Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of Language and Translation

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Abstract: Walter Benjamin's exploration of language delves into the intricate relationship between divine and human language, translation, and the philosophical implications of linguistic theory. This fascinating exploration of language underscores Benjamin's deep engagement with philosophical and theological themes. Benjamin critiques Kantian epistemology for reducing experience to its lowest form and failing to address the ephemeral nature of experience, emphasizing the need for a higher, religious concept of experience. The relationship between language and translation is seen as beyond meaning, not merely a copy of the original. Through this lens, Benjamin invites us to reconsider the role of language, not merely as a medium of communication, but as an instrument of higher philosophical and metaphysical significance, capable of bridging the temporal with the eternal, the human with the divine.

Keywords: Benjamin, philosophy, language, translation, religion, experience

> Benjamin never once acknowledged the boundary taken for granted by all modern thought: the Kantian commandment not to trespass into unintelligible worlds or, as Hegel riposted, to where there are "houses of ill repute" ... For Benjamin, everything habitually excluded by the norms of experience ought to become part of experience if it adheres to its own concreteness instead of dissipating this, its immortal aspect, by subordinating it to the scheme of the abstract universal.
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> Theodor W. Adorno[1]

Introduction: Categorical Imperatives

Three Axioms

1. For Kant, the categorical imperative ensures that thinking and knowing an object are not inherently the same, as the act of thinking does not inherently posit the object given to intuition. Knowledge emerges through the interaction of thinking with the object. Kant argues, "the only intuition possible to us is sensible; consequently, the thought of an object in general, by means of a pure concept of understanding, can become knowledge for us only in so far as the concept is related to objects of the senses" (Kant 1965:162). Pure intuition yields only a priori understanding of concepts, exemplified by mathematics. Empirical intuition, on the other hand, provides empirical knowledge of perceptible entities.

2. Kant, in the "Preface" to the Second Edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, notes the failure of reducing objects to their concepts: "all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them a priori, by means of concepts, have...ended in failure" (22). Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* exemplifies this failure, where conceptual reason falters in the face of reality, demanding silence in the presence of profound atrocities such as Auschwitz.

3. Kant posits, "experience is itself a species of knowledge which involves understanding," and it precedes the a priori intuitional givenness of objects. Therefore, experience is the a priori condition of knowledge, which is expressed through a priori concepts to which all experiential objects conform. Epistemology's challenge between the dialectics of appearance and essence was reconciled by asserting that conditioned knowledge (empirically determined) and unconditioned knowledge (the thing-in-itself) coexist within these distinctions. In Kantian thought, all judgments of experience are synthetic, integrating what lies outside the concept through experience, thereby synthesizing it. The subversive nature of the concept in epistemology ultimately confronts "actual cognition of things that resist cognition" (Adorno 1966: 28).

Benjamin's Critique of Kantian Epistemology

In his essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," Benjamin recognizes the significance of Kantian epistemology for its "decisive and systematic consequence," but is ultimately critical of its limitations (Benjamin 1989: 1). However, as his argument unfolds, it becomes apparent that the significance of the entire Kantian framework reflects a sense of "sadness," rooted in its awareness of a reality of a "lowest" order, where experience is "virtually reduced...to a minimum of significance" (2). Even though Kant shows that the truth and certainty of the reality of knowledge should be judged by two criteria – (1) a certainty of knowledge that is lasting, and (2) the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral – it fails, however, to deal with the latter adequately. Nonetheless, it remains true that Kant does not decide in favor of a knowledge that can adequately compensate for the irreducible and unique temporality of an experience by making it "identical with the object realm of...science" (what the Neo-Kantian of the Marburg school did at the turn of the last century as Benjamin points out in the essay).

Benjamin challenges the prevailing interpretations of experience that emerged from the Kantian era through their Enlightenment theorization, which posited that the only valid experience was that which was given, encapsulated in a *Weltanschauung*, or "*world view*" (2). This *world view*, whose correspondence located in the lowest form of experience, that of mechanistic order, was insufficient insofar as it excluded the possibility of a higher, that is new, concept of experience – the religious, which Kant failed to integrate within his system. Benjamin's program attempts to retrieve the degeneration of experience from the grasps of the mechanical God of certainty of the Newtonian world, for it reduces "the naked, primitive, and self-evident experience...to a minimum significance" (2). He argues that Kant's philosophy reduces experience to mere scientific objectivity, neglecting the unique and ephemeral nature of true experience.

Benjamin contends that this reductionist view, inherited from the Enlightenment, fails to account for higher, religious experiences. He believes contemporary philosophy must revise Kantian thought to establish a new concept of experience that includes both mechanical and religious dimensions. The shortcomings lie not exclusively within Kantian methodology itself, but rather within the flawed "*world view*" of the Enlightenment to which Kant was intrinsically associated. This task involves redefining the field of knowledge so as to make metaphysical and religious experiences logically possible.

Metaphysics, in Benjamin's sense, does not prove the possibility of God, but it certainly makes the "experience" of God, the religious experience, possible (6). The knowledge of such religious experience is not to be found in formulae or numbers of an empirical consciousness, but rather in its unique expression in language. As Benjamin says, "The great restructuration and correction which must be performed upon the concept of experience, oriented so one-sidedly along mathematical-mechanical lines, can only be attained by relating knowledge to language, such as attempted by Hamann during Kant's lifetime" (9).[2]

The revision of Kant essentially entails a revision of philosophy's relation to religion. The concept of experience is itself mythological, and therefore any attempt at its revision must partake in a

revision of the concept of knowledge that seriously hinders it from acquiring a metaphysical/philosophical content. Benjamin writes, "This new concept of experience, which would be established, given the conditions of knowledge, would itself be the logical place and logical possibility of metaphysics. [...] Thus the task of the coming philosophy can be conceived as the discovery or creation of that concept of knowledge which [...] makes not only mechanical but also religious experience logically possible" (6). Before we proceed to delineate the significance of language in Benjamin's philosophical and literary *oeuvre*, it needs to be stressed that the epistemological traditions, especially of the neo-Kantians, have failed to distinguish nature and experience from the nature of experience. Since it does not fall within the domain of this essay to elaborate on the above distinction, we proceed to explore: What is language for Benjamin?

Language After the Fall

Benjamin's essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" is a study of difference in language after the Fall, the fall of the Adamic language from its divine origin (Benjamin 1978, 318).[3] Irving Wohlfarth refers to this fall in his admirable essay "On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin" as the fallen and "degenerate" state of the "human word from the god-inspired language of names" (Wohlfarth 1989: 57). The Fall marks the difference between language *as* such and language as *something*, the former as the word of God and the latter as a "means" for communication. Language as such *speaks* of itself to itself and in that it confers the name of creation, while the language of man, in speaking of itself, speaks about the other, something "outside of itself." In other words, human language operates within a structuralist framework of signifier and signified, "in which one thing stands for another" – unlike the self-referential divine language.

For Benjamin, the original language was considered the language of creation rather than meaning. According to him, language did not create meaning; instead, it created a world. He believed that this creative power was diminished in the current state of languages, which prioritizes meaning over creation. If one could assemble the fragments of original languages from their representative function and meaning-producing roles, they would serve the higher purpose of the cosmic order of creation. In language, meaning is not reproduced but assigned through its use for communication and information. A true translation does not aim to replicate the original's meaning in the translated version but seeks to reproduce the original's intention (*intentio*). Thus, the goal of translation is not merely transferring meaning from one source to another but fostering a harmonious relationship or "kinship" between differences. Translations should resonate together like diverse notes in a grand composition.

Translation seeks eternal life, and the task of the translator is governed, according to Benjamin, by "a special high purposiveness."[4] It is not something ordinary and banal as communication. Translation is deeply engaged in the embryo of linguistic relationships of languages. Benjamin's meditation on the task of the translator is devoted to the embryonic relationship of languages as they have evolved in history: "Languages are not strangers to each other" (*I*, 72.) This embryonic relationship is the commiseration of all languages to have the same structure, that is, the desire "to express."

The Role of Human and Divine Language

For Benjamin, language is not merely a vessel for conveying information; but a sacred medium that bridges the gap between the material and the transcendental, thus making it a fundamental component in the pursuit of knowledge and experience. While human language, in its postlapsarian state, serves as a tool for representation and communication, divine language inherently embodies the essence of things, bestowing upon them their true names and allowing for a more profound connection to the world.

This divergence between divine and human language underscores a critical aspect of Benjamin's thought: the potential for redemption and renewal through the reclamation of language's original

purity. By reconnecting with the sacred dimension of language, Benjamin envisions the possibility of transcending the limitations imposed by the Enlightenment's mechanistic worldview and recovering a form of experience that encompasses both the empirical and the metaphysical.

In this context, Benjamin's exploration of language extends beyond mere linguistic analysis to encompass a broader philosophical and theological project. He seeks to uncover the hidden layers of meaning within language, revealing its capacity to convey not only empirical truths but also deeper spiritual insights. Through this endeavor, Benjamin aims to restore the lost unity between word and world, bridging the chasm that has divided human understanding since the Fall.

Benjamin's concept of "pure language" emphasizes the unity and harmony that language can achieve when it transcends its communicative function. This pure language, untainted by the distortions of fallen human speech, aspires to reflect the divine intention inherent in creation. It is through this purified linguistic form that Benjamin believes we can access a higher form of knowledge and experience, one that is both revelatory and redemptive.

Thus, Benjamin's philosophy of language and experience is deeply intertwined with his broader metaphysical and theological concerns. By advocating for a return to the sacred essence of language, he challenges the dominant epistemological frameworks of his time and opens up new pathways for understanding the world and our place within it. This vision of a redeemed language and experience ultimately seeks to heal the rift between the material and the spiritual, offering a holistic approach to knowledge that honors both the empirical and the transcendent dimensions of reality. His philosophy invites us to embrace a vision of language that transcends its conventional boundaries and engages with the metaphysical and theological dimensions of existence. In doing so, we are invited to take part in a journey of discovery and renewal, seeking to restore the original purity and sacredness of language as a means of redemption and transformation.

Furthermore, Benjamin also draws on the notion of translation as a means of approaching pure language. Translation, for him, is not merely about converting words from one language to another; it is an act of revealing the deeper, sacred connections that lie dormant between languages. Each language, in its unique way, captures aspects of the divine truth, and through the process of translation, these fragments are brought into alignment, offering a glimpse of the original, unifying language of creation.

Translation as a Philosophical Act

A careful reading of "The Task of The Translator" clearly establishes the hermeneutic cycle of textual history which is intermittently bound up with the task of translation (*I*, 69–82). It deconstructs the concepts of "original" and "originary," showing they do not follow a linear progression. Translation does not relate organically to the text that precedes it. Moreover, translation of a work of art involves overcoming its natural unity rooted in its "mythical interconnectedness" and thus becoming "thoroughly denaturalized" (Gasché 1986: 93). Benjamin dismantles the idea that the original is primary to its translation. He suggests translation mediates a forgotten divine language, highlighting the immediacy of the "non-phenomenal otherness" of the divine language. The relationship between language and translation is seen as beyond meaning, not merely a copy of the original. As Benjamin states, "no translation would be possible if in the ultimate essence it strove for the likeness of the original" (*I*, 73).

Carol Jacobs, in "The Monstrosity of Translation," comments: "What Benjamin's essay performs (...) is an act of translation. It is to begin with a translation of 'translation,' which then rapidly demands an equally violent translation of every term promising the key to its definition. 'The *Aufgabe des Übersetzer*' dislocates definitions rather than establishing them because, itself an uncanny translation of sorts, its concern is not the readers' comprehension nor is its essence communication" (Jacobs 1975: 756). For Benjamin the real task of translation is to render the traditional concept of translation, in which the meaning of the foreign words and sentences are made comprehensible

within the reader's linguistic milieu, incomprehensible – in such a way that the familiar sight of the reader's own language turns radically different in its foreignness. The foreignness is not made ours, on the contrary, what is ours, our own language, is made foreign. For example. Benjamin cites Rudolf Pannwitz:

> Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign work.... The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent any language can be transformed, how language differs from language almost the way dialect differs from dialect; however, this last is true only if one takes language seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly (*I*, 80-81).[5]

Translation is seen by Pannwitz as a "mode" for revealing hidden meanings and aligning disparate languages, contributing altogether to the realization of "pure language" (*rein sprache*). Language, already, is considered a trace of pure or divine language, and translation represents this trace within a trace. These traces conceal and reveal themselves simultaneously, canceling their presence. Benjamin suggests that traces of pure language are evident even before language evolved into its current form. The trace of the Fall exists prior to the actual event, giving trace primacy over language. Similarly, translation precedes the original text despite appearing later. As Werner Hamacher notes in his reading of Benjamin, "Forgetting exists before that which is forgotten and before the one who forgets" (1986: 154).

The connection between original and translation "may be called a natural one [...] more precisely a connection of life," writes Benjamin.[6] The term "life" (*Leben*), according to Jacobs, occurs "sixteen times in the course of the paragraph, and midway through [Benjamin] clears it of its traditional meaning. The 'life' to which translations are bound is itself woven into textual history. 'The sphere of life must ultimately be fixed in history, not in nature [...] Thus the task arises for the philosopher to understand all-natural life through the more encompassing life of history'" (Jacobs 757). By assigning the task to the philosopher, Benjamin at once acknowledges the relationship of resemblance between translation and philosophy, insofar as philosophy establishes a critical relationship with the world, as in a philosophical discourse, which is not a simple *Abbild* (reflection) of the world.

For the symbolic relation of word and meaning is still enmeshed in natural and mythical figuration. The task of translation is to destroy the sense and meaning of the original text, its intention and reference, and Benjamin cites Hölderlin's literal translation of Sophocles as the supreme example.[7] Translation approaches the language as if to remove it from its natural associations, to instigate a call for its departure from the "symbolic forest." Translation approaches and simultaneously move away after "fleetingly" touching the sense and meaning of the original and thereby maintaining what Gasché calls a "caesural difference."

"A *caesura*," Gasché explains, "keeps them simultaneously together and separate" (Gasché, 1986, 86). "True philosophical difference," writes Gasché, "is achieved in the fleeting touch of what is to be disregarded, in fidelity to what is to be abandoned" (86). The light, fleeting touch of the "dialectical flash" – that produces its own difference in spite of the lack of a radical otherness of truth, which, however, it does not possess, is mainly a task that both communicability and translatability must perform in their movement away from the mythic and natural as well as the empirical condition of language's fallen condition. The light touch, "the way an aeolian harp is touched by the wind," is only a reminder of the difference that philosophical activity of translation and communication is capable of engendering in the absence of pure difference of the radical otherness of truth (*I*, 81).

Within the framework of a distinction that gestures toward *difference* as the unifying principle of pure language – a unity that is purely linguistic yet cannot be fully grasped from within itself, only alluded to or approached as an essential task – *communicability* and *translatability* can be illuminated by a Benjaminian simile: "Just as a tangent lightly touches a circle at only one point, with this touch rather than the point establishing the law by which it continues on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the minute point of sense, thereafter following its own course according to the laws of fidelity within the freedom of linguistic flux" (I, 80). We have now reached a point in our discussion where in Benjamin's words, "it is necessary to found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory, for it is much too far-reaching and powerful to be treated in any way as an afterthought, as has happened occasionally. Translation attains its full meaning, in this schema, in a realization that every evolved language (with the exception of the word of God) can be considered as a translation of all the others.... Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continual of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity" (*R*, 325).

Echoes of Heideggerian Thoughts in Benjamin

Benjamin's exploration of language goes deep into profound metaphysical and theological realms where he seeks to distinguish divine language from the multiplicity of human languages. This distinction draws parallels to Martin Heidegger's conception of the Being of Language as difference. Heidegger's philosophy posits that language is not merely a tool for communication but an essential and residential aspect of Being itself. In a similar vein, Benjamin regards language as a sacred entity, imbued with intrinsic value and meaning, bridging the material and transcendental worlds.

The first half of Benjamin's title, "On Language as Such," recalls the as-structure *(als-struktur)* of Heidegger's Being. The German title of Benjamin's essay, "*Über sprache überhaupt und über die sprache des Menschen*," does not contain the word "as such" as (mis)translated by Harry Zohn into English. This engagement allows us to delve deeply into the intricate relationship between language and (mis)translation. Benjamin's exploration of "Language as such and on the Language of Man" resonates profoundly with Heidegger's ontological inquiries. By choosing the English title, we aim to bridge the philosophical insights of both thinkers, creating a dialogue that transcends linguistic boundaries and enriches our understanding of the essence and function of language. Since this essay is engaged with the issues of translation and language, we have decided to use the English translation of the title to engage in a more fruitful manner with Heidegger's formulation of "as such" in his philosophy. For Heidegger, the things that surround the phenomenon of *Dasein* in themselves are not the pure articulation of the Beings as such; instead, they stand "for something," "*something as something*" that serves some purpose. He famously gives the example of a chalkboard:

> [A] chalkboard, if it were unintelligible, would as such, not be present here. Unless it were understood as for-writing-on, it would be hidden. The same with a door unless it is understood as for-entering-and-existing. These things are intelligible because we ourselves move among and operate with them, although we do so in such a taken-for-granted way that we forget this state of affairs in its basic structure as constituting these things. (Heidegger 2010: 123, n. 11).

All speech and perception are grounded in an ontological relationship with the world, where things are already disclosed in terms of their functionality. Referring to specific objects – such as "this table," "that window," "the chalk," or "the door" – implies their prior understanding. What does this understanding involve? It involves uncovering the object in terms of its intended use. The object is already embedded with meaning; it inherently makes sense. This should not be interpreted to mean that an object devoid of meaning is initially given and subsequently assigned a meaning. Instead, what is initially "given" – a term that requires further clarification – is the functionality such as "for writing," "for entering and exiting," "for illuminating," or "for sitting." Activities like writing, entering and

exiting, and sitting are intrinsically understood. Our comprehension and acquired knowledge, when we "know our way around," pertain to these purposes for which the objects are utilized (123).

In other words, the "as-structure," as Heidegger explains, cannot be linguistically determined because by its very nature it is pre-predicative and anterior to linguistic formulations. It stands for "something as something," where the *as* has an apophantic nature, that is, it "does not belong to something thematically understood" (122). The "as-structure" shows that the disclosure of *Dasein* is not to be found in language itself but in the "*possibility*" of language, through interpretation (hermeneutics) and discourse (*Rede*), "which is already the possibility of speech" (Gasché 1988: 299).

Thus, from a Heideggerian perspective, by calling God's word *the* language as such, does Benjamin also suggest in some such way that in it the primary articulation has already the structure of discourse? Or is it just as essential and imperative for the understanding of God's word to be understood in the structure of its own discourse – as that which is immanent in its own being, as the Word in which the Being of language discloses itself? The Word is immeasurably and infinitely different from the human word, a proper sign of the fall of the human language, as the word which creates its difference from the human language, as Gasché put it, "in an essentially prelinguistic, nonpropositional, prepredicative, and nonthematic manner" (1988: 229).

In the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue," Benjamin asserts that "truth is an intentionless state of being," further elaborating that "truth is the death of intention" (1977: 36). In the context of divine language, which Benjamin equates to the language of God, this truth relates to itself by being a difference. In essence, it constitutes the analogy of all perception, pointing to its existence as "the transcendens pure and simple," as elucidated by Heidegger in *Being and Time*.[8] For Heidegger, language is "the house of Being," where the essence of Being is revealed through language (1998: 257). This resonates with Benjamin's idea that divine language embodies the essence of things, bestowing upon them their true names and allowing for a profound connection to the world. In both philosophies, language transcends its role as a representational tool and becomes a conduit for experiencing and understanding the fundamental nature of reality. Another significant difference between Benjamin and Heidegger lies in their views on poetry, which they both considered to be inspired by divine madness. For Benjamin, Hölderlin was not only an exceptional poet but also an inspired translator. Benjamin specifically highlights Hölderlin's "monstrous translation" of Sophocles, referring to it as an interlinear translation that remains "literal" at the same time (*I*, 78).

Critique of Art Through Language

Within the structure of Benjamin's theory of language, one discerns a critique of art. The language of art reveals the traces of difference that language, as language, creates beyond the symbolic and utilitarian functions of natural and mythically interconnected language. The translation of a work of art endeavors to elevate the artwork above its fallen, degenerate, natural, and mythical state to a higher form of expression, which does not rely upon the natural relation of sign and content. The act of translation uses the original solely to discard, displace, and dissemble. The original language has descended to the mythical level without even recognizing it. Consequently, it cannot recall – has indeed forgotten – its own fall. Translation not only recalls that moment of descent but also remembers what has been forgotten in natural language, namely its own fall. Therefore, "One might...speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it. If the nature of such a life or moment required that it be forgotten that predicate would not imply a falsehood but merely a claim not fulfilled by men, and probably also a reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God's remembrance" (*I*, 70).

The Proper Name

Benjamin considers translation to be already embedded in human language. By calling name the language of language in which God's creation is fulfilled, Benjamin establishes the foundation for

understanding language as the translation of the Word into names. As Benjamin explains, "name is the innermost nature of language itself. Naming is that by which nothing beyond is communicated, and in which language itself communicates itself absolutely. In naming, the mental entity that communicates itself is language. Where mental being in its communication is language itself in its absolute wholeness, only there is the name, and only the name is there" (*R*, 318).

The distinction between the mental and linguistic entity of language, according to Benjamin, lies in how the mental entity communicates itself ("all language communicates itself") within the linguistic framework. To elucidate this point, we can refer to an example from him: "The language of this lamp...does not communicate the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is *communicable*, is by no means the lamp itself), but: the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression" (emphasis original) (*R*, 316). The lamp, as an object, cannot communicate itself directly to us since we understand it through our own naming conventions, which are based on human knowledge. Consequently, our relationship with the lamp exists only to the extent that we know and recognize its name as communicated to us through the language in which the "language-lamp" expresses itself. The distinction between the word "lamp" and the language resides in "the absolute relation of name to knowledge [which] exists only in God; there, name is identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge" (*R*, 323). Equating the mental essence of language as "outwardly identical" with its linguistic essence not only conflates the concepts of what is knowable and what is knowledgeable ("God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge"), but also neglects the important distinction between the acts of "communicating (naming) and [...] the communicable (name) aspects of communication" (*R*, 323, 320).

Here, Benjamin's exploration of language shifts into the ontological significance of names, framing the act of naming as a divine communion that precedes the fallibility of human communication. This divine prelapsarian language, as posited, was intrinsic and self-referential, a contrast to the instrumental language of man that emerged post-Fall, where words became mere symbols within a system of signs. Thus, contemporary philosophy, according to Benjamin, must grapple with the implications of this linguistic divide, seeking to reconcile the mythological origins of language with the epistemological demands of modernity. Understanding this bifurcation is crucial to redefining concepts of knowledge and experience in a way that integrates both mechanical and spiritual dimensions, reflecting a synthesis that has profound metaphysical potential.

The materialistic aspects of Benjamin's "idealistic" theory of language are based on its distinction from "the infinity of all human language [which] always remains limited and analytical in nature compared to the absolutely unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word" (*R*, 323). However, this distinction, the material foundation, according to Benjamin, operates as a "frontier between finite and infinite language...the point where human language participates most intimately in the divine infinity of the pure word," which is represented by the proper name (*R*, 323-324).

Human language does not have the creative function in the Biblical sense; instead, it produces a sign that substitutes or reifies the proper name, the creativeness of the divine word, for an abstract meaning or judgment. Human language's difference lies solely in its meaning, in its object, or, in other words, in the process of signification. God's language, on the contrary, embodies the difference in its own self-relationality. "The proper name," according to Benjamin, "is the word of God in human sounds" (*R*, 324). Human sound, interpreted here as the speech-act of man, is, nonetheless, a *result* of the *action* of the Word (*logos*) of God, which, as Michael Fishbane, commenting on the Biblical account of creation, suggests, is more than speech; "it is God in action, creating (Gen. 1.3; Ps. 33.6), revealing (Amos 3.7-8), redeeming (Ps. 107.19-20)." Furthermore, "God's speaking and creating are one and indissoluble. His words create and order the heaven and the earth; they give a syntax to the formless and the void, they transform the primordial, undifferentiated unity into order and classification.... The prosaic, reflective discourse of the human speaker ('there was') counterpoints the commanding tones ('let there be') of the divine speeches, as well as the force expressed in naming the things of creation ('Day!' 'Heaven!' 'Earth!'). Indeed, the speeches of Elohim would be

overpowering without the calming and alternating rhythm of the human speeches which precede, intervene between, and follow them" (1979: 7).

Consequently, the gentle and alternating rhythm of human speech cannot rival the overpowering forces of creation. It is solely through the articulation of proper names that humans are able to echo the Word of God. Only through proper names can individuals surpass the limitations inherent in finite language. Through the use of proper names, human language transcends its ambiguities and the bourgeois notion that words have an incidental relationship with their objects (*R*, 324). It is also through proper names that we realize equating naming languages with language itself deprives linguistic theory of its profound insights (*R*, 317).

Benjamin's interpretation of the two creation myths (Genesis 1–2) aligns neatly with his argument, precisely that of "presupposing language as ultimate reality" (*R*, 322). God did not create man from Word; neither did He name him. But He gave him the *gift* of language. "He did not wish to subject him to language, but in man God set language...free" (*R*, 323). The creativity of man's language is the knowledge of its difference from God's creation. Man is the *knower* of his *creator*. Man knows things not by their own name as essence, as mystical linguistic theory implies, since things do not have words for themselves, but he knows them by name in human words. He knows things and animals by their names because he was the first to translate those "nameless in names." He concludes that language is both the creative force and the finished creation, embodying both word and name.

We have reached a pivotal point in our discussion where, as Benjamin articulates, "it is necessary to establish the concept of translation within the deepest level of linguistic theory. This is due to its far-reaching and powerful nature, which cannot be treated as an afterthought, as it occasionally has been. Translation attains its full meaning through the understanding that every evolved language (with the exception of sacred texts) can be considered as a translation of all others. Translation is the process of transferring meaning from one language to another through a continuum of transformations. It involves continuous transformation rather than abstract notions of identity and similarity" (*R*, 325).

Benjamin's theory of language is marked consistently by theological motifs developed in explicit connection with his reading of the first chapter of Genesis, a theory of linguistic origin rooted in the divine act of creation, in the creative act of naming. [9] Naming – the word – expresses human language as a mimesis of creation, which rejects the Sausserean model of language constituted by arbitrary signs. His theory of language is reminiscent of Herder's view that "human beings invent language themselves from the sound of living nature" (cited by Rabinbach 61). Benjamin's discourse of the mimetic image of language is based on a doctrine of "non-sensuous similarity" and natural correspondence, resemblances, and has its origin in mythical foundation of language that was expressed by the configuration and constellation of stars, in the occult practices of the ancients.[10]

Benjamin did not define the structurality of the Word beyond its theological significance in Judaic interpretation. Anson Rabinbach notes that Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty" show a consistent unity of theological motifs in his language theory (Rabinbach 60). Benjamin states that "the other conception of language," referring to God's language, "knows no means, object, or addressee of communication" (*R*, 318). According to Benjamin, "the most linguistically fixed expression" is essentially "the concept of revelation" (*R*, 321).

The concept of revelation, as articulated by Benjamin in "On Language as Such," is integral to the profound metaphysical discourse within linguistic theory. It emerges when the "mental being" of language, which conveys itself through linguistic expression, intersects with the linguistic being of language, which communicates through the language of tangible entities, particularly in human expression. This interplay occurs as these two dimensions – mental and linguistic – aspire towards a "higher category" that predates the hierarchical evolution of language, a process influenced by the Fall. This relationship establishes a significant connection with the philosophy of religion, wherein revelation is defined by Benjamin as a pivotal moment (*R*, 320).

Revelation and Translation

Revelation represents the instance when the linguistic word, in its utmost "inviolability," manifests as "purely mental" (*R*, 321). As Benjamin notes, until this moment, revelation remains obscured within the confines of language. Consequently, one of the primary objectives of translation is to unveil these concealed meanings. The manner in which language obscures its intent within the object that discloses its historical significance is merely one aspect of translation's role. More critically, the nuanced task of translation lies in harmonizing the intentions across diverse languages, thereby contributing to the realization of "pure language." For Benjamin, translation and revelation exist in a complementary relationship, each enhancing the understanding of the other.[11] Furthermore, the most sacred task of translation, as articulated by Benjamin, is to reveal the divinity of pure language that functions in its Biblical role in the creative potential of naming (*R*, 318).

To elaborate on the above arguments, we now proceed in somewhat more systematic fashion with "On Language as Such" and "The Task of the Translator," with the help of the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1977). Within this triangulation are embedded some of Benjamin's most refined and sophisticated arguments about his theory of language. As Benjamin says in "The Task of the Translator," "no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener."

We can add to this another statement from "On Language as Such": no language is intended for the speaker ("Languages therefore have no speaker," (*I*, 69; *R*, 316). The recurring question, whether concerning a work of art or language itself, is, "What does it communicate"? Initially, one might conclude that it communicates nothing. As Benjamin elucidates in the translation essay, "It 'tells' very little to those who understand it" (*I*, 69). Similarly, in his "language" essay, Benjamin asserts, "The answer to the question 'What does language communicate?' is therefore 'All language communicates itself'" (*R*, 316). This indicates that, fundamentally, literary or artistic works have minimal explicit content to convey; their "essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information." (*I*, 69). Conversely, does the answer "All language communicates itself" imply a significant communicative value? Indeed, it does, as it encapsulates the essence of language's self-referential nature. Ultimately, Benjamin's philosophy invites us to embrace a vision of language that transcends its conventional boundaries and engages with the metaphysical and theological dimensions of existence.

Language as Broken Vessel

> Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (*I*, 78).

In the case of the broken vessel, Benjamin is quite clear in stating that the original language is as broken as the translation itself: "Both the original and the translation are recognizable as fragments of a greater language." The original is already a broken vessel and not a result after the restorative work of translation. What Benjamin has evoked through the image of the amphora is the difference between natural and symbolic representation. For example, the metaphoric similes of "fruit and its skin" refer to the natural language (i.e. human language), whereas pure language, or what is purely language, does not require any such naturalistic analogies.

> While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like *a royal robe* with ample folds. For it signifies a more *exalted* language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien" (emphasis added) (*I*, 75).

Translation serves as the adhesive, cementing agent that unites disparate realms of pure language, fostering a kinship aimed at restoring or revealing the essence of pure language. The primary responsibility of the translator is redemptive, as it is dedicated to the renewal or "afterlife" of languages.[12]

Benjamin's theory of language, in short, is the trace of all languages in the form of translation. Languages are connected through words or sentences or their structures, where they intend to inscribe meaning to the objects of their references. Meaning is confined to the language, but the modes of intentions behind meanings remain infinitely possible in all languages. For instance, the German word *Brot* and the French word *pain* "intend" the same object, but, Benjamin insists, the "modes of this intention [*Arts das Meinens*] are not the same" (*I*, 74). While *Brot* and *pain* both mean "bread," they hold different connotations for Germans and French people. Whereas in pure language "meaning is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences," instead it "emerges…from the harmony of all the various modes of intentions" (*I*, 74). They "supplement" each other, the original and the translation, by relating to a higher level of kinship, the pre-Babelian stage of pure language.[13]

Translation "gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as a reproduction but as harmony, as a *supplement* to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*" (emphasis added) (*I*, 79).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to summarize the basic arguments of my essay on Benjamin's theory and philosophy of language and translation.

Benjamin criticizes Kantian epistemology for minimizing experience and ignoring its ephemeral nature, advocating for a higher, religious concept of experience. He asserts that metaphysics facilitates religious experience, captured through language rather than empirical measures.

Benjamin distinguishes between divine and human language, with human language serving communication and representation purposes. He argues that language communicates itself, not explicit content, thus inviting a metaphysical and theological engagement with language. His concept of "pure language" emphasizes unity and harmony beyond its communicative function, with translation revealing sacred connections between languages. He also highlights the proper name as God's word in human sounds, reflecting the divine word and transcending finite language.

Translation, seen as a philosophical act, reveals hidden meanings and aligns languages, contributing to the realization of "pure language." Different languages may intend the same object, but their modes of intention differ, highlighting the infinite possibilities of meaning. Pure language emerges from the harmony of these various intentions, transcending individual words or sentences. For Benjamin, translation makes one's own familiar language foreign, urging translators to let their language be transformed by the foreign tongue.

Benjamin also highlights Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles as an example of interlinear translation, where the literal approach reveals deeper truths. He sees translation as a mode of uncovering hidden meanings, contributing to the realization of a "pure language" that reflects the divine essence. Benjamin philosophy of language draws parallels with Heidegger's idea that language is fundamental to being. Heidegger's "as-structure" suggests that the meaning of objects is inherent and not merely assigned by language. Both philosophers see language as transcending its conventional boundaries, becoming a conduit for experiencing and understanding reality.

And, lastly, it is vital to recall how Benjamin critiques art by suggesting that translation elevates it from its natural state to a higher form of expression, using the image of a broken vessel to illustrate that both original and translation are fragments of a greater language. By highlighting the ongoing fragmentation of language, he gestures to the goal of pure language as breaking the vessel into further fragments. Splintered, scattered, these fragments come to settle into a *constellation* of its parts – rather than achieving a totality after fragmentation through the redemptive role of translation. Translation serves as a unifying force, renewing languages and restoring their essence.

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Notes

[1] Adorno. (1983). "Thinking Through Benjamin," xi.

[2] For an interesting discussion of Hamann's influence on Benjamin, see Stern 2019.

[3] Benjamin, "On Language as Such," *Reflections*. All subsequent references will be given in the text with page numbers as *R*.

[4] Benjamin (1968). "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, p. 72. All subsequent reference be given in the text with page numbers as *I*.

[5] Benjamin writes in "The Task of the Translator," "Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, *a priori* and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express" (*I*, 72). See also Carol Jacobs on kinship of languages as difference, "Monstrosity," 759-760.

[6] Translated by Jacobs, "Monstrosity," 757, n. 4.

[7] Hölderlin's poetry forms another significant point of intersection between Heidegger and Benjamin as we will see later.

[8] *Sein und Seinsstruktur liegen über jedes Seiende and jede mögliche seiende Bestimmtheit eines Seienden hinaus. Sein ist das transcendens schlechthin* (Heidegger 1967: 38).

[9] Benjamin regarded Adam as the father of philosophy, not Plato, because he named, which is an acoustical phenomenon, and by naming he renewed the creative potential of the word of the primordial order. This differs from philosophical contemplation, where the word is reduced to its significative function of communication and representation (Benjamin 1977: 37).

[10] See Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar," 65-69, and "On the Mimetic Faculty" (*R*, 333-336).

[11] The concept of "revelation" in Benjamin's theory of language is explicitly developed in the essay, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," (*R*, 320). See also "The Task of Translation" (*I*, 75, 82).

[12] "[A] translation issues from the original, not so much from its life, as from its afterlife" (*I*, 71).

[13] Here I am invoking Benjamin's "On Language as Such" essay in which Benjamin discusses the consequences of the fall of pure language (*reine Sprache*), God's language (*R*. 326). For the Babelian confusion of multiple tongues, see Derrida's "*Des Tours de Babel.*"

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