Translation: Language Transmission as Complementation

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Translation: Language Transmission as Complementation

Martin Heidegger explained the meaning of ‘translation’ as a leap to another language that always remains foreign to the translator. In other words, translation is an event that is shaped by the distance between languages and the irrevocable foreignness of the text, which belongs to another language and another tradition. For Heidegger, therefore, translating is not appropriating a foreign work so that its information is transmitted into one’s own language. If this were the case then language would simply remain a vehicle that transports the meaning incorporated into texts using dictionaries as guides and tools. However, the translator does not bring information out of a foreign language into a familiar one, but rather he moves – with a leap that is also always precarious – from his own language to a new context that is foreign to him. By defining translation as the act of crossing over, Heidegger makes it clear that translation should not be misunderstood as transmission.

No theory of translation that is to be taken seriously can ignore the fact that languages are fundamentally different and therefore there is always something foreign between them. This is symbolized in the myth of the tower of Babel. Quine and Derrida’s reflections on translation – despite the fact that they come off as quite different – can also be read as echoing Heidegger’s difference-oriented interpretation of translation. Quine’s idea of radical translation generalizes the ethnological situation of the field linguist who investigates a language on the basis of concrete situations and their immediate context, which are completely unfamiliar to him and whose meaning is therefore not based on practice through use, habit, and repetition. Derrida interprets the myth of Babel as a deconstructive act of God, who introduces rupture and difference between people and their languages while at the same time facilitating the genesis of sense and meaning by virtue of this differentiality.

For Heidegger, Quine, and Derrida, therefore, the radical difference between languages is an unavoidable fact that sets the standard and the limit for every attempt at translation.

There is only one language thinker who acknowledges the existence of an irreducible linguistic difference ‘after Babel’ and also agrees with Heidegger’s disavowal of the instrumental concept of language reduced to the symbolic, but who nevertheless uses not division but rather kinship between languages – though not based on similarity – as the basis of his theory of translation. This thinker is Walter Benjamin, who actually interprets translation as a kind of ‘transmission event’. According to Benjamin,
a virtually ‘true’ and ‘pure language’ looms in the vanishing point of real linguistic diversity, and this ‘pure language’ finally emerges in the act of translation. This language does not actually exist for Benjamin, but rather it is only a quasi-‘messianic’ vanishing point that all translations point towards.

For Benjamin, translation is the ‘removal from one language into another’. However, this does not mean that translation simply transmits sense and meaning from one language to another. As already mentioned, for Benjamin translation expresses the ‘essence’ and ‘nature’ of our linguisticality; ‘to be a language’ is therefore ‘to be translatable’. This is the basis of the medial character of language, which is precisely why Benjamin's concept of translation is significant here. For Benjamin, translatability and mediality are the two sides of our linguisticality, which – if this image were not so static and thus inappropriate – are related to each other like the front and back sides of a page.

For Heidegger, translation remains a leap because there is no medium that enables the transfer of one language to another. For Benjamin, however, translation is a constant transformation, and thus the transfer of one language to another occurs ‘through a continuum of transformations’.

To reconstruct Benjamin's theory of translation it is also necessary at the same time to reconstruct his understanding of linguistic mediality. Against this backdrop, Benjamin's reflections on translation also provide an answer to the question of how the transmission function of media makes them productive. I will now illuminate the relationship between translatability and mediality in five steps.

**Benjamin’s Affinity for the Reproductive**

In familiar traditions of thought, language is considered productive precisely because and insofar as it is a medium, whether for the cognitive representation of facts or understanding between people. The idea that speech possesses a genuine creative power and that language is therefore a site of production, the original source of our cognitive and communicative creativity, is linked to the assumption that language can be used as an instrument of knowledge and communication.

In contrast, Benjamin displays – even in his early work – a persistent affinity for the reproductive dimension of language and thus for phenomena that are usually considered secondary and derivative, like ‘translation’, ‘critique’, or ‘mimesis’. By turning precisely to these linguistic practices, which are always associated with the repetition of and reference to something that has already been said, Benjamin attempts to sketch a profile of language
that subverts the instrumentality of language or the anthropogenic shaping of language as a medium of expression and communication. Translation shows that languages should not be conceived as a means of expression. If languages are not means, but rather media – as already mentioned, Benjamin’s concept of media is based on this opposition between ‘means’ and ‘medium’ – then this also implies that they are not media that refer to either objects or other subjects. This is precisely what is ordinarily assumed: The referentiality of a language is based on its (cognitive) reference to the extra-linguistic world or its (pragmatic) reference to communication partners. For Benjamin, however, the constitutive relation of reference is from one language to another. Media are therefore languages insofar as they refer to other languages. The first decisive step towards understanding Benjamin’s theory of translation is to conceive of the relationality of languages as interlinguistic. Language is only language insofar as it communicates with another language. For Benjamin, Wittgenstein’s ‘private language argument’ assumes the form of a ‘plurality of languages argument’: There can be no language that only exists for itself. Regardless of whether or not a language is actually empirically translated, its translatability is inscribed in every language, and this is precisely what makes it a language. Benjamin’s concentration on the sphere of linguistic reproduction is only logical: It is nowhere more apparent ‘what a language is’ than in its ability to refer to other languages.

It is important to note one additional fact concerning this interlinguistic referentiality; perhaps it appears trivial and will be easily overlooked: ‘To translate’ always means to translate languages and not texts. I will return to this later, but the next step involves dismissing yet another familiar attitude concerning the concept of ‘language’.

From the Metaphysics of Language to the Transcendental Character of Translation

In his 1916 essay on language Benjamin already goes far beyond a concept of language as a discursive utterance associated with voice or writing: ‘The existence of language [...] is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression in which language is always in one sense or another inherent, but with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents.’ At the same time, however, Benjamin also emphasizes that there are different languages, such as those of ‘technology’, ‘art’, ‘justice’, and ‘religion’. He is referring not to particular specialized terminologies here, but rather to the
way in which characteristic ‘mental beings’ are communicated for these domains. Something exists in the world that can communicate itself, but that participates in language in some form or another.

What can be achieved with such a metaphysical if not mystical absolutization of language? Benjamin’s theory of translation provides one answer. If the differences that are relevant for our world and its linguistic diversity ‘are those of media that are distinguished as it were by their density – that is, gradually’ – then translatability constitutes the universal register, in which all relationships and differences can be registered. To make language into the ‘material’ out of which the world is formed means that the order of the world is based on translatability and translation is an elementary expression of a relationship between the diverse. For Benjamin, the fact that all of the material dimensions of existence are projected as kinds of languages means that Plato’s fundamental distinction between an original and its reflection, which implies that the imitated and reproduced are ontologically secondary and derivative, no longer applies. The interpretation of language and translatability as the basic constituents of the world guarantees that transfer, transmission, and translation will no longer be considered subordinate, but rather they will be conceived as the – fundamental – form of production. It actually all comes down to the concept of form. Benjamin emphasizes that ‘translation is a form’, which does not mean that a work is really translated, but rather that it ‘accepts and even calls for translation – in accordance with the meaning of this form’.

Werner Hamacher’s insightful attempt to define translatability as the ‘categorical imperative of language’, as a challenge that corresponds to Kant’s moral law, interprets translatability as a transcendental aspect of language. For Benjamin, translatability is actually a ‘law of language’, according to which every language transcends itself in its aspiration to be transferred into another language. In contrast to Kant’s a prioricity, however, the a priori of translatability in Benjamin’s work is to be understood as thoroughly historical. I will now attempt to explain that this means.

The Situation of the Translator: Exteriority

As already mentioned, Benjamin interprets the Fall of Man from a linguistically-theological perspective as a break whose line of demarcation was marked by the fact that language was no longer exclusively employed as a medium, but rather – first and foremost – as an arbitrary means. God created by naming, and the ‘language of names’ was thus a ‘pure’ medium, but the Fall of Man resulted in the grammaticalization, semiotization, and instrumentalization of language; from then on, language served as a pragmatic means
of denotation, identification, expression, and communication. Benjamin also describes this instrumental conception of language as the ‘bourgeois conception of language’.

A translator who understands his activity as an act of ‘mediation’, through which the assertions of a work are transposed into another language such that the meaning of the translation resembles that of the original, is neglecting his task: He is a bad translator. In contrast, the ‘true translator’ remains mindful of the ‘fall of language’: For him, translation is ‘a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages. An instant and final rather than a temporary and provisional solution to this foreignness remains out of the reach of mankind.’ At the same time, however, the translator attempts to reverse the historical tendency that culminates in the Babylonian confusion of languages and the bourgeois instrumentalization of language in the sense that ‘its goal is undeniably a final, conclusive, decisive stage of all linguist creation’. On the one hand, the irrevocable foreignness between languages must be acknowledged; on the other hand, translation takes place in the vanishing point of a ‘paradisiacal’ stage of language. How can the ‘true translator’ do justice to both of these aspects? Benjamin’s answer is that he does not use language as a means, but rather he approaches it as a medium. This is the heart of Benjamin’s theory of translation, but what does it mean to approach language as a medium?

In the act of translation, the translator purges languages of their function as means and restores their immediacy, which was lost through the Fall of Man. This does not happen by transferring the information content intended by the author of a foreign-language text into the translator’s native language. When it is assumed that a language communicates something, then it is working indirectly rather than directly. Language is only immediate and direct when it communicates itself rather than something else. In order to enable this ‘self-communication’, the translator must be able to ignore precisely the intention of a text, its ‘meaning’ in the usual sense.

The translator does this by disregarding the relationship between content and form that is unique to the original text. While content and language actually form a ‘certain unity’ in the original text, like ‘a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelopes its content like a royal robe with ample folds.’ Benjamin expresses this idea more drastically elsewhere: ‘the reproduction of the sense ceases to be decisive; the translation must ‘liberate the language imprisoned in a work.’ With this disengagement from meaning and content, the translator radically sets himself apart from language and assumes a position outside of language. Benjamin compares
the poet and the translator and insists on a fundamental distinction between them: Unlike poetry, which is situated ‘in the center of the language forest’, translation does not enter this forest of language, but rather remains outside of it.\(^ {164} \) By virtue of this exteriority – and here Benjamin uses a strange image – the translator ‘calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one’.\(^ {165} \) This cryptic image is easier to understand when it is made clear that in his translation essay Benjamin also describes the echo and reverberation produced by the translator as ‘true’ and ‘pure language’.\(^ {166} \)

This ‘pure language’ is direct and thus functions as a medium; it is the language that was lost with the Fall of Man: ‘to regain pure language […] is the tremendous and only capacity of translation’.\(^ {167} \) The point of this ‘regaining’ is that something is restored that did not actually exist prior to the restoration. Benjamin’s linguistic-theological interpretation of the Genesis chapter, which identifies ‘pure language’ with God’s creative language of names, implies that such language was never available to concrete historically situated people. This sheds a characteristically paradoxical light on the translator: The productivity of translation consists in revealing a ‘pure language’ that does not de facto exist. How does this work? At this point I will now turn to the technique of translation.

On the Technique of Translation: Literality

Because translation does not involve transmitting the meaning and content of the original, the translator focuses on the word rather than the sentence as a unit of meaning.\(^ {168} \) Words – not utterances or messages – constitute the ‘primary element of translation’. This represents a preliminary step ‘back’ to the immediacy of language that Benjamin associates with the non-grammaticality of an (originally divine) ‘language of names’. At the same time, however, Benjamin also states that the words of different languages never coincide absolutely. At this point Benjamin introduces an important idea, which provides the key to his theory of translation. Benjamin distinguishes between ‘meaning’, which could also be called ‘word-meaning’, and ‘connotations’. According to Benjamin, words like ‘Brot’ and ‘pain’ have the same meaning, but they each invoke entirely different connotations. These connotations are embedded in history, culture, and everyday practices in German- and French-speaking areas.

The translator thus focuses on connotations, which are incorporated into the original but always remains foreign in the translator’s native language. The translator is able to express this foreignness through the literalness of a word-for-word transmission: Literality thus becomes the
ideal method of translation. It is no accident that Benjamin refers here to Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, which for him represent ‘monstrous examples of such literalness’ because they embody the translator’s radical refusal to preserve the meaning of the original, which is precisely what the ‘unrestrained license of bad translators’ aspires to do. In Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, ‘meaning plunges from abyss to abyss’, which evokes the danger that the translator can be enclosed in silence. Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles were his last work, but this danger of the radicalized literality of a translation can be entirely averted: Benjamin offers the example of the interlinear translation of Holy Scripture, which no longer attempts to mediate a meaning, but rather enables the appearance of ‘true language’, which is direct and thus a medium, through its meaning-alienating literalness. A text proves to be translatable precisely in its literalness and without the mediation of meaning. This representation of ‘true, pure language’ is therefore what all translations amount to: By remaining faithful to the word, the translator loosens and suspends the original meaning of the message, and the translation now means something different than the original text: It thus reveals the true language, which was concealed in the original but is brought to light in the ‘transparent’ translation.

But again: How is it possible to understand this ‘true language’, which the translation reveals but nevertheless does not actually exist?

The Vanishing Point of Translation: The ‘True Language’ and the Complementarity of Languages

This ‘true language’ has nothing in common with a discursive sign system. It cannot be understood as a self-contained or demarcated object. It is something that only exists in the movement of translation. The ‘true language’ is the medium in which individual languages grow in that they are transplanted and ‘live on’ in the translation.

A translation that focuses on words expresses the diversity of ‘connotations’, which make languages incongruent with each other. By transferring one ‘connotation’ into another ‘connotation’, while still remaining mindful of their fundamental incongruence, the translator effectively complements or completes one language through another. The ‘connotations’ are then ‘recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel’.

Translation is therefore not about replacement, which obeys the semiotic logic of aliquid stat pro aliquo and in which what resembles one another can take the place of one another; rather, it is about completion. This
complementarity is precisely what translation establishes and achieves. It is the fundamental relation between languages, which shows that languages are related to one another. A relationship – Benjamin emphasizes – does not presume any similarity: Languages and their ‘connotations’ are as different as puzzle pieces, which nevertheless fit together. The goal of the true translator is to trace these connotations ‘lovingly and in detail incorporate’ them. The fragment of a particular ‘connotation’ complements the fragment of another ‘connotation’, which points to something ‘higher’ that is nevertheless only prospectively constituted by this reference. The pure language only exists in individual languages as trace and reference, as ‘intensive – that is, anticipative, intimating – realization’.

With this reference to something more complex than the individual languages themselves could possibly be, translation becomes ‘unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien. This disjunction prevents translation and at the same time makes it superfluous. The translation does not transmit a meaning, but rather it irretrievably transplants the original in another place: This is also why a translation of a translation cannot restore the original text. This ‘relocation’ is also at the same time a defamiliarization of one’s own native language: Benjamin approvingly cites Rudolf Pannwitz, who complains that ‘our translations [...] proceed from the wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English.’ Only when the translation reveals the foreignness and diversity between languages can these differences also be revealed as complementary and thus integratable. The ‘true language’ only becomes apparent to the translator by virtue of his position between the languages.

The task of the translator thus consists in transferring the original text into the translation in such a way that its brokenness becomes a trace of the absent ‘pure language’.

**Translation as Complementarity: A Conclusion**

So what does this complex theory of translation and its linguistic mysticism reveal about the significance of messenger, transmission, and medium?

(i) Unlike the poet, there is nothing demiurgical about the translator. He does not create original texts, but rather he represents the complementary relationship between languages. His sphere or métier is therefore not production, but rather reproduction.

(ii) The translator can represent the relations between languages insofar as he consistently occupies a position of exteriority. His standpoint with respect to language – also unlike the poet – is ‘external’. The translator
is not situated in language, but rather between languages. This makes the translator a kind of messenger figure.

(3) From this external position the translator is able to loosen the relationship between content and form that is unique to the original text. By separating them from one another, the translator’s activity no longer needs to focus on the linguistic transformation of the meaning and information content of a text. The ‘joke’ of his position is therefore that his concern with language surpasses its function as communication. From this perspective it becomes apparent that language is not an instrument, but rather a medium. In its mediality language is always also a ‘language of names’, and literalness is therefore the ideal method of translation.

(4) The translator no longer focuses on the similarities or even equivalencies between different languages, but rather on the differences in their ‘connotations’, which constitutes the translation’s basic point of reference. The good translator does not correct or cover up these differences, but rather attempts to bring them out in the translation.

(5) The translator defamiliarizes the native language, but at the same time he can also show that the foreign language and the defamiliarized native language complement each other. Completion is thus a fundamental principle for translation. The translator becomes a mediator between languages, as he recognizes their diversity and brokenness but nevertheless integrates them by making them visible as fragments – like puzzle pieces – of ‘pure language’. By making the differences between languages transparent and nevertheless fitting them together, the translator reveals that all concrete languages jointly participate in a messianic-like ‘pure language’. This revelation can only occur through the process of translation.78

(6) Because these fragments of different languages complete each other, they point to a linguistic totality that does not actually exist but is potentially visualized through translation. ‘Pure language’ has been gone and forgotten since the Fall of Man, but a good translation can be considered a trace of this ‘pure language’ insofar as it signals its absence and makes its potential givenness a measure of the work of translation itself. The trace of this ‘pure language’ is therefore not found in concrete languages, but rather in the activity between languages first produced by the good translator.

(7) The translatability of languages is intertwined with their mediality, as languages become media when they establish the milieu for an assemblage of the diverse.