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Philosophy, Abstract Thought, and the Dilemmas of Philosophy

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When considering the relation between languages, it seems intuitive that there are common references reflecting simple empirical observations. One would not expect there to be any great difficulty in translating terms such as “tree” or “chair;” what difficulties arise, however, as translation moves away from these basic referential terms? Willard Quine writes in “Meaning and Translation” that “Empirical meaning is what the sentences of one language and their firm translations in another language have in common.”¹ Quine argues that linguistic meaning is purely referential and is derived from the symbolism of a term. He uses radical translation—a theoretical situation of creating correlations between a familiar language and one completely alien (which he calls the “jungle” language)—to draw his point, claiming that “What we objectively have is just an evolving adjustment to nature, reflected in an evolving set of dispositions to be prompted by stimulations to assent to or dissent from occasion sentences.”² This view of language is one which begins with common references such as basic objects of perception, and then builds more complex terms, phrases, and combinations of meanings to

¹ Willard Quine, “Meaning and Translation,” *The Translation Studies Reader: Second Edition*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 94.

² *Ibid.*, 100.

express more conceptual notions. The conceptual grid of language as a whole is then that of empirical perception—any abstraction is the combination of these more basic terms, and no inter-lingual equivalence would be guaranteed between abstractions, even assuming that the basic terms have a degree of equivalence.

Quine states that “...the analogies [or, correlations] weaken as we move out toward the theoretical sentences, farthest from observation. Thus who would undertake to translate “Neutrinos lack mass” into the jungle language? If anyone does, we may expect him to coin new native words or distort the usage of old ones.”³ This claim seems true, regardless of whether we accept his argument of the empirical nature of inter-lingual relations and of a minimal conceptual grid—sense and consideration show how difficult translation and understanding become as we move from concrete terms towards those more abstract. For example, the phrase “Rabbits have weight” naturally shows itself to be easier to translate than “Neutrinos lack mass” due to the former’s basic nature of linguistic meaning and the abstract, complex correlations of meaning contained in the latter phrase.

What implications does this difficulty of translating abstract language hold in regards to practical matters, outside of the realm of Quine’s experiment of radical translation? Considering philosophy as a study typically involving abstract terms and concepts, we are then faced with an interesting and extremely significant difficulty of translating philosophical works. Conveyance of meaning through translation is obviously a crucial aim for any work that is translated—with this concern of the translatability of abstract terminology, however, philosophy seems to have an added element of difficulty. As a field which relies on an array of abstract vocabulary, how do we translate a work and still remain faithful to both the thinker and the source language (SL)? By translating key terms do we risk disturbing the very essence or meaning of a work, and by transplanting an author’s thought do we risk changing the very message itself? Our goal is to examine this problem—it will be seen that this is a very real risk, and that complete equivalence cannot always be expected,

³ Ibid., 111.

and that in some cases the author's very ideas can be endangered by translation and interpretation.

The first example is the ancient Greek term *nomos*. Richard Kraut tells how “the Greek term that is translated as ‘law’—*nomos*—covers not only the enactments of a lawgiver or legislature, but also the customs, norms, and unwritten rules of a community.”⁴ Our contemporary concept of law lacks the same meaning as that of the Greek culture. We consider law as existing beyond societal norms: as Kraut points out, we may say “that slavery is contrary to the moral law, and that this law existed before the wrongness of slavery began to receive general recognition.” On the contrary, *nomos* necessarily includes the sociological background of a community and its legal system. There is a cultural discrepancy, and therefore a potential loss of meaning, between the term *nomos* and the English word “law” into which it is typically translated.⁵

In his article titled “The Problem of Translating” Hans W.L. Freudenthal discusses this problem of equivalence in translation. Words are not isolated terms with static meanings—he claims that “Each word has been coined in a specific atmosphere, it has its own history; the metamorphoses of meaning throughout time often demonstrate this fact [dynamic, mutable nature of terms] with a distinctness baffling to linguists.”⁶ He brings up an example from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, discussing Helen Zimmern's translation of *de Epochistik* as “science of epochs”:

The phrase “science of epochs” makes no sense at all, and the context suggests a very different meaning. It is obvious that the word *Epochistik* will not be found in any dictionary. The translation of Nietzsche's works presupposes a study of the peculiarities of his brilliant style and acquaintance with the fact that his procedure was willfully creative in the matter of the coinage of words.

⁴ Richard Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 105-106

⁵ *Ibid.*, 105-108.

⁶ Hans W.L. Freudenthal, “The Problem of Translating,” *The Modern Language Journal* Vol. 26, No. 1. (Jan. 1942): 63.

But more than this: one has to be well informed concerning the things constantly present to this philosopher's inner eye and which provide him continually with the images, analogies and similarities that he explores.⁷

In this case we see the problem that Quine discussed in approaching abstract translation—*Epochistik* is a term which lacks one-to-one equivalence or any easy correlation that does not involve significant footnoting or drawn out language. Interestingly enough, in this case even those solutions would seemingly fall short, as footnoting and extenuated, lengthy explanations are by no means Nietzsche's style, and would risk changing the very nature of his thought—this, however, is an issue which we will briefly delay.

Does this difficulty and potential untranslatability of *Epochistik* then damage the meaning that Nietzsche intended? If “science of epochs” is not an accurate translation, then some of the value or meaning is definitely lost—the question then is if this difficulty is significant in whether or not it hinders the conveyance of meaning. Another example may be seen in translations of *The Genealogy of Morals*. An extremely important aspect of this text is the separation between the terms *das Böseste* and *das Schlechte*. For Nietzsche, the separation between these words, translated by Walter Kaufmann as “evil” and “bad” respectively, is immensely important to the entire discussion of the “slave” and “nobility,” and the very antithesis drawn between these opposite concepts hinge around understanding a clear division between the two. In his introduction to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Kaufmann discusses difficulties with the translation by Thomas Common, writing that Common “coins ‘baddest’ in a passage in which Nietzsche says ‘most evil’”⁸ in *The Genealogy of Morals*. Thomas Common's apparent failure to draw an oppositional difference between “Good and Bad” and “Good and Evil” by mistranslating *das Böseste* greatly damages Nietzsche's entire project and demonstrates significant loss of meaning stemming from the same basic

⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁸ Walter Kaufmann, Editor's Preface, in Frederick Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 109.

problems seen in the difficulty of understanding what Freudenthal considered “the philosopher’s inner eye.”

In putting trust into translations, one would hope that it would portray the most accurate equivocation possible and would not contain gross mistranslations such as Common’s coinage of “baddest.” Nonetheless, even in an ideal translation, the problem discussed above is very real and it is understood that translation lies in finding a compromise between the source text and the target language. In response to this worry, some translators have chosen to leave certain crucial terms untranslated and not risk replacing them with a word from the target language which may be loaded with a meaning that varies from the source term. One example of this is the English translations of Heidegger and the term *Dasein*. In a version of *Being and Time* translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, this word is left untranslated and explained in its first instance by a footnote. They tell how “the word ‘Dasein’ plays so important a role in this work and is already so familiar to the English-speaking reader who has read about Heidegger, that it seems simpler to leave it untranslated except in the relatively rare passages...”⁹ This practice of not translating terms then tries to avoid this problem of finding a word in the TL that signifies a closely accurate meaning for a crucial and difficult word in the SL. By leaving the original word untranslated, which can be seen as in a sense coining a new word in the TL, the translator then decides to explain the meaning outside of the original author’s thought itself, using mechanisms such as footnotes—through this the term may be expanded and explained more proficiently and still be kept in a similar context as the original work.

Footnoting and other methods of avoiding the problem of untranslatability seem to be closely related to what Jonathan Cohen had in mind when he claims in “Are Philosophical Theses Relative to Language?” that “this is what constitutes a fundamental difference between philosophy and grammar—when philosophical theses *mention* an expression there is nothing to prevent that expression’s being translated along with the rest of the thesis. You can find, for instance, books about the rules of Aristotelian logic written in many different natural languages and all using the same

⁹ John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Footnote in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 27.

example for a syllogism...”¹⁰ Cohen’s statement is in the context of an argument between the translatability of grammatical and philosophical theses, and while this may be seemingly off-topic, his claim is one which is important and shows both truth and falsity. Cohen uses the universal syllogism “all men are mortal” to support this assertion of the translatability of philosophical theses, and his claim in this specific instance does seem to be true. This example, however, is a very basic instance of “philosophical” thought—neither the terms nor the overall proposition portray much of a degree of abstraction. The thesis “All men are mortal” is undoubtedly less complex of a claim than a statement such as “True moral action follows the categorical imperative.” This is no attempt to make an overall comparison between the translatability of Aristotle and Kant, but rather to show a flaw in Cohen’s argument. Granted, philosophical terms and theses may be translated with different degrees of equivalence, as a simpler proposition such as Cohen’s example seems to lend itself to translation rather easily while the latter example would be much more difficult. Nonetheless, his argument seems to fall short of any serious critique of the examples given previously—in many instances translation deals with concepts of abstraction which are loaded with cultural and linguistic meaning that are both inseparable (at least to some degree) from the SL and alien to the TL. Furthermore, Cohen’s argument also necessarily considers philosophical concepts distinctly separate from grammar and language itself. What happens when philosophy is not separate from the use of language?

An example of this problem may be seen in poetry. When translating poetry do we concern ourselves primarily with retaining the meaning of the words and sacrifice the sense and feeling of the work? Or, instead, do we retain the latter and risk damage to the meaning, which may be lost from poorer word choices? Either way, the translator risks damage to the original instance of art. The previous examples of philosophical terms in translation demonstrate that we cannot always expect a one-to-one equivalence when moving into another language, and instead must use devices such as footnoting or expanding a thought into a longer

¹⁰ L. Jonathan Cohen, “Are Philosophical Theses Relative to Language?” *Analysis* Vol. 9, No.5. (Apr. 1949): 76.

sequence of terms or phrases. In many instances it could be argued that this does not damage the meaning of a philosophical thesis or of an abstract concept, such as the argument expressed by Cohen. What if, however, philosophy held similar aspects as those of poetry and we could not separate grammar, syntax, and meaning so easily?

In many cases this seems to be a rather absurd question. Philosophy, in numerous respects, does seem to be separate from the sense of language in the overall work—metaphysics, for example, is typically a study in which language serves to logically connect philosophical terms. In this sense, while the terms may face difficulties of translation, the translator would most likely favor the equivalence of terms over the style of the SL. But not all philosophy is formatted or stylized as metaphysical discourse, not all authors use language for the same purposes, and the notion that philosophy could use language and feeling in the same way as poetry is quite important to the way in which we consider its translation.

Nietzsche's work serves as an excellent example for this consideration. Unlike metaphysics and similar philosophy, Nietzsche sought after a very different project. It is not a project which, like generations of thinkers before, sought to define lofty eternals or definite absolutes. Nietzsche's philosophy is that which is seen in his works such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Antichrist*—his project is that of the “revaluation of values,” of the pursuit of perspectives. Sarah Kofman discusses this very nature of Nietzsche's philosophy, writing that

Tyranny is reprehensible in all its forms, including that of any philosopher seeking to raise his spontaneous evaluation to the status of an absolute value and his style to that of a philosophical style ‘in itself’, opposed to poetic style ‘in itself’ like truth opposed to untruth, good to evil... Whether writing is conceptual or metaphorical (and since Nietzsche the opposition has hardly applied any longer), the essential thing is... to be at enough of a distance from it to make fun of it.¹¹

¹¹ Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, trans. Duncan Large (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 3.

The typical philosophical style—what Kofman argues as the style of the “metaphysician”—is that of transcending both meaning and language to absolutes, to logical propositions which are universal, or as close to universal as possible. This is not Nietzsche, and his language mirrors his philosophy. Similar to poetry, language does not serve merely as a vehicle for Nietzsche’s meaning, but rather it works in conjunction with his philosophy. His language and his thought are not separate—together, they are his meaning. To quote Walter Kaufmann, who seems to understand this very same point:

...it is impossible to be faithful to the content while sacrificing the form: meaning and mood are inseparable. If the translator makes things easy for himself and omits a play on words, he unwittingly makes a lighthearted pun or rhyme look serious, if he does not reduce the whole passage to nonsense.¹²

For Nietzsche this mutual connection is that of his use of metaphor—by creating this reflection between meaning and sense, between his thought and the very use of his language, he brings about the revaluation that his philosophy itself cries out for. By the use of metaphor and poetic style he creates the ability for a plurality of perspectives and the capacity for his text to evolve. As our concepts of “truth” change, so must our perspective, our thought, and therefore, also our style.

How do we translate this plurality of style and meaning in a work in which they are inseparable? One reason for Kaufmann’s retranlations was that,

For one thing, they completely misrepresent the mood of the original—beginning, but unfortunately not ending, with their many unjustified archaisms, their ‘thou’ and ‘ye’ with the clumsy attendant verb forms, and their whole misguided effort to approximate the King James Bible... More often than not, he [Thomas Common] either

¹² Walter Kaufmann, Introduction, Frederick Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 6.

overlooks a play on words or misunderstands it, an in both cases makes nonsense of Nietzsche.¹³

In this criticism then we see a failure to convey this style and the subsequent loss of meaning, the very loss that, “abets the common misconception of the austere Nietzsche, when, in fact, no other philosopher knew better how to laugh at himself.”¹⁴ That is one way, then, which it seems we should not translate Nietzsche—criticism of previous faults may help us, but how do we retain the very style which Common seemed to betray?

Kaufmann explains his attempt at a better translation, writing that “an effort has been made to preserve as much as possible of his cadences, even where they are awkwardly groping or overstrained. What is thus lost in smoothness is gained for the understanding of the development of his style and personality.”¹⁵ Here, foreignizing is preferable to domesticating Nietzsche’s language and Kaufmann surely shows this with his criticism of Common’s translation and his own preference for “style and personality” over smoothness. Kaufmann’s decision is correct if Nietzsche’s style and meaning are inseparable—why risk sacrificing both the beauty and innate meaning of writing for a higher degree of ease or smoothness?

The pursuit of this brief talk, however, is not to define methods by which translations can become flawless, nor should it be seen as an attempt, or at least much of one, to recommend better devices or practices for the translator. We have seen how cultural and inter-lingual differences hinder the translation of abstract terms—Quine’s claim that “...continuities [between languages], by facilitating translation, encourage an illusion of subject matter...”¹⁶ in this case seems to be true. That is not to say abstract terms cannot be translated, but instead that we must realize the existence of conceptual differences between languages and beware of assuming that a term from the SL holds the very same connotations and correlations as the word that we perceive to generate it in the TL. Furthermore, we must also be aware that translation of

¹³ Kaufmann, Editor’s Preface, 107-108.

¹⁴ Kaufmann, Introduction, 6.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ Quine, “Meaning and Translation,” 111.

philosophy and of conceptual thought in general cannot be viewed as the translation primarily of vocabulary, but also of the translation of thought as a whole. With the connection between style and meaning which was seen in Nietzsche, we must realize that to translate is to interpret and that by disregarding or privileging any particular aspect we risk damage to the work, especially when there is such a dependence on language.

This difficulty of translation is, at least in part, a reflection of Nietzsche's various interpretations and ideas which, through the metaphor, show (or, perhaps only encourage) multiplicity and change as the only permanency. Kaufmann's criticisms of Common in many respects do seem to ring true, as being unable to see Nietzsche's humor within his seriousness, his carefulness within his rashness—in short, this very plurality of perspectives—would doubtlessly damage the translation of Nietzsche's language and his philosophy. At the same time, however, if as Sarah Kofman wrote, "A new reading/writing destroys the traditional categories of the book as a closed totality containing a definitive meaning, the author's; in such a way it deconstructs the idea of the author as a master of the meaning of the work ...", then maybe we may wish to seek particular meaning from the ambiguity and multiplicity, from the very "pluralism of interpretations and their renewal."¹⁷ Perhaps we cannot completely discard any translation, and instead consider different interpretations in translation and if perhaps, as Walter Benjamin wrote, "all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines..."¹⁸

¹⁷ Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, 116.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*," trans. Harry Zohn, *The Translation Studies Reader: Second Edition*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 7.