Amongst the Ruins: Wittgenstein and Translation

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Abstract: Paul Ricœur describes two 'ruinous alternatives' often reached interpreting translation philosophically: either translation is taken as a mechanical process, and there is a theoretical search for a logically universal language in which all words can be at home, or the diversity of languages and natural limits of translation motivate scepticism regarding the possibility of translation. This paper shows how these alternatives, as represented by Wittgenstein's Tractatus and Quine's 'radical translation', tend to collapse into and "translate each other" (Derrida 57) due to a shared intellectual standpoint which theorises our human limits (the finitude of translation) as limitations (fatal or sceptical flaws).

I demonstrate how Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and its vision of language respond to these philosophical theorisations of translation by accepting the human limits to translation and reclaiming and returning us to our ordinary practice of translation.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translation, scepticism, finitude

Forged in the act of translation is a continuous struggle between 'domestication,' the bringing of words home, and 'foreignization,' the limits of a shared human form of life. This struggle is not only waged in translation. It is to be continually discovered and rediscovered across the pages of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.[1] Conversely, Paul Ricœur describes two 'ruinous alternatives' often reached interpreting these poles of translation philosophically: either translation is taken as a mechanical fact, and there is a theoretical search for a logically universal language in which all words can be at home, or the diversity of languages and natural limits of translation motivate scepticism regarding the possibility of translation (see Ricœur Ch.2).[2] This paper shows how these alternatives, as represented by Wittgenstein's Tractatus and Quine's 'radical translation', tend to collapse into and "translate each other" (Derrida 57) due to a shared intellectual standpoint which theorises our human limits (the finitude of translation) as limitations (fatal or sceptical flaws).

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* seeks to undermine such an intellectual standpoint. Its descriptions of ordinary language are an attempt to return us to, and reclaim, our human life with language. In this paper, I demonstrate how Wittgenstein's vision of language responds to philosophical theorisations of translation. Wittgenstein's acceptance of human limits allows him to accept the human limits to translation without falling into either of the ruinous alternatives.

1. Translation in the *Investigations*

It would be misleading to call translation a central concern of the *Investigations,* but it would be equally misleading to overlook the instructive moments within the text where it does appear, two of which are noted below. They orient us toward a perspective in which translation is a philosophically revealing aspect of our natural history, materialising in Wittgenstein's responses to theorisations of translation in the rest the paper.

i. Most transparently, translation appears on Wittgenstein's list exemplifying the countless things we do with language (PI §23). Alongside giving orders, reporting an event, telling stories, acting in

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a play, cracking jokes, thanking, cursing, greeting, and praying, translation is an example of a 'language-game' that is tangled up with our understanding of human life. The kind of *do*ings that emphasise the activity of language and which are often overlooked or rendered unrecognisable by theoretical accounts of the structure and meaningfulness of language. The kind of doings that caused Wittgenstein to scold his previous Tractarian self[3]:

> It is interesting to compare the diversity of the tools of language and of the ways they are used… with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (This includes the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.) (PI §23)

When picked up in philosophy, translation often becomes unrecognisable through either oversimplification or scepticism, as we will see in the next two sections.[4] This oversight is even more egregious, given that translation seems to offer rich ground for philosophical reflection. As Wittgenstein notes in a letter to Ogden. regarding Ogden's translation of the *Tractatus*: "It *is* a difficult business!" (LWPP I 19). This difficulty is a model of complex human interaction and communication.

Wittgenstein reminds us of these features of our life with language to dissuade us from pursuing philosophy in familiar yet familiarly unsatisfying ways (PI §24).[5] Once the variety of uses of language in our everyday lives is overlooked, certain modes of philosophical inquiry - that abstract away from meaningful uses of language or operate with simplified models - become difficult to resist. The reminders serve as warnings against philosophy's ability to make aspects of our human life unrecognisable, given that the features Wittgenstein reminds us of "are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing" (PI §25).

ii. There are also times when translation itself is the focus of philosophical discussion. An example of this is Wittgenstein's remarks on the relationship between the builder's language,[6] thoughts, and actions, and our own. Wittgenstein circles around several problems that arise when trying to think about the *real meaning* of a translatable expression. In his example, a builder, whose language we are asked to imagine as consisting of only the four words 'slab', 'block', 'pillar' and 'beam', uses 'slab!' to order another builder to go and bring them a slab. We will naturally translate it as the English command 'Bring me the slab'. When tempted to compare each of these commands ('Slab!' and 'Bring me the slab') out of the context of their meaningful use, Wittgenstein imagines asking such questions as: 'Is 'slab!' [*Builder's language*] the same sentence as 'bring me a slab' [*English*]? 'Are the builders shortening the English sentence that is our own? Or is it we who have lengthened the word to a sentence?' Such questions quickly bring to our attention the prickly nature of these issues, and there seems to be something malfunctioning in the way we are trying to compare them.

> Again, why shouldn't you be able to mean "Slab!", if you can mean "Bring me the slab!"? — But when I call out "Slab!", then what I want is *that he should bring me a slab!* — Certainly, but does 'wanting this' consist in thinking in some form or other a different sentence from the one you utter? – (PI §19)

One thing here is certain. Too close a focus on the *word,* in isolation from its use, or the stream of life that surrounds it, serves to disguise the meaning of the sentences (LWPP I).

This serves as an example of translation integrated into the methodology of the *Investigations.* Translation is *used* by Wittgenstein as a way of drawing out what is of philosophical importance. Translation is a site of philosophy, or a site from which to do philosophy, in which our reflections on the nature of language constrain or distort our thinking about translation. Keeping these reflections in mind, I now turn to the two ruinous alternatives for theorising translation.

2. Translation Between Wittgenstein's Early and Later Work

Misleading views of language, or pictures in Wittgenstein's parlance (e.g., §1), will manifest in misleading scenes of translation. In other words, the way you conceive language constrains and potentially distorts how you conceive of translation. This section tracks Wittgenstein's philosophical

transformation between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* through his turn away from a theory-driven approach to translation.

A comprehensive interpretation of the *Tractatus* has to accommodate an understanding of its penultimate remark:[7]

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) (TLP 6.54)

Fortunately, in this paper, I can stop short of this minefield by presenting the *Tractatus'* views on translation before coming to terms with its purported dissolution of itself. My uncritical presentation of the views espoused in the body of *Tractatus'* avoids committing to a methodological interpretation of its nonsensicality. When I refer to the views of the *Tractatus*, it is to be taken as the views in the body of the text, but we should remain cautious of attributing them to Wittgenstein or the *Tractatus tout court.*

The account of translation in the *Tractatus* is driven by the requirements of its theory of representation (see especially TLP 2.1-3.2). The picture theory of meaning postulates that there is an isomorphic pictorial relationship between language and the world. Thoughts and propositions are pictures, and they picture reality – "A picture is a model of reality" (TLP 2.12). There is an attachment between the constituents of language that make up propositions and the parts of the world that propositions are about – "*That* is how a picture is attached to reality; it reaches right out to it" (TLP 2.1511). A meaningful sentence is a combination of names that produce a proposition that pictures a possible combination of simple objects in the world by sharing a pictorial relationship with it. The combinatorial possibilities are determined by the 'logical structure' of the world and language, and a meaningful proposition is either true or false because it represents a possible state of affairs in the world that either holds or doesn't.

This model of representation entails that: "If all true elementary propositions are given, the result is a complete description of the world" (TLP 4.26). As propositions represent a possible state of affairs by picturing it, if you combine up all of the true elementary propositions, you arrive at a complete description of the world. The elementary propositions are those that represent atomic facts (TLP 4.21). They contain proper names and describe the simplest units that, if the proposition is true, go to make up the basic facts of the world. For this reason, an elementary proposition cannot be contradicted by any other elementary proposition (TLP 4.211).

One outcome of this view is that it entails that any language that describes the world must be translatable into every other, because, at the elementary level, they will contain representations of the same atomic facts that hold in the world (see also McGinn 49). This is how *Tractatus* puts this point: "Any correct sign-language must be translatable into any other in accordance with [definitions]: it is *this* that they all have in common" (TLP 3.343).

We can clarify the connection between languages that entails their translatability with a musical analogy from the *Tractatus*:

> A gramophone record, the musical idea, the written notes, and the sound-waves, sound, all stand to one another in the same internal relation of depicting that holds between language and the world.
> They are all constructed according to a common logical pattern. (TLP 4.014)

> There is a general rule by means of which the musician can obtain the symphony from the score, and which makes it possible to derive the symphony from the groove on the gramophone record, and, using the first rule, to derive the score again. That is what constitutes the inner similarity between these things which seem to be constructed in such entirely different ways. And that rule is the law of projection which projects the symphony into the language of musical notation. It is the rule for translating this language into the language of gramophone records. (TLP 4.0141)

Just as there is an internal relation between different components of a musical composition which entails rules of translation, so too there is an internal relation between languages that represent the

world. This conception of translation doesn't entail the absurd idea that each proposition of our ordinary language can be seamlessly translated into any other language. Rather, when ordinary language is analysed down to its logically elementary structure it must be completely translatable *in principle*.[8]

> When translating one language into another, we do not proceed by translating each *proposition* of the one into a *proposition* of the other, but merely by translating the constituents of propositions. (TLP 4.025)

The *Tractatus*' perfectly instantiates one of Ricœur's 'ruinous alternatives' when theorising translation – the search for a logically universal language. In an attempt to eliminate the 'deficiencies' of ordinary language, the *Tractatus* is driven to postulate logically universal constituents of all languages, which entails the complete and seamless translation between all languages. Deep down, after logical analysis, translation becomes mechanical.

By the *Investigations,* Wittgenstein had deserted both this theory of representation and the theoretical commitments that determined the style and direction of his thought. The above picture of translation was an outcome of the theory of representation, which was led by the requirement of the 'crystalline purity of logic' to eliminate the unclarity of our ordinary language (see PI §97 and §§107–108). Wittgenstein came to question the whole direction of this philosophical project: "The more closely we examine actual language, the greater becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not something I had *discovered*: it was a requirement.)" (PI §107). When we begin to investigate our ordinary uses of language it becomes increasingly difficult to hold on to the *requirements* of our theory in the face of our actual linguistic practices.

> The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming vacuous. – We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground! (PI §107)

Following the turn of Wittgenstein's investigation, if we are to investigate the practice of translation it will not fall out from a theory of language and representation. It will be found by investigating the practice of translation as it is in *our* lives – the 'everyday practice' or custom (PI §§197–199).[9] This is what Wittgenstein calls a grammatical investigation, in which we investigate our language and practices by reminding ourselves of how it is with us, in our life, not empirically, but by the use of examples in which we can clearly see the purpose and function of language: "What that means is that we call to mind the kinds of statement that we make about phenomena… Our inquiry is therefore a grammatical one" (PI §90 see also §5).

One way of thinking about the interaction between languages in translation, which gives one way of picturing the purpose of Wittgenstein's fictitious examples, and hence his philosophy, is that it aims to "Englishify" the other language (using English as our example). What I mean by this is that we already have our language. As a consequence, when learning a new language, it is grafted onto our already established meanings, mirroring new words, phrases, and sentences that express the same thing. We could call this the Augustinian view of translation, because of its resemblance to the view of language contained in the passage from Augustine that opens the *Investigations*, or a simplified Tractarian view. In Wittgenstein's response to the Augustine passage, he notes this implication:

> And now, I think, we can say: Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. (PI §32)

The purpose of the remark is to note that acquiring a first language is not best characterised by a child appearing in an unknown country learning a second language. However, we must remain vigilant against the distortions of the Augustinian picture of language not only for first-language acquisition but also for the translation and learning of any further languages.

The difference, and we shouldn't play down this difference, with translation, or learning a second language, is that there is already (what I will call) a 'logical space of language' from within which we operate. This is the motivation for Wittgenstein's remark §32 (PI). When attempting to learn French, my existing logical space of language, my understanding of my own language, distinguishes this from the process of acquiring (learning?) my first language. For example, in my first lesson, I arrived with an understanding of the range and purpose of greetings. These include, but are not limited to, the different ways in which people greet each other in the morning and the night, the different greetings between a formal setting and an informal one, and the special greeting reserved for a first meeting. '*Bonjour*', '*bonsoir*', '*salut*', '*coucou*', '*enchanté*(*e*)' – I arrive at these words with a form of life that can already roughly categorise their uses.

However, it is obvious by now that if we are going to reject a logically universal language, then in practice, we must be interested in moments when translation overspills these boundaries. Yes, we arrive at translation with a language and a logical space of language; a form of life; a way with words. But in rubbing up against another language, there is the opportunity for the kind of growth and leaps and transformation that happens in acquiring a first language. Meaning, at best, we can say the Tractarian view is unable to capture all of what goes on in translation. Part of translation will be to Englishify the other language, and this proves very useful at the beginning of learning another language. This word means this. 'Le pain' means bread. 'Le fromage' means cheese. But we must eventually leave behind this tit-for-tat exchange and begin to take more expansive strides in understanding the other language. At a certain stage in our education, we discover we can no longer rely on directly Englishfying what we are learning. Instead, we must bring our ways of being in the world into an understanding of the new language. We must learn when, where, and why people use the language they do, if we are to understand them, and we are to understand their language (which only becomes more pronounced in confronting languages 'further' away from ours, such as the situation of 'radical translation' considered in the next section).

That languages don't neatly map onto each other and instead pass on ways of living and valuing is the kind of insight we only require reminding of while doing philosophy. One so obvious, it may be said to be under the nose of the Tractarian Wittgenstein – blinded by the requirements of the theoretical position.

For example, there are words which betray local customs or objects. Learning the words 'sake', 'barszcz', and 'marmalade', will increase our understanding of the life of those people whose life includes those words.[10] The linguist Wierzbicka builds on this obvious insight by exploring a wider set of linguistic terms that teach us about other cultures: "what applies to material culture and to social rituals and institutions applies also to people's values, ideals, and attitudes and to their ways of thinking about the world and our life in it" (2). Wierzbicka argues that the structure and notions of our language affect our worldview or cognition. Just as 'marmalade' teaches us something about the eating habits of English people, so too other words can be revealing of a culture or form of life.

Interestingly, the most stringent opponents of any such view often defend a view about the relationship between thought and language that Wittgenstein undermines in the *Investigations* (PI §§332-342). For example, Steven Pinker takes any linguistic 'relativity' to be "wrong, all wrong" (57). Pinker's reason for this conclusion is that "since mental life goes on independently of particular languages", the natural language one happens to speak is irrelevant to the concepts involved (82). His view aligns with a broader tradition in cognitive science that treats thought as fundamentally distinct from language – an approach that finds support in computational models of cognition. Under this view, the brain operates with an internal 'mentalese', a universal language of thought that exists prior to and independent of any particular spoken or written language.

Wittgenstein's later philosophy challenges the assumption that thought can exist independently of language in any fully formed state. He asks, "Can one think without speaking?" – a question that doesn't straightforwardly demand a yes or no answer, but rather invites an examination of what we mean by 'thinking' abstracted from language (PI §327). Pinker's model assumes a sharp division

between thought and language, but this is an oversimplification and tends to reliably end in confusion. Wittgenstein points out that "thinking is not an incorporeal process which lends life and sense to speaking, and which it would be possible to detach from speaking" (PI §339). It is no coincidence that one thinks and speaks in the same language, and no peculiarity of English that the words occur in the same order in which Pinker thinks them (PI §336). Meaning does not exist prior to, or outside of, or detached from the use of our language.

If we accept Wittgenstein's view, then Pinker's dismissal of linguistic relativity is premature. While it may be true that humans can grasp abstract concepts beyond the words available in their language, it does not necessarily follow from this that language has no influence on how concepts are structured or experienced. Wierzbicka's response to Pinker highlights this issue: his rejection of linguistic relativity leads to an absolutization of his own conceptual framework. When Pinker states that "concepts of freedom and equality will be thinkable even if they are nameless," he assumes a universal definition of these concepts, rather than recognizing that their meaning is shaped by cultural and linguistic contexts (82). In contrast, Wierzbicka argues that:

> Reliance on one's native tongue as a source of universally valid 'common-sensical' assumptions about human nature and human relations is bound to lead to the obliteration of very valuable empirical evidence concerning both similarities and differences in the patterning and conceptualisation of human relations in different cultures and societies. (Wierzbicka 34)

We can exemplify this with the notion of friendship and the different patterns of 'friendship' that are recognised in Russian culture. In Russian, several words come within the orbit of the kind of relations that we call friendship in English (see Wierzbicka 55–84). Carving up this grammatical space, Russians have the concepts: *drug, podruga, prijatel (*Feminine: *prijatel'nicd),* and *znakomyj (*Feminine: *znakomajd).* None of these words match up neatly with the English friend.[11] A *drug* can best be described as a form of very close friend. A *podruga* is a female's female friend and is also considered stronger than the English 'friend'. A *prijatel'* (*prijatel'nicd*) is the closest to 'friend' without a modifier. A *znakomyj (znakomajd)* is a close acquaintance.

Each of these relations has its specific ways of being instantiated that again reinforce their necessary separation from being neatly translating into 'friendship'. Russians place great importance on the development of friendships, and the concept of *drug* has significant cultural weight. A *drug* is someone you spend lots of time with, and someone you have a willingness and obligation to help (to levels far beyond what is expected of someone we might call a friend). They are someone who you can share anything with, and vice versa. There is a deep trust and respect.

The cultural specificities mean that it is futile to try and squeeze *drug* into friend or vice versa. It is not that we mean *drug* when English speakers say 'close friend', or that Russian speakers mean close friend when they say '*drug*'. This is a similar confusion to the one, discussed earlier, that Wittgenstein remarks on in his builders' example (PI §19). Rather than seeking to go below and uncover the meaning of our words, we should see that what is important for their uses in our lives. We can learn about our own language, and the way in which other human beings live, by testing the translatability of our language against theirs. We learn about human relationships, and our own concept of friendship, by bringing it into contact with other patterns of 'friendship', while maintaining a distance from ours as a universal aspect of humanity.

Wittgenstein remarked of Augustine that he "does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system" (PI §3). Well, we must say of the Tractarian view of translation: "it does describe a system of translation; only not everything that we call translation is this system."

This section has shown that Wittgenstein's turn in investigation rejects both the vision of language and the methodological requirements which resulted in a misguided desire for a logically universal language that would reduce translation to a mechanical procedure – leading to one of Ricœur's ruinous alternatives. The result is a philosophy that navigates between the familiar and the foreign and a view of language that allows for the potential of mutual knowledge in translation.

3. Indeterminacy and Interpretation: Quine on 'radical translation'

Just as one bank of Ricœur's 'ruinous alternatives' of translation is avoided, the other seems inevitably to come into view. When translation is pictured as non-mechanical and not guaranteed, then the diversity of languages motivates the idea, at least in philosophy, that translation is theoretically suspect, perhaps even impossible. An explanatory gap opens up between languages and it threatens to result in disastrous sceptical conclusions. Our conditioned, imperfect, and non-mechanical translation practices become interpreted as impossible because they fail to be frictionless.

The conditions for translating French are relatively straightforward. There are longstanding linguistic, social, and cultural ties which aid the process. There are also expert dual speakers whom we can easily consult. However, our footing becomes increasingly insecure when conditions are less favourable and linguistic relationships are more remote. When the target language and people are significantly alien, we are pushing up against the limits of translation, and the temptation towards the impossibility of translation is at its most seductive.

The most dramatic example of this distance, following Quine's influential and controversial discussion of it,[12] is the situation of 'radical translation'. The 'radical' aspect here comes in the form of a deliberate isolating of the target language and people. It is stipulated that there are no existing interpreters or interpretational schemas of the language, which means no prior interaction between the languages culturally or linguistically. This lack of interference allows for a pure investigation of what goes on in the interaction of the languages – but without misleading historically channelled patterns or assumptions.

Quine's interest in such anthropological cases has led some to draw a comparison with Wittgenstein, at one point Wittgenstein even remarks on a case of radical translation (PI §206), and Glock has described them jointly as being 'on safari' (Ch.7). However, this point of similarity only highlights their profound differences and vastly different sense of the purpose and construction of such cases.

Quine's consideration of the situation of radical translation, which appears within a broader investigation into language and an overarching argument for empirically unconditioned variation in conceptual schemes, leads him to a constitutive scepticism about the determinacy of translation. A version of the impossibility alternative, where theoretically there is no decisive fact of the matter that determines the correctness of translation: "manuals for translating one language into another can be set-up in divergent ways" (*WO* 24).

Quine conceptualises the situation from within, and from the resources of, his reductionist behaviourism. This means that he describes the translator's position as one of responding only to the evidence provided by the observable stimulus conditions under which speakers assent or dissent. Hence his project is to discover "how much of language can be made sense of in terms of stimulus conditions" (*WO* 23). Quine has an internalist conception of stimulus conditions as patterns of sensorial stimulation. Any psychological and semantic assumptions about the target people and language must be disregarded.

A significant early task for the translator will be to attain the 'locals'[13] words and/or body language that correspond to 'yes' and 'no'. In other words, the translator must first become acquainted with their typical representations of assent and dissent, from which they can begin reproducing language in different stimulus conditions and recording speakers' responses. Quine imagines that this will involve first recognising two responses that seem to correspond to 'yes' and 'no', which will appear often when we ask binary questions. Then, through an inductive process of trial and error, we generate a working hypothesis regarding which is which. Over time our confidence will grow, and we can build our interpretation of the language from the assent or dissent of the local speakers to different linguistic constructions in different stimulus conditions.

In great detail Quine reconstructs the translator's attempts to determine the common nouns that appear in the local's language. The famous example tracks the word '*gavagai*'.

> A rabbit scurries by, the native says '*Gavagai*', and the linguist notes down the sentence 'rabbit' (or, 'Lo, a rabbit') as a tentative translation, subject to testing in further cases. (*WO* 29)

Quine describes the inductive process that the linguist would carry out to build up a picture of the locals' language and their uses of '*gavagai*'. On an occasion that a local would assent to '*gavagai*', it would also be the case they would assent to the localist, if it existed, for 'animal', 'white', 'moving' etc. This means that the linguist will need to begin querying combinations of words in different contexts to disambiguate words. A brown rabbit scurries by, the linguist points and says '*gavagai*' and the local assents to the linguist's question. We now have a stronger belief in the working hypothesis that '*gavagai*' refers to (means) rabbit, along with a diminished belief that it refers to a colour.

Out of the resources available to the translator Quine summarises four aspects of language that can be established (see Glock 146):

> i. the 'stimulus-meaning' of local 'observation sentences'. This means that we can determine the circumstances (set of stimulations) under which the natives assent to simple utterances like 'this is red' which report observable features of the external world (*WO* 31–4 and 41–4)
> ii. whether a native sentence is 'stimulus-analytical', i.e., accepted under any circumstances, come whatever stimulation (*WO* 49 and 62–3)
> iii. sentences in the native language which are 'stimulus-synonymous', which means that multiple sentences are assented to under the same circumstances by all native speakers (*WO* 42 and 62)
> iv. which of the native expressions are truth-functional connectives (*WO* 57–8).

However, despite these successes, Quine goes on to reason that radical translation suffers from two distinct indeterminacies. One form of indeterminacy, from below, is the indeterminacy of reference. Quine argues that the part of the world that stimulates the locals' assent to a term (i.e., the stimulus that is giving rise to assent to '*gavagai*') can be conceptualised in multiple ways. It is indeterminate between translating '*gavagai*' as rabbit, or un-detached rabbit bits, or rabbit-hood manifesting itself, or brief temporal segments of rabbits, etc. Unlike 'animal' or 'white', the stimulus conditions for these different translations are identical and there is no way of determining which one the locals mean. Each translation is equally valid given the evidence.

Another form of indeterminacy, this time from above, is what Quine calls holophrastic indeterminacy, which affects not merely the sub-sentential parts of the language but whole sentences and the whole language. Quine posits that there are multiple different ways of translating the whole import of sentences within a translation manual that has no independent check beyond that translation manual (*WO* 65). According to Quine's holism, individual statements do not face empirical assessment alone; rather, our statements are assessed 'as a corporate body' (*TD* 38). Within translation, this means that each of those sentences can be translated differently if we make compromises elsewhere in the framework of the manual. Combinations of these indeterminate sentences result in "radically unlike and incompatible English renderings" (*WO* 65) of the complete language. Thus, there is indeterminacy between different *equally good* systems of translation. Despite being incompatible translations, none of them can lay ultimate claim to being more accurate or more objective.

The results extend beyond radical translation and affect our understanding of our ordinary practice of translation. It means that common systems of translations are merely dominant due to "tradition" or the force of the linguist who introduced them (ibid).

Faced with the Tractarian view of translation we turned our investigation away from the crystalline purity of logic towards the rough ground of ordinary language. Now Wittgenstein's metaphor of the ice at §107 takes on a new dimension: "We want to walk: so we need *friction*" (PI). Quine's conclusions about radical translation freeze us out of determinate knowledge of what others mean and neuters translation. Wittgenstein can now be heard as voicing our natural desire to walk, to go somewhere with these people and their language, and for this, we need to return to the rough ground of our actual translation practices. This means responding to Quine's sceptical conclusions regarding

translation by rejecting his description of what the translator is doing, and hence his picture of what the site of translation is. Quine's commitment to a thoroughly behaviouristic framework is a requirement, not something he has discovered (PI §107).

Let's take a closer look at Quine's description of coming to identify assent and dissent, which, as stressed above, is a crucial first task for the translator.

> What he must do is guess from observation and then see how well his guesses work. Thus suppose in asking '*Gavagai*?' and the like, in the conspicuous presence of rabbits and the like, he has elicited the responses 'Evet' and 'Yok' often enough to surmise that they may correspond to 'Yes' and 'No', but has no notion which is which. Then he tries the experiment of echoing the native's own volunteered pronouncements. If thereby he pretty regularly elicits 'Evet' rather than 'Yok', he is encouraged to take 'Evet' as yes… However inconclusive these methods, they generate a working hypothesis. (*WO* 26).

Remember, in Quine's theoretical construction of the example the translator operates with a non-psychological and non-semantic description of the situation, a blank slate. The problem is that if a translator fully embodied this bare understanding of the situation, then they could not even begin to distinguish which one of 'Evet' and 'Yok' is assent and which one is dissent.

To begin with, from a blank slate, there is no way to tell whether such 'noises' are being used for anything that resembles assent or dissent instead of, say, rejecting the question, rebuking the translator, cursing them, or are directed at someone else entirely. That is if they are meaningful sounds at all, rather than a side effect of digestion. To bridge past this the translator must assume something: they must at least assume that the local understands the translator's questions as concerning the word and not "a religious ritual involving rabbits, an attempt to query his hunting rights, or simply a dumb repetition" (Glock 153). Yet any mutual understanding, which is necessary for the kind of results that Quine postulates, is something that Quine is not entitled to, given the presuppositionless way in which he attempts to construct the case.

We can get a sense of the kinds of misunderstandings and incompatibilities imaginable from Wittgenstein's example of the child who continues the series '+2' over 1000 as 1004, 1008, 1012 (PI §185). Or someone for whom it comes naturally "to react to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction from fingertip to wrist, rather than from wrist to fingertip" (PI §185). Without any hook on the situation, without being able to assume some shared reactions or behaviours, the radical translator's translation of 'Evet' and 'Yok' wouldn't just be a reasonable yet inconclusive hypothesis but will be completely arbitrary.

From within the behaviouristic framework's requirements translation is bound to fail. However, if we release the grip of Quine's theoretical commitments, this failure serves to highlight features of our practice of translation. Wittgenstein remarks on the shared human behaviour that is a necessary reference point to translation:

> Suppose you came as an explorer to an unknown country with a language quite unknown to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on?
>
> Shared human behaviour is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language. (PI §206)

Quine's only concession is a principle of charity, which entails that when translating, one should minimise ascribing false beliefs to the locals. So, respecting humility, we must presume it is more likely that our translation is wrong than to conclude that the locals have contradictory or incorrect beliefs. But we must go further, and Wittgenstein, as seen in the quote above, highlights that a shared system of reference is necessary in order to gain a foothold at all in understanding an unknown language. What this means is that there must be a way in which we can make their actions comprehensible, a way of filling in their form of life which we can recognise as that of being a human being. They do not have to be the responses and actions that we take, nor do they have to be practical for

me in my life, but we must be able to give a coherent explanation of them. If we cannot, it is not that we become sceptical of translating them, but that their behaviour becomes incomprehensible to us, we relegate them outside our understanding.

Thus, untranslatability becomes an inability to accommodate something outside our common framework of human life. We may call them 'crazy' or 'alien', but this reflects something about us as well as them. As Stanley Cavell remarks, this is not "a fact but my fate for them. I have gone as far as my imagination, magnanimity or anxiety will allow; or as my honour, or my standing cares and commitments, can accommodate." (188). Part of this possibility of comprehensibility for Wittgenstein is dependent on there being certain regularities in their behaviour. If we try to understand an unknown language and yet find connections between their words and actions lack comprehensible connections, then we may find ourselves withholding the idea of language to them. Even if it is obvious that speaking plays a part in their lives.

> When we try to learn their language, we find it impossible to do so. For there is no regular connection between what they say, the sounds they make, and their activities… There is not enough regularity for us to call it "language" (PI §207)

This suggests further differences in the use of translation as a philosophical device. While Quine and Wittgenstein share an anthropological dimension in their investigations, this similarity is reflected through fundamental differences. While Quine is trying to theorise about understanding and language, Wittgenstein is instead trying to reveal what goes into having a language by returning and reminding us of that language, by drawing on what we would *call* 'language'. While Quine's translator is an observer fairly uninterested in the native's way of life, Wittgenstein's situations of translation are embedded in specific contexts of everyday life. What this generates is the need for us to recall and rely on our own language and life to draw out the comprehensibility of unknown and alien forms of life and language. Thus, the perceived anthropological similarities between them are exaggerated. They not only differ in their descriptions of the relevant cases, but this difference is compounded by entirely different directions of philosophical practice.

Take this set of passages from Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*:

> §142: People pile up logs and sell them, the piles are measured with a ruler, the measurements of length, breadth and height multiplied together, and what comes out is the number of pence which have to be asked and given. They do not know 'why' it happens like this; they simply do it like this: that is how it is done. — do these people not calculate?
>
> §147. Those people — we should say — sell timber by cubic measure — but are they right in doing so? Wouldn't it be more correct to sell it by weight — or by the time that it took to fell the timber — or by the labour of felling measured by the age and strength of the woodsman? And why should they not hand it over for a price which is independent of all this: each buyer pays the same however much he takes (they have found it possible to live like that). And is there anything to be said against simply giving the wood away?
>
> §148: Very well: but what if they piled the timber in heaps of arbitrary, varying height and then sold it at a price proportionate to the area covered by the piles?
>
> And what if they even justified this with the words: "Of course, if you buy more timber, you must pay more"?
>
> §149: How could I shew them that — as I should say — you don't really buy more wood if you buy a pile covering a bigger area? — I should, for instance, take a pile which was small by their ideas and, by laying logs around, change it into a 'big' one. This *might* convince them — but perhaps they would say: "Yes, it's a *lot* of wood and costs more" — and that would be the end of the matter. — We should presumably say in this case: they simply do not mean the same by "a lot of wood" and "a little wood" as we do; and they have a quite different system of payment from us.

This is a stark contrast in texture to Quine's case. Wittgenstein uses translation as an opportunity for reflection; here, as such, we are thrown back on our own practices. We are led to think about the notion of calculation and payment as it is in our lives by considering how it might be in the lives of others. On Quine's inductive process, we may come to the point where we translate their method of selling wood as 'calculating' the price and therefore tie it to our process of calculating more and less. But for Wittgenstein, although we *may* translate it this way, we may not. We may say "they simply do not mean the same by "a lot of wood" and "a little wood" as we do; and they have a quite different system of payment from us." (RFM §150). There is only so much distance from our ways of doing things we can accommodate.

The purpose of Wittgenstein's investigation into the case is to arrive at a clear understanding of what it means to commit either way – what this interaction does – and how we might find ourselves negotiating with people who do things differently. Sometimes the tables are turned – and we simple have to say 'this is how we do it' (PI §217). Only certain things will count as doing calculations. But this threat is not the threat of Quine's indeterminacy of translation. Wittgenstein's limits, set from inside our practice of translation, do not represent limitations to translation in general. The limits uncovered by Wittgenstein reveal something about the practice of translation. This is driven not by a theoretical concern but by illuminating language as it is used. It is also why the limits do not shipwreck Wittgenstein's views on the ruinous alternative of translation as impossible. Translation is ongoing, refinable, and perpetual, but not impossible.

4: Translation and Philosophy: Limits and Limitations

In the end, what makes itself clear is that the ruinous alternatives translate each other.[14] Despite significantly different conclusion, they each involve an interpretation of the human limits to translation as limitations. This becomes a commitment to mechanical translatability (to remove the limits) or its opposite, a commitment to the limits as revealing the impossibility of translation (to interpret them sceptically). They translate each other in a way that, despite opposite conclusions, shares an overall framework of what our life with translation must look like. It is a framework driven by theoretical requirements that make our ordinary practice of translation unrecognisable.

This interplay of responses to our ordinary life is the argument of scepticism. The sceptic 'discovers' what we ordinarily count as knowledge as compromised and interprets this discovery as undermining our general ability to know anything. In response to the sceptic, it might be tempting to overcome the limits they have 'discovered' in our ordinary knowledge – by conceptualising a way of knowing the world that is stronger. However, such a response shares a rejection of our ordinary ways of knowing and further entrenches us in sceptical ways of thinking. There is no non-human way of knowing: "what begins as an honourable attempt to guarantee our invulnerability to the sceptic's charge… ends by ensuring that we become guilty as charged" (Mulhall 94). Translation is mechanical or it is impossible: "nothing is untranslatable; but *in another sense*, everything is untranslatable" (Derrida 56)

Following Wittgenstein, this argument of scepticism – and its embodiment in understandings of translation – must be seen as an inability or refusal to accept our human condition. This situation and the motivations that cause it are to be understood as natural, as Mulhall writes, "nothing is more human than the desire to deny the human, to interpret limits as limitations, and to repudiate the human condition of conditionedness (finitude)." (94). Wittgenstein's philosophy is an attempt to reveal to us these human desires to repudiate the human through theoretical requirements and in response, with reminders of our ordinary life with language, to attract us to return and reclaim our human conditionedness.

Both of these 'ruinous alternatives' reveal something about our life with translation – not as models of translation itself, but as distortions that, through the mark of what they deny, illuminate what translation truly involves. The hope of Wittgenstein's philosophy is that we notice some of ourselves

in his work, in such a way that he can reorientate us to our world and language: a reorientation, conclusively, from which translation is inseparable.[15]

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Notes

[1] I will follow convention and use the following abbreviations to refer to Wittgenstein's work: *Philosophical Investigations* (PI), *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology: Volume 1* (LWPP I), *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (RFM), *Zettel* (Z), *The Big Typescript* (TS) and *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP). These will be followed by section (§) or page number. For full details please consult the bibliography.

[2] Derrida calls them two 'hyperboles' of translation (57).

[3] There is a discussion of the *Tractatus* and its theoretical account of translation in the next section.

[4] It is not uncommon for translation scholars to think of translation as philosophy's 'blind spot', for example Venuti, (115), Pym (25), and Arrojo (247), a state of affairs that motivates this special volume and its call for a dialogue between them.

[5] PI §108: "One might say: the inquiry must be turned around, but on the pivot of our real need."

[6] The builders' language is introduced in §2, of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and expanded in §8. For more on the Wittgenstein's builders see PI §§1–21 and Z §§98–99.

[7] The two major schools of interpretation either seek to explain how the 'nonsensical' propositions can convey ineffable insights (the *ineffabalist* reading) or accept that the propositions are pure nonsense (the *resolute* reading). The major proponents of the ineffabalist reading include G.E.M. Anscombe (1959), Peter Hacker (1972, 1986), David Pears (1987), and Anthony Kenny (1975). For the resolute view, see Diamond (1988), Conant (1989), and essays collected in Crary and Read (2000).

[8] Wittgenstein's comments on translation imply a realist metaphysics, one that I have assumed in this section as space impedes me from defending it. For a dissenting voice see McGuinness (Ch.8).

[9] In use (i), stated above, we see Wittgenstein reminding us that we do have an ordinary practice of translation.

[10] Sake is a Japanese fermented rice wine. Barszcz is Polish sour soup. Marmalade is an Orange jam popular in Britain.

[11] Of course, in English there are equally various words that surround friendship: mate, colleague, best friend, etc. But it is still the case that there are specific Russian concepts of friendship that don't map onto English equivalents.

[12] Quine (*WO* Ch.2). I will use 'WO' to refer readers to Quine's *Word and Object* and 'TD' to his 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'. For their full details, please consult the bibliography.

[13] Quine's use of 'native' and 'jungle' to name the speakers and their location resonate uncomfortably in the modern ear. I have resorted to the unwieldy 'a local', 'locals', and 'speaking localist'.

[14] See Derrida (56–57).

[15] I thank Dr. Katherine Morris and Professor Bill Child for discussions and support while writing this paper.

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