

Untranslatables and their Translations

A Logbook

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"A language, it doesn't belong"

Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live At Last*

The point of departure for these notes is a work, the *European Vocabulary of Philosophies. Dictionary of Untranslatables*, which *Transeuropéennes* has decided to accompany in its transformations. So that a logbook of translations of untranslatables might be maintained by many hands, with everything that a journal can have of the trivial and the thoughtful, the well-stitched and the incoherent - a *Denktagebuch* as far as is possible. The project kicked off in November 2007 with a confrontation between Arabic translators, with Ali Benmakhlouf and Ukrainian translators, with Constantin Sigov, held in the Maison de l'Europe in Paris, entitled 'The site of the difference of languages'. It was followed by a festive exploration of nostalgia at the Swiss Cultural Centre, with Fernando Santoro and Anca Vasiliu: 'When Europe is not well', around words like *Saudade*, *Sehnsucht*, *Spleen*, *Dor*, *Nostalgie*, planted in poems, philosophical texts, songs, and by means of which Europeans speak of the state of malaise, when body and soul are in disorder, designate where and how they are not well, differently in each language and each culture.

Let us start again, very briefly, from the work itself, such as it was conceived and published (Seuil-Le Robert, 2004). It was a very heavy labour, which brought together 150 French and foreign researchers over ten years. It resulted in a very singular object, rich with 9 million signs, 400 entries and 4000 words, turns of phrase or expressions, taken from fifteen European languages or languages constitutive of Europe, by starting from the symptoms of the differences of languages that "untranslatables" are - not what one doesn't translate, but what one doesn't stop (not) translating: after Babel with happiness. The originality of this work has been acknowledged by what one customarily calls the international scientific community, and its resonance in civil society is not diminishing (around 10,000 copies have been sold so far). This dictionary is now in the course of being translated/adapted in different languages, and these publishing projects multiply both its philosophical difficulty and interest. All the more as it is a matter of, amongst others, English and Arabic - not yet Turkish, alas - languages that constitute the plurilingualism proper to *Transeuropeans*. But also, besides Ukrainian, Romanian, Spanish, Portuguese, and maybe, just maybe, Farsi. And it is certainly not indifferent to philosophical geopolitics that the Spanish is being prepared in Mexico, the Portuguese in

Brazil - nor that the English is American.

In the first place, we must return to the objective of the *Vocabulary* itself. One of the most urgent problems that Europe poses is that of languages. One can choose a dominant language, in which [all] exchanges will henceforth be made, or one can play on the maintenance of plurality, in making manifest the meaning and the interest of the differences. The *Vocabulary* is resolutely inscribed in the second optic.

It is both a philosophical gesture and a political gesture.

Its ambition is to constitute a cartography of European philosophical differences, by capitalising on the knowledge of translators (you know, footnotes...). It explores the link between fact of language and fact of thought, and rests on those symptoms that the difficulty of passing from one language to another are. With *mind*, does one understand the same thing as with *Geist* or *esprit*? Is *pravda* justice or truth? What happens when one renders *mimesis* by *imitation*? Each entry thus starts from a knot of untranslatability, and proceeds to compare the terminological networks, the distortion of which makes the history and the geography of languages and cultures.

It is in this way that it constitutes a working instrument of a new type in philosophy, in the wake of Emile Benveniste's comparativist study *The Vocabulary of Indo-European Institutions*. One doesn't start here from concepts but from words, and it obliges us to become conscious of philosophising in languages. "Whoever finds language interesting in itself is different from whoever only recognises in it the means for interesting thoughts"¹. "Language is manifest in reality solely as multiplicity"². Language is and is only the difference of languages. In this perspective, translating is no longer *dolmetschen* but *übersetzen*, understanding how different languages produce different worlds, make these worlds communicate and disquiet languages the one by the other, in such a way that the reader's tongue goes to meet that of the writer³. The common world becomes a regulatory principle, a goal and not a starting point. That is the regime of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*.

Now this philosophical gesture is also, and perhaps today above all, a political gesture. Which linguistico-philosophical Europe do we want? Answer: there are two that we do not want, that I propose to characterise in this way: neither everything in English, nor ontological nationalism.

The first catastrophe-scenario only lets one language subsist, without author and without oeuvre: *globish*, '*global English*', and dialects. All the languages of Europe, French, German etcetera, would only be for speaking at home (dialects, then), and for preserving like endangered species via a politics of the patrimony. The English of Shakespeare and of Joyce belong to these dialects that no-one understands any longer. Already today, in the international colloquia where everyone speaks *globish*, the only speaker not understood is the one who comes from Oxford. *Globish* is a language of pure communication, which serves for ordering coffee from Tamanrasset to Peking and to make submissions to Brussels by proposing *issues* and *deliverables* in the framework of

a programme of 'governance' in a *knowledge-based economy*. The difficulty evidently results from the relationship between *globish* and the English language. It is even that which makes the threat so intense: the risk of collusion between a pragmatic esperanto and the language of a culture. On the one hand, in effect, a certain analytic philosophy advocates the angelic innocence of the universal: what counts is the concept, not the word - Aristotle is my colleague at Oxford. On the other hand, the angelic innocence of the universal is accompanied by a militancy of the ordinary. English, taken this time as an idiom, in the singularity of works and of authors who expressed themselves in English in the philosophical tradition, is the language of fact par excellence, the language of usual conversation attentive to itself. Whether it is a matter of empiricism (Hume) or the philosophy of ordinary language issuing from the *linguistic turn* (Wittgenstein, Quine, Cavell), one pricks the bubbles of metaphysics by being *matter of fact* and *fact of the matter*, attentive to what we say when we speak everyday English. Hence the exceptional force of a *globish* resting on or supported by an "analytic English" which makes a continental philosophy stuck in the history and philosophy of languages amphigouric. From this perspective, the very idea of the untranslatable is null and void, or worse: lacking utility.

The other catastrophe scenario is linked to the weighty problem of the "genius" of languages. There are languages that are "better" than others, because more philosophical, with a better grasp on being and the saying of being, and these languages must be taken care of as one takes care of superior races. I return constantly to this phrase of Heidegger, who makes it [the matter] legible in a caricatural manner "The *Greek language is philosophical*, i.e. [it is] not that Greek is loaded with philosophical terminology, but that it philosophises in its basic structure and formation [*Sprachgestaltung*]. The same applies to every genuine language, in different degrees to be sure. The extent to which this is so depends on the depth and power of the people who speak the language and exist within it [*Der Grad bemisst sich nach der Tiefe und Gewalt der Existenz des Volkes und Stammes, der die Sprache spricht und in ihr existiert*]. Only the German language has a depth and a creative philosophical to compare with the Greek"⁴.

Greek then, and German, more Greek than Greek. All the work of the *Dictionary* goes against this tendency to hierarchise languages and to sacralise the untranslatable, the symmetric opposite of the universalist contempt.

The heading to take between these two stumbling blocks may be named using a Deleuzean term: "to deterritorialise" . Humboldt adds: "the diversity of languages is the immediate condition for a growth in the richness of the world and the diversity of what we know in it; in this way the area [aire] of human existence is at the same time enlarged, and new ways of thinking and feeling are offered to us under determinate and real traits"⁵. Such is the ambition of the *Dictionary*.

The comparativist stake finds itself redoubled with the translation, or rather translations, of the *Vocabulary*. It could not be a matter, in effect, of a mechanical translation. The

Vocabulary has thought "untranslatables" at the heart of a space that is certainly international and plurilingual but is nevertheless Francophone, in the strict sense of French-speaking, and it has described them by means of French as metalanguage. Every translation into another language will thus have to make a distinction between the entries that are in a "generic" or "metalinguistic" French and those that are in "idiomatic" French. One can hear/understand this difference by comparing, for example, the two articles "*Aimer, amour, amitié*" and "*Nostalgie*". In French "*aimer*" holds the place of an entire semantic region analysable differentially, from the Greek *eran*, *agapan*, *philein* to the English *to love*, *to like*, and for which it will be necessary to find the corresponding generic term - one or several - in the target language, so that the article could deploy the history and geography of the ensemble of these terminologies. On the other hand, "*Nostalgie*", a French word come from Greek via Swiss German, is idiomatic, it is "in French" the same as *saudade* is in Portuguese, *Sehnsucht* in German and *dor* in Romanian. This first labour of discrimination and sorting, which dictates that sometimes the French entry is kept and sometimes that the lemma (that is to say, the term or terms that serve as the entry point for an article) passes into the other language, is not a banal editorial job of translation but a philosophical labour linked to the translation.

The choice of word or words which will serve in a given language as equivalents for the generic entries constitutes a second philosophical problem. It is emblematic of this non-superposability of languages and of [terminological] networks that is the very object of the *Vocabulary*. This choice of lemmas is in turn a simple mirror that magnifies the difficulties and the dilemmas that will have to be resolved language by language, in particular when it is a matter of quotations - it is not difficult to foresee that, as was the case for the French, existing translations will put their finger on the insufficiencies of the habitual equivalences.

Such is the first, lemmatic and linguistic, labour which we threw ourselves into from A to Z, with Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, Michael Wood and Etienne Balibar, at the start of July, by the sea, in Corsica.

It is essential to compare the perceptions of different linguistic teams of translators, their criteria, justifications, interests and effects. The stake is not necessarily identical for each of the languages. Each translation into a language will fix a terminology. But today this terminology is likely to be more or less floating, for reasons that are not only cultural but also historical and political, interfering with national sentiment. This is the case, for example, in Romanian, where Slavic and Latin interfere and compete with each other. Such is the stake, in particular, for the domain of political philosophy in the Ukraine. Translation into Ukrainian was the first to be decided, during a memorable session of Cité-philo Lille, with Constantin Sigov and his team, who prepared the Slav entries in the original *Vocabulary*.

The principle tool is a labour on homonymy: what is a homonym in one language from the point of view of another and inversely? How do homonyms that can remain invisible

or unnoticed in a language considered in isolation and from the inside, and which nevertheless characterise or constitute it differentially, appear as plain as day with "deterritorialisation", when one passes from language to another? What does one see of a culture or a tradition in the passage via another language, by "trans-lation"? If it is true, borrowing a phrase from Lacan in *L'Etourdit*, that "one language, amongst others, is nothing more than the integral of equivocations that its history has left in it"⁶, then one has a thread that is strong enough to compare two languages and their manners of dividing up the world. An example will make this more understandable. "*Pravda*", which is customarily rendered as "truth" first signifies "justice" (the sanctioned translation of the Greek *dikaio sunê*) and thus appears as a homonym from the French (or the English) point of view. Inversely, our "truth" is a homonymy from the Slavic point of view, since the term crushes together "*pravda*" which comes from *justice* and "*istina*", which comes from *being* and from *exactitude*. One might reflect in the same way on the ambiguity for "us" of the root "svet", light/world, and on the problematic homonymy of "*mir*", peace, world and peasant commune, on which Tolstoy plays constantly. It is clearly the ensemble of a language, tradition and culture that finds itself interrogated again.

Every translation is thus an adaptation and an adventure. It elaborates its strategies, reflects on the effects that it wants to produce. The Hispanophonic world is revealed as without doubt the closest, except that it recomposes the relationship between philosophy and literature. In the United States, where a certain Anglo-Saxon philosophy of language supposes concepts that are independent of the words used to say them and as such barely situated in space and time, giving the difference of languages in philosophy the keys to the city doesn't go without saying. Finally, for the Arab world, the stakes are massive: it consists in opening up to one another languages and cultures that history has, for sure, already reunited - the presence in the *Vocabulary* of Arabic as a language of passage and a vector of the transmission of philosophy, testifies to it - but which have since been largely ignored, as shown by the till now very small number of modern translations into Arabic. I dare not say anything about Farsi in this day and age if not that the stake of the relationship between Farsi and Arabic is considerable. We have started to explore it with Transeuropeans thanks to Azartash Azarnoosh at the Maison de l'Europe, when with regard to translations of the Koran he presented his book *Languages in Conflict: Arabic and Persian in the First Centuries of Islam*⁷. And I know nothing yet of the grand heterogeneous linguistic continents that are Japanese, Chinese, Hindi etc.

Each one of these translations leads to transformations, and it is, in a second time these transformations that we would like to compare: taking seriously the difference of languages and cultures, putting it in the light and interrogating it by means of this very singular apparatus of translation, that doubles up the question of translation, makes a critical reflection on [its] practice obligatory, and constitutes a powerful tool for comparativist interrogation.

If the short and medium term objective is to help to conceptualise and to better realise the translation of the *Vocabulary* into each of the languages considered, the objective is also, in the longer term, to visualise and to think the geometry of all the repairs and adaptations to which translation will have been constrained. To finish our labours we are

envisaging collecting together the singularities of each version, their additions and transformations in relation to the French "original", and publishing them in French (in the first place and in any case in French, but, *anagke stênai*, Aristotle said: one must, at a given moment, stop, decide arbitrarily to stop), as a volume in itself, a guide for us of the detours of "philosophising in languages".

Such a gesture has to be pursued by the development of an electronic network and via the medium of the internet, the importance and specificity of which I believe in, as I believe too in the new version of *Transeuropéennes*.

Concretely, the translation into Ukrainian is being done first in instalments in such a way that each instalment can play the role of a book, with a principal author and a theme, before the ensemble is reorganised as an organic whole, *holon* and not *pan*. It was also chosen to proceed by instalments for the Arabic translation without any decision yet about an electronic edition. On the other hand, the Anglo-Saxon, Spanish and Romanian translations will, at least in the first instance, be in the form of a single volume book.

So, along with the publishers, it is necessary to reflect on the modalities allowing the *Vocabulary* and its adaptations-versions on the net. There is something in that which conforms to the spirit of this work. On the one hand, because the *Vocabulary* is a gesture rather than a closed work - an *energeia* rather than an *ergon*, to borrow the term by which Humboldt characterises language; so much so that the adding of symptoms, language by language, evidently follows in the sense of the undertaking. On the other hand, because the vocation of these additions themselves is to resonate amongst themselves, so as visibly to constitute a comparativist meshing of philosophical cultures and traditions. On condition that scientific control is retained over the additions in question - it is true that it is not easy to define this type of control. Wikipedia is in its own way the proof of this. It seems to me that it would in any case be a matter both of verifying the "philosophical information" contained in the new articles and of ensuring that the comparativist "spirit" of the dictionary, as far as possible from any hierarchy of languages, is not betrayed; the problem, that I don't wish to treat here, is evidently one of knowing who will provide the guarantee for the police.

So, for its key-words, such a network will be able to anchor itself not only in the analogous lemmas in different languages, but [also] the quotations (and/or their references) around which the articles are constituted, in such a way as to make them appear at once in their original language and their multiple translations in space and time. We will thus pursue the work initiated during [our] participation in the ECHO project (*European Cultural Heritage Online*, piloted by the Max Planck Institute during the 5th PCRD), and which gave rise to a prototype [attempt at] intelligent numbering, with a cartographic representation of the relationships between entries, hypertext navigation, a set of external links via keywords, proper names and quotations, thus permitting access to oeuvres in [different] languages (a sample can be consulted online at the websites of the Max Planck Institute and of the Robert publishing house⁸). This sample, which bears on the vocabulary of the image starting from the French dictionary,

needs to be extended rapidly to the adaptations of the same entries in certain other languages, in order to compare [their] cartographies and to allow [for] navigation both inside and outside.

In the longer term, such research opens up a reflection on the models at work in automatic translation. I will start [here] from an anecdote: when, passing through the institutional mediations of the CNRS, I was concerned to discover how the European Union [might] fund a *European Vocabulary of Philosophies* focused on translation and its difficulties, I got the following hatchet-sentence: "Europe only funds research dealing with computer-assisted translation". I would like to get my own back on this reply by an obedience of a different sort. The principal model at work hitherto, linked to Systran, consists in passing from one language to another via a pivot-language, English, that functions as a common denominator. English itself is previously disambiguated (essentially via Wordnet), [and] thus transformed so as to change in status from a natural language to a pivot-language. Disambiguation is thus understood as the means for passing from the word, singular and illuminated by language, to the universal concept. This deal is part of the philosophical tradition, from Aristotle, who constructs homonymy as the radical evil of language, to Leibniz, whose universal characteristic aims at a reduction to the identicals allowing for the operation of the calculus. Translating then consists in bringing all natural languages back to a single, conceptually neutral language, without qualities, like an intersection authorising a new passage towards any other natural language. From this perspective, the difference between natural languages is evidently accidental and reducible.

By starting from the *Vocabulary* and its translations, I would like to explore the possibility of the inverse model: confront and exploit plurality instead of aiming at unity. Comparison doesn't require a common *tertium quid* ("globish-technish", a conceptual language), but a common space or geometry, a topic, a topology, allowing terminological networks to show how they are and how they aren't superposable from one language to another, and even from one oeuvre to another in the same language (epoch, genre, author, style); how, in an analogous manner, syntaxes are and are not superposable. A re-evaluation of homonymy, as characteristic of a natural language as such, constitutes a key. Lacan's phrase from *L'Etourdit* can serve here as a reference point. The inventory of equivocations, as with the *semantic web*, constitutes an obligatory point of passage. But the manner of treating them differs considerably: a certain number amongst them, different each time, are constitutive of a language, they are not accidental and they evolve diachronically, and finally they are visible from the outside of this language. Thus it is for "us" (which "us" ?) that the Russian *pravda* signifies in an equivocal manner "truth" and "justice", or *svet* "light" and "world", just as it is for a latin that the Greek *logos* simultaneously signifies *ratio* and *oratio*, or for "us" that the Spanish *ser* and the Spanish *estar* are not differentiated.

So the epistemological suppositions differ: one is not treating concepts but words, that is to say, words in languages, and without doubt, strongly contextualised words, taken [from] oeuvres and texts (the local/global problem). One ends up with a sheaf of

questions: how is the description of the homonymic "richness" of a word, an expression, a phrase, to be formalised. How is the relation between two set of "riches" to be formalised? How is the tracing out of [these] networks to be modelled and their non-superposition to be rendered visible? These questions overlap with that of the treatment of occurrences and contexts which, without the ideology of translation having changed, begins to inflect the model of the pivot language. They constitute the distant horizon of our work.

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Translated by Andrew Goffey

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Fragments sur le langage' in *Poétique* 5, trans. J-L.Nancy and P.Lacoue-Labarthe (1971), p. 134 [this working note does not appear with the English translation of *Homer and Classical Philology*].

² Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Über die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues', *Gesammelte Schriften* 6, eds. A Leitzmann et al. (Berlin: Behr, 1904) p. 240.

³ I am paraphrasing the celebrated bifurcation "either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and makes the reader to meet him or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and makes the writer go to meet him". Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Des différentes méthodes de traduire*, trans. A. Berman (Paris, Seuil, 1999) p. 49.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Human Freedom. An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 36.

⁵ 'Fragment de monographie sur les Basques' [1822] in P. Caussat, D. Adamski, M. Crépon, *La langue source de la nation* (Paris: Mardaga, 1996), p. 433.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Scilicet* 4. Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 47.

⁷ Currently being translated into French for Fayard.

⁸ <http://robert.bvdep.com/public/vep/accueil.html> - see in particular, the article "Bild".

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Notes
