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# Translation and Ambiguity: Towards a Reformulation

ANDREW BENJAMIN

## **Abstract**

That there can always be more than one translation of any work is a commonplace. However, harboured within it is the truth of translation, namely that what is essential to any work is its 'translatability'. Translatability, however, never yields just one outcome. Here the idea of translatability, having been located in the writings of Walter Benjamin, provides the basis for a reflection on the relationship between translation and ambiguity.

## **1.**

With ambiguity there is always another point of departure. Rather than allow its presence to be assumed, the existence of ambiguity could be denied. It would be taken as lacking necessity. Henceforth, and working within the ambit of this disavowal, there wouldn't have been ambiguity. Or, were there to be, it could be quickly resolved. Beginning in this way, a beginning structured by either the refusal or the posited dissolution of ambiguity, raises two interrelated questions. What is being denied? What would have been dissolved? For the most part answers to these questions equate ambiguity with the semantic. Given that equation, ambiguity can be overcome by resolving either a founding lack of clarity in the first instance, or, in the second, addressing and eliminating contestation posed on the level of meaning. Resolving ambiguity, absolving the proposition that a given formulation is ambiguous, would be carried out therefore in the name of meaning. And yet, while possible, (indeed there is a genuine inevitability in this regard, since ambiguities need to be resolved) a question remains. What still endures is an account of the interplay between ambiguity's founding presence and an envisaged resolution. Such an account would not begin with meaning, but with the already present possibility of semantic ambiguity. To start with ambiguity as though it were simply present would be premised on having neglected the interplay between possibility and resolution. Moreover, simply positing ambiguity would have conflated an account of its founding presence with the pragmatic necessity for the state of affairs deemed ambiguous to be resolved. That resolution needs to be understood as a determination of what is initially indeterminate. Taking this complex of concerns as a point of departure means that the question that has to be posed at the beginning is the following: What is happening with ambiguity? Clarity is essential even with a question of this nature. What is taking place with ambiguity – its happening – does not occur in the abstract. Once ambiguity can be repositioned such that it enacts, or more accurately is already the enacting of the relationship between the indeterminate and the determinate, the latter is of course finitude, then what is being addressed cannot be reduced to the vagaries of meaning. The indeterminate becomes an ontological condition that necessitates determination. The link between the two has the structure of a decision. A clear instance of this movement is the act of translation.

Before taking up the opening that the connection to translation allows, it is vital to return to the interplay outlined above between the originality of ambiguity and its necessary resolution. Two points need to be noted. The first is that the original position, while continuing

to appear semantic in nature, has a more complex presence. Semantic ambiguity needs to be understood symptomatically. It is an after-effect of an original condition. The second point is that the resolution of ambiguity, an instance of which is the act of translation, starts with the symptom. In other words, it starts with the semantic. However, as has already been intimated, neither ambiguity nor translation, understood in terms of their happening and thus as the move from the indeterminate to the determinate, are purely semantic. The reduction of ambiguity, or translation, to the semantic would fail to engage either with what allows for their possibility, or for the occasioning of a resolution. (This 'occasioning' involves a set-up in which translation, formally, can itself be understood as the resolution of a founding ambiguity.)

In order to develop an answer to the question of ambiguity, the track to be followed here, as has been indicated, stems from what could be described as the founding connection between ambiguity and the project of translation. (Rather than considering translation in the abstract, its presence will be worked through one of the central formulations given to it in the writings of Walter Benjamin.) Defining translation in terms of a 'project' is intended to underscore the supposition that translation, as with the resolution of ambiguities, is a process. Any process involves movement. Moreover, what has to be presupposed is that intrinsic to the founding object is the potentiality that allows the process to occur. Evoking the projective nature of translation necessitates a redefinition of the object. That which is given to be translated or a founding ambiguity that is there to be resolved are to be characterized as having that potential. The project of translation therefore is the identification of potentiality. Recourse to potentiality will form part of an account of what allows translation to happen. The happening of translation taken in conjunction with potentiality refers to the quality of language. Moreover, the formulation language's 'quality' identifies what it means for language to be language and therefore what can be more accurately described as the ontology of language.

Such an approach, involving an interconnection between ambiguity as a site of philosophical exploration and translation, while not the only way in, is nonetheless demanded by the nature of the exigencies within translation itself. While there will always be an imperative to strive for accuracy, the complicating factor, which establishes the connection between the project of translation and the development of a philosophical understanding of ambiguity, is that the point of departure for any translation, the initial text, is itself ambiguous. The status of this claim is straightforward. Precisely because the meaning of the original formulation, the one to be translated, is not singular, translation begins with the 'ambiguous'. That beginning, once ambiguity is understood in terms of its happening and thus as a process of enactment, will always take the form of the semantic. And yet, what can never be eliminated is the creation of a site in which further decisions (interpretations, perhaps even further translations) are possible and may even be necessary. What has to be retained however is the recognition that the act of translation is already a move that resolves the presence of a founding ambiguity. In addition, this resolution, by taking the form of a decision, allows for a conception of judgment that is positioned beyond simple relativities. Moving therefore from the semantic as a point of departure to the semantic as an after-effect of an original ontological condition, demands the addition of an apparently new term within discussions of ambiguity and translation. What this involves is the following: once emphasis moves from semantic overdetermination, where the semantic is taken as an end itself, to that which occasions it, then within the realm of translation the term that becomes necessary is 'translatability'. This term does not just identify a quality of language: more importantly, it identifies potentiality as inherent to that quality. Translatability is a potentiality. Understood in this sense, the use of the term 'translatability' signifies that the after effect of ambiguity within translation does not stem from an intrinsically ambiguous semantic condition but from the condition of language itself.

The founding state of indeterminacy is commensurable with language's intrinsic translatability. Indeed, the argument will always have to be that translatability and the indeterminate are terms that are essential to identify the quality of language. While its surrounding vocabulary will differ, 'translatability' is one of the terms central to Benjamin's contribution to an understanding of what has already been identified as the happening of translation.

## 2.

As a point of departure it is important to note that in discussions of translation Walter Benjamin's is one of the names that almost inevitably appears. His introduction to his own translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, the text known in English as 'The Task of the Translator', has acquired, and rightly, an almost canonical status. Translation endures within his work. Its presence is central to one of his early papers on the nature of language 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man'.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin had a range of concerns. Rather than offer a summation of the arguments of both papers, if only because this task has a certain endlessness attached to it, the project here is to develop an approach to one of the concepts central as much to his work on language as it is, though in a slightly altered form, to his writings on criticism, painting and literature, and which will work to open up the project of thinking ambiguity as an original ontological condition. Here it is vital that a distinction be drawn between a conception of language that gestures towards an ontological set-up which, while it shows itself in the work of language, the field of language points beyond itself and thus to the ontological. And one in which ontology identifies the quality of language itself. (This position is compatible with Benjamin's conception of 'translatability' and in addition underscores the general argument being advanced here.) While an account of that quality will have recourse to the relationship between the infinite and the finite, a relation that is operative in domains that are not delimited by language, what is in play nonetheless is an account of the work of language. In this context language is at work within translation and is integral to ambiguity's resolution.

The term central to the realization of this project, precisely because it begins to delimit the ontological quality of language, is 'translatability' (*Übersetzbarkeit*). One of the central passages in Benjamin's writings in which it occurs is the following:

Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original contained in the issue of translatability (*Übersetzbarkeit*).

(GS. IV.1.9/SW. 1.254)

Rather than comment directly on the passage as such, though it will be important to return to its concerns in the guise of a conclusion, what follows needs to be understood as a more general reflection on translatability and ambiguity. In order to respond to the challenge posed by Benjamin's conception of 'translatability' it is best to start with a slightly more direct approach.

Translation, as has been noted, has a pragmatic dimension. Translations take place. Translation is both possible and in certain instances direct, if not instant. Translation happens. The act can be assumed. The question of translation therefore does not inhere in the pragmatic act. What matters is what happens. And yet, what it is that actually happens is of course the question. As such, the question of translation, as with ambiguity, has to be linked to what grounds the fact of its occurrence. In other words, the question of translation does not so much concern its reality as it does its possibility. To make the point in a slightly different way, it can

be argued that the inevitability of translation is translation's least interesting aspect. Of greatest interest is the fact that language allows it. This allowing is already the gesture towards the quality of language; a gesture that inscribes potentiality at the heart of any concern with translation.

Linking translation to its possibility will automatically distance a conception of translation explicated in terms of substitution or equivalence. Such an understanding of the process of translation is based on a conception of language as a neutral medium. Its posited neutrality, and thus transparency, would allow it to identify and thus present the 'same' objects. Working with such a conception of language and translation defines the operative dimension within translation in terms of finding the word in a specific language for this 'same' object in the world. Hence, there would be an apparently unproblematic move from '*kitab*' to '*livre*' to '*Buch*' because in each instance what is involved is the material object identified in English as a 'book'. While such a conception of translation is limited, it does contain a residual truth; namely that movement between languages is possible. This is the insistent reality of translation. However, the limitation of such an account emerges because the basis of that movement - what allows it to be possible - then becomes a quality of the world and not language. The world would have acquired a type of universality, or if the world were not to have it directly then the objects comprising such a world would. Language, while having its own relativities, would as a consequence only ever name that world of universal objects.

No matter how attractive such a theory may be - and it would only exert a hold because it makes both language and the world straightforward and thus easy to understand and therefore would obviate the need for any reflection and any consequent need for judgment on the way these elements combine - it is nonetheless constructed on an omission. What is missed is what is already there, namely the complexity of language and the detail of the world. While this limitation opens up important problems, what such a conception of translation cannot account for is the way that two translations of the same text may be accurate and yet significantly different. The accuracy of a translation does not stem from the relationship between world and word. Two different translations of the same source may be given and yet both are correct. In addition to being correct, each could capture a different aspect of the original. On the level of word for word substitution two different translations of a work of poetry may be accurate (accurate despite difference) and yet the fact that one may be in verse and the other in prose repeats the original; and it needs to be emphasized that the original is in fact repeated, in significantly different ways. To concede the presence of both a sense of accuracy that incorporates differences (difference without relativism precisely because there could not be only one exact equivalence) and to allow genre and style to play a foundational role within translation - to allow, for example, the difference between prose and verse to be significant for translation - is already to have recognized the impossibility of substitution as a basis for a theory of translation. And yet translation takes place. The happening of translation demands more than would have been provided by the relationship between word and world.

Drawing on part of the argument presented so far, two elements are central. The first is the possibility of differences between two translations of the same text in which accuracy is maintained despite those differences. The second is that style and genre are able to form part of what is translated. Each of these points needs to be addressed. Starting with style and genre, two things, at the very least, need to be noted. The first is that part of what comprises a work is the presence of its generic determination. The second is that the presence of one literary style, in differing from another connects a work's reality and thus its power as literature to stylistic considerations. Indeed, style would then become a way of describing the economy of a particular literary work.<sup>2</sup> These considerations are not therefore general. Style is for the most

part particular. And yet within the happening of translation additional elements are in play. Neither style nor genre is absolute. Within translation there may be a fidelity to genre and equally a fidelity to style. In the case of the translation of poetry it is possible to capture even the verse structure of the original (for example, the sonnet form) in the translation. However, it is also possible to refuse it. An instance here is essential. While an example from the texts in question will be taken up at a later stage of my argument, it may be noted immediately that differing translations of Homer's *Iliad* (Book 1), one in prose (by E.V. Rieu) and the other in verse (by John Dryden) are nonetheless both translations.<sup>3</sup> Both bring a concern with accuracy to the fore. While a given reader may prefer Dryden to Rieu, it cannot be argued that the former is accurate while the latter is either wrong or inaccurate merely because he fails to repeat the literal generic determination.

A consideration of style and genre opens up the general question of accuracy. (In part they open it up because neither style nor genre determine the appearance of a given translation.) It can never be denied that errors occur within translation. Certain translations can be inaccurate, if not straightforwardly wrong. The interesting point however is that even though error is possible it can take as many different forms as those taken by accurate translations. In other words, in the same way as a range of differing errors may be at work in translations - for example, missing a nuance, *faux amis*, a direct misunderstanding - differing possibilities of accuracy will also be evident. The difference however is clear. In the case of error the source text is not present, in the precise sense that its repetition is not taking place. In the case of accuracy it is present. The concession, which incorporates a concern with both style and genre, is that there is no single exact form in which it is present. (This latter point is, of course, borne out by the history of the translation of Classical literary and philosophical texts.)

There is therefore an opening that emerges here that needs to be noted. Error and accuracy can be reformulated in terms of differing relations to repetition. As such what has to be introduced is the connection between repetition and possibility. If the project of translation's relation to accuracy can be redefined in terms of repetition, then one of the ways in which potentiality needs to be understood is in terms of repetition. Two aspects need to be noted. The first is that potentiality is not to be defined in terms of a conception of the new that occurs without relation. Equally, repetition is not to be understood in terms of the reiteration of sameness. Linking repetition and potentiality means that what emerges, as another translation, will be a conception of the new that is marked by the interplay between the unpredictable and the already related.

The second aspect is that there is a founding relation between potentiality and repetition. In addition, the fact that the original already has the potentiality for it to be repeated means that the actualization of that potential does not depend upon the retention of the original's founding style or generic determination. What it is dependent upon is language's inherent quality. What the translator works with therefore is as much the content that is given to be translated as the original's potentiality.

### 3.

In sum, what can be concluded thus far is that the presence of the original, while central, is not the issue if it is taken as an end in itself. The more significant element, as has been noted, concerns the relationship between repetition and potentiality. Translation is a modality of repetition. However, it is not a repetition positioned within identity. Rather, what occurs is a form of repetition in which sameness and difference both obtain. (The relative existence of each becomes of interest in relation to specific translations.) Repetition becomes one of the terms with which to account for translation understood as a form of movement; translation's

happening. Translation (as *translatio*) is a 'carrying over' (*Übersetzung* as *setzen über*). And yet, on its own this is not sufficient; it is merely to remain at the pragmatic level. What needs to be incorporated is an additional element, an element inhering in language. In order to develop this quality, the difference between the two following translations should be noted: the context is the opening of the *Iliad* Book 1. Chryses is attempting to retrieve his kidnapped daughter. In their own way the translations recount this event.

Chryses had come to the Achaean ships to recover his captured daughter. He had brought with him a generous ransom and carried the chaplet of the Archer-god Apollo on a golden staff in his hands. He appealed to the whole Achaean army, and most of all to its two commanders, the sons of Atreus.

E.V. Rieu

For venerable Chryses came to buy,  
With Gold and Gifts of Price, his Daughters Liberty.  
Suppliant before the Grecian Chiefs he stood;  
Awful, and arm'd with Ensigns of his God:  
Bare was his hoary Head; one holy Hand  
Held forth his Laurel Crown and one his Scepter of Command.  
His Suit was common; but above the rest,  
To both the Brother-Princes thus address'd.

John Dryden

In both translations what occurs after these lines is Chryses' address. Thus the continuity of the translations follows the original. As instances of writing they occur within the determinations of style and genre. Moreover, they will appeal to differing sensibilities. Moreover, questions of accuracy and fidelity can be left to one side insofar as there is an accord and thus a relation of sameness between the two translations. They are therefore both repetitions of the original. What is remarkable about them - the first published in 1950, the second in 1700 - is not their difference *per se*, but that both are possible. In other words, possibility incorporates both their difference and their sameness

Prior to taking up the question of their possibility, what needs to be noted is that what both translations indicate - by the nature of their difference - is that the next translation of this passage from the *Iliad* could not be predicated in advance. Neither the original nor the history of its translation provides an adequate ground for determining beforehand the particularity of any future translation. This is the case because translation cannot be accounted for in terms of the meaning of the words in the passage, nor by insisting on the singularity of ideational content. The impossibility of predication does not mean however that any translation is possible. As I have already suggested, within a translation the original has to be repeated. Both passages cited above have to be understood as repetitions. Repetition's possibility - translation as repetition - inheres in the original as a potentiality. Repetition evidences language's potentiality. And it should be added that repetition is also an essential element in both structuring and providing the ground of judgment. To the extent that these points concerning repetition are conceded - and it can be argued that the history of translations indicates that they should be - then what has to be argued in addition is that any adequate account of language (language as inherently translatable) has to begin with the proposition that the semantically overdetermined evidences the original interconnection between potentiality and repetition. It is not enough merely to assert that translation occurs. Nor is it enough to argue that any one

translation breaks the hold of an original context. The reason why context does not determine either a work's meaning or predict the forms of its translation is that decontextualization – understood as either interpretation or translation – releases a work's potentiality for decontextualization.<sup>4</sup> Dryden's translation of Homer gives to the original a quality it could never have had and yet it is a translation in the precise sense that it is the original's repetition. Were it not for language's potentiality for a future, it would have been lost to its original setting.

The original setting is of course the past of historicism. However, there is another dimension that inheres in any discussion of an original setting. Any discussion of translation will always be set against the possibility that translation has only become necessary because of a fall from the singular language to the multitude of languages. A 'fall' articulated as the myth of Babel. Equally that 'fall' brings with it a related possibility. Multiplicity may entail an eventual reconciliation. A unity, in other words, that recalls a founding past and projects a future. Benjamin was acutely aware of this possible argument. Indeed his formulation of what he termed 'pure language' (*die reine Sprache*), precisely because it is held apart from linguistic determinations, i.e. the play of natural languages, could be interpreted in this light. However, close attention to its formulation indicates that this would be too hasty a judgment. Towards the end of 'The Task of the Translator', in a long and important passage, Benjamin argues the following:

In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized. It is the former only in the finite products of language, the latter in the evolving of the languages themselves. And that which seeks to represent, indeed to produce itself in the evolving of languages, is that very nucleus of pure language; yet though this nucleus remains present in life as that which is symbolized itself, albeit hidden and fragmentary, it persists in linguistic creations only in its symbolizing capacity. Whereas in various tongues, that ultimate essence, the pure language, is tied only to linguistic elements and their changes, in linguistic creations it is weighted with a heavy alien meaning. To relieves it of this, to turn the symbolizing in to the symbolized, to regain the pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation. In this pure language – which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages – all information, all sense and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished.

(SW. 1. 261/GS IV.1.19)

In this difficult and demanding passage the key elements in the formulation 'pure language' are, firstly, the attribution to it of a capacity ('pure language' therefore needs to be understood as generative or at least productive) and, secondly, its identification as 'expressionless and creative Word'. 'Pure language' persists without expression.<sup>5</sup> Present as that which 'cannot be communicated'. While persisting in this way, its field of operation is language. As a result, 'pure language' does not point beyond language. However, it is neither reducible to any one natural language nor is it simply linguistic. Resisting these reductions is what allows 'pure language' to figure within language. The nature of the separation does not involve mere distance nor an eventual form of connection. The separation is an allowing, i.e. is a set-up that creates possibilities and is to be thought in terms of production and therefore in relation to



potentiality. If there is access to ‘pure language’ then it occurs not as access to an original language, let alone to a final language of reconciliation, but to its having been regained in the act of translation. What is regained is what allows language’s work. It allows for it. It is part of what happens even though ‘pure language’ remains ‘expressionless’. If the translator, in Benjamin’s words, liberates ‘the language imprisoned in a work in his recreation of that work’ what this entails is that ‘pure language’ is only ever present as possibility and thus as the original potentiality. Pure language does not figure as though it could be merely given content. Not having content, it provides content’s continual reforming at the point where potentiality and repetition interconnect. That interconnection is the expression of the next translation; a repetition whose possibility is of necessity expressionless.

In a number of differing contexts Benjamin writes of a work’s ‘afterlife’. However, its having one is grounded in what has to be described as the quality of language. Any other description would understate what is at play. That quality is at work in allowing for repetition. ‘Translatability’, Benjamin’s demanding term, needs to be understood as the quality of language that occasions translations; a quality to be explicated in terms of potentiality and repetition. Even though the form of any one translation cannot be predicted, this is of course the anti-utopian gesture of refusing the future an image in advance; the future understood as an act of translation will always have language’s inherent potentiality as its ground.<sup>6</sup> As with language so with the present; both contain the potentiality for their own radical transformation. A transformation held beyond the oscillation between the apocalyptic and the utopian because the present – both a historical moment and as work – is the locus of potentiality.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The references to Walter Benjamin’s texts are to both the German edition and the relevant English translation; page numbers will be given in the text. In the case of the German, reference will be to the *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980-1991). In regard to the English, reference for the most part will be made to the *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996-2003).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed presentation of style as providing a work’s productive economy, see Flaubert’s letter to Louis Colet dated 16 January 1852; Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*. Choix et presentation de Bernard Masson (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 156.

<sup>3</sup> The two translations of Homer’s *Iliad* Book 1 that will be looked at are by E.V. Rieu and John Dryden. The first is Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. E.V. Rieu (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950). Dryden’s translation, published 1700, formed part of his *Fables, Ancient and Modern*, published in *The Poems and Fables of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). The page numbers of the two citations are 23 and 660 respectively.

<sup>4</sup> These comments need to be read as part of an engagement with Derrida’s central paper ‘Signature, événement, contexte’ in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘expressionless’ marks not only Benjamin’s debt to Hölderlin but also the link between the ‘expressionless’ and the caesura as a form of production. I have taken up this connection in much greater detail in my *Philosophy’s Literature* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> I have addressed this question in my ‘The Illusion of The Future: Notes on Benjamin and Freud’, in Andrew Milner and Robert Savage (eds.), *Imagining the Future: Utopia and Dystopia*, Arena, 25-26 (2006): 193-205.