words.

Group 5: Matt Ternsten, Archita Padmanabhan, Amir Saadeh

Paragraph 9, pg. 159-160, “The translator’s task consists in this...puts its mark on history no less deeply.”

The intention of translators is towards the translated language and its readers, while maintaining the theoretical framework of the original text.

Translation is different from the original text (poetry) itself because the poetry is more focused on the aesthetics/organization of the language content (such as meter, rhyme), rather than the entire message and overall themes. Translation does not focus on the mechanics of the language, rather it finds its link to the original text by reproducing its themes and messages. Translation is directed toward its language itself, where the poetry (source text) is the starting point. But translation is different from poetry in the sense that the poet is coming from a more creative and aesthetic mindset, while a translator strives for perfection in meaning, and brings closure between the two languages. By creating this “single true language,” the piece becomes more translatable and communicable to an audience. The mechanics of the language are not delivered in the translation (they are not in agreement), but languages agree through the message that they present.

The “language of truth” is that in which the message is one and the same across any language/context, and explains thought processes. The language of truth exists only through translations. Benjamin says “There is no muse of philosophy, and there is also no muse of translation” (Benjamin, 160) This could mean that philosophy and translation are more similar than one would think. Philosophy and translation are still representations of art whose purpose is to create this “language of truth.” However because of the imperfections within languages as a result of untranslatability, this becomes unattainable, according to Benjamin.

Translation is not as perfect as doctrine, which has a more factual, and therefore superior basis. But Translation is more direct (not as abstract) than art.

Group 6: Collin Ace, Farhan Shah, Shirun Zhang

Paragraph 10, pg. 160-162, “If the translator’s task is regarded in this light...word-for-word rendering is the arcade.”

The task of translation absent a focus on meaning may at first seem alien or even impossible to realize. However, as we seek pure language within translation, rejecting meaning as the primary reproductive purpose ultimately means fidelity to the original and freedom from the original’s language are no longer useful. In any case, they are necessarily oppositional to one another. Fundamentally, any attempted “faithful” translation of meaning at the level of individual words can never bring the full extent of that meaning in the original into the translation; meaning in the original is intrinsically tied to the close relationship between the intended object and its mode of intention. One way of explicating the bond between the two is in word-for-word syntactically identical translations. In translating this way, incoherence is bound to

arise, but in doing so elevates the language above the realm of meaning. Essentially, faithfulness to form means sacrificing faithfulness to meaning. The tension between these two is not novel, but it does mean that literalness and meaning cannot be tied together in translation. Rather than attempting to recreate the meaning of the original, the task of the translator is like that of the shipwright: building pieces that fit together but do not necessarily resemble each other; this makes the translation a complement to the original's language and through this its mode of intention. In this light, the original only serves the purpose of organizing and revealing the relationship between the mode of intention and the intended object. This allows the language of the translation to resonate with language itself, bringing it ever closer to pure language. True translation allows the original to close in on pure language, tying it more closely to the communicative intent of language. In theorizing language this way, words become the most important, basic aspect of translation. The sentence acts as a barrier to whole corridors opened by the intention of words.

Group 7: Tyler Strzeminski, Vedant Patel, Helen Hopersky

Paragraph 11, pg. 162-164, "While fidelity and freedom in translation have long been seen as conflicting...not when they are considered all too lightly but only when they are considered with sufficient gravity."

Fidelity and freedom are two sides of the same coin. While trying to understand one of them, rather than understanding both, it can only further deny the other one justification. Only when a word's linguistic construction and its meaning match does the word truly become understood and clear. In all languages, depending on context, meaning can be communicable but beyond the normal depth is something more intangible and incommunicable. In the development of language these communicable and incommunicable meanings create a pure language in which when symbolized, inhabits linguistic construction as something symbolizing. While this ultimately results in spoken language, it is bound only between itself and its transformations. Translation is the only method that can unbind the language, turning the symbolized words and symbolizing them into meaning to discover the true language underneath. Pure language doesn't symbolize anything; it has no meaning. Since pure language has no meaning but by its nature is creative, then all communication, meaning, and intention are removed. Freedom does not come from meaning, but it is the truth which separates freedom from meaning. Freedom shows how it can benefit the pure language through the translation's own language.

It is the translator's task to extricate the pure language from the source text by rewriting the text. The translation and original are related in the same sense as a tangent is related to a circle. A tangent touches a circle at one point; this contact point would then determine how the tangent will continue on in space. In the same way, a translation only shares meaning with the original, with the rest of the translation's aspects being completely different from the original. The translation has the freedom to develop on its own path, independent of the original. What matters is the meaning stays the same; all else may change to make sure meaning is transferred over to the translation.

Rudolf Pannwitz stated in his book *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur*: “our translations, even the best, start out from a false principle: they want to germanize Indie, Greek, and English instead of indicizing, graecizing, anglicizing German. The fundamental error of the translator is that he holds fast to his own language, thus not allowing it to be put powerfully in movement by the foreign language. When translating out of a language completely different from his own, the translator must broaden and deepen his own language through the foreign one. We do not know to what extent this can be done, because every single language is different in its own unique way, but know the only time this may happen is when every single language is considered with sufficient gravity.”

Group 8: Gisell Sosa, Marco Bracco, Xueyu Liu

Paragraph 12, pg. 164-165, “To what extent a translation can correspond to the essence...the interlinear version of the holy scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation.”

The “translatability” of a work is a function of the proximity between its language and its meaning. In original works, when less of the meaning of the work is conveyed through the intricacies of its source language— that is, the language is of less value to the meaning— it becomes more translatable. This idea is epitomized by an interlinear translation of a holy scripture: from the moment it is written, the scripture’s revelation transcends language. However, translations themselves are considered untranslatable precisely because their language is too distant from their meaning.

The simpler the language, the easier the translated language will be. The stronger the structure of the text to be translated, the more likely it is that the meaning the author wants to express will be translated. The second translation of a work that has already been translated may disrupt the meaning of the original author. The original text is like a template, there are thousands of translations, all of which are different in language, but the idea they want to express is the same. When translating an article, we need to trust the language of the original text and the thoughts of the author. All translations, including great books, involve translation.