Hypertranslation as a Problem Solver

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Abstract: This article investigates hypertranslation, a concept coined by the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou. For this purpose, after a discussion of the general frameworks of untranslatability and translatability, Badiou's hypertranslation is proposed as a new perspective. We have argued that this last conception is a framework that resolves the dualities and dilemmas of other approaches. Finally, the limitations of hypertranslation are discussed and some suggestions for overcoming these limitations are developed.

Keywords: Untranslatability, hypertranslation, philosophical translation, Alain Badiou

Introduction

The translation of philosophical texts is a longstanding issue, one that essentially stretches far back into history. There are as many challenges in philosophical translation as there are philosophers. It has become almost common sense that some concepts cannot be translated from one language to another. No matter what language, a translation of philosophy from Ancient Greece always has to contain notes and explanations that approach the length of the translated text itself. Moreover, concepts such as Hegel's *Geist* or Heidegger's *Dasein* are often left as they are. This is from the fact that not a single word in any of the languages into which they are translated that can convey those concepts along the same horizon of meaning.

But do all elements, taken together, really pose a problem? If so, and that problem is identifiable and subsequently recognizable, it is worth wondering how to better affix the essence of this problem. For instance, is the problem itself inherent in what is called "language", or in philosophy, or does it arise rather in the act of translation? We aim to answer these questions both in the first and second sections of the article. Firstly, within the framework of untranslatability, and second in the context of philosophers who come to terms with problems and affirm them. Furthermore, in the third section we will introduce "hypertranslation" as a method to overcome the problems that have emerged, up to that point, before addressing the limitations of this approach. We will argue that it transcends the primary conceptions which solely admits the problems. In the examples of Badiou (alongside Jacques Rancière in some respects), the problems of the translation cease to prevail. Thus, these examples offer an entirely new framework in which not only the answers of the deep-rooted questions are metamorphosed, but the very questions became unrelated and secondary. In each section, we will discuss how the conceptions covered in that section situate the translator and fidelity problem.

The Problems and Untranslatability

Proponents of untranslatability often base their arguments on essentialism. In other words, rather than the intention of the translator or the process of translation, there is a more fundamental element at stake - language itself. Although a strict defense of untranslatability may not seem credible today, or at least not in vogue, it has occupied and continues to hold an important place in the history of

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philosophy. Here we will briefly discuss two philosophers, Martin Heidegger and Barbara Cassin. However, it is worth bearing in mind that some of the arguments of the thinkers that we will mention in the next section may well work in favor of untranslatability. Their premises seem to be in favor of untranslatability, but they do not fit within the scope of it in terms of their own conclusions. Ricoeur's approach epitomizes this issue. When he states that translation is "theoretically difficult, practically easy (14)," or "translation is theoretically impossible and that bilinguals have to be schizophrenics (15)," he comes pretty close to postulating untranslatability. But he will later deduce from it an intersubjective relation, an affirmative result for translation.

Meanwhile, for the German philosopher Heidegger, the reasons that give rise to untranslatability are not of a kind that can be transformed and affirmed in any way. In an oft-quoted passage he states:

> The difficulty of a translation is never merely a technical issue but concerns the relation of human beings to the essence of the word and to the worthiness of language. Tell me what you think of translation, and I will tell you who you are (63).

It is worth underscoring that the problem of translation is not a "technical" one but rather related to the "essence". The fact that the problem is about the "essence of the world" means that the translator cannot overcome it through any effort or principle. Nonetheless, for Heidegger, translation is not a secondary activity set aside, instead it is intrinsically interwoven with his way of doing philosophy. As a matter of fact, it is the problems of translation that underpin many of his main arguments in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*. For Heidegger, the history of Western philosophy is the history of the oblivion of Being. This is in part due to the fact that the Ancient Greek concept of *aletheia* is translated into Latin as *veritas* (2009, 257). Translation is also employed by Heidegger as a way of doing philosophy. His attempt to reframe Being in his lectures on Parmenides is one of the finest examples of such an effort (2002).

The point at which Heidegger was later accused by Gert-Jan Van Der Heiden of establishing a hierarchy of translation (191) is that aforementioned way of situating translation, i.e. as a way of doing philosophy, is exclusive to German. Heidegger writes as follows:

> The fact that the Greek language is philosophical, i.e. not that Greek is loaded with philosophical terminology, but that it philosophizes in its basic structure and formation. The same applies to every genuine language, in different degrees to be sure. The extent to which this is so depends on the depth and power of the people and race who speak the language and exist within it. Only our German language has a deep and creative philosophical character to compare with the Greek (36).

As a result, it is possible to say that Heidegger's claim of untranslatability is based on a kind of linguistic chauvinism. In this conception, only German and Greek are philosophically creative and rich, while other languages, and naturally their speakers, have an inferior position (Foran 51). Thus, only a thinker who works with German, as he does, can benefit from a translation and reconsider a Greek concept. Any translation other than that between these two languages is simply impossible.

Initiated by Barbara Cassin and contributed to by some four hundred thinkers, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (2014) argues for untranslatability from a point of view completely opposite to Heidegger's. More precisely, the book itself has already been translated into a large number of European languages, and therefore it argues rather for the untranslatability of *concepts*. The reason why we term it the complete opposite of Heidegger is that, in contrast to his "chauvinism of language", this book avoids a hierarchy of languages and, moreover, a globalization. Cassin emphasizes that there is no such thing as "language," but rather languages. Moreover, she considers translation as a form of philosophizing, an endeavor that is possible in any language. In the introduction to the book, she explains this as follows:

> One of the most urgent problems posed by the existence of Europe is that of languages. We may envisage two kinds of solution. We could choose a dominant language in which exchanges will take place from now on, a globalized Anglo-American. Or we could gamble on the retention of many

> languages, making clear on every occasion the meaning and the interest of the differences – the only way of really facilitating communication between languages and cultures. The Dictionary of Untranslatables belongs to this second perspective (xvii).

Following Foran, Cassin's effort to preserve concepts in the language they are in, which can be called "irreducibility", can be justified in two ways. The first is the idea that any philosophical concept cannot be detached from its own world. We always speak of concepts that are claimed to be universal within a particular language, so the specific color of that language will somehow be involved. What is at stake here is the affirmation of a multiplicity inherent in every language. The second is the difference within a language itself, for example the change of a concept over time depending on history and context (52).

As a result, this idea of irreducibility remains within the scope of untranslatability, even though it provokes a lively effort of rethinking on translation. While it is not an essentialist project in the Heideggerian sense, which Cassin notes "untranslatables signify not because they are essentialist predicates of nation or ethnos with no ready equivalent in another language (xv)," it ultimately gives rise to an essentialism that is not limited to a single language. In other words, untranslatability is not about the translator, it is about the language itself. The essence of a particular language is not in question, but the irreducible structure, in a sense the "essence" of what is called "language".

The Problems and Affirmation

There is no shortage of thinkers who list the problems of translation, and specifically of philosophical translation, and derive an understanding of translation from these problems, or even consider the problems as a reason for translation. So much so that today we can state that this is slowly coming into view, as a widespread consensus in this emergent field.

We regard philosophers such as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, and innumerable scholars who are essentially quite different from each other in this scope. We argue that what unites all these names is the same underlying framework. In slightly philosophical terminology, what they do is a negation and an accompanying affirmation. First, a criticism or a statement that can, almost at first glance, be seen as in favor of untranslatability, followed by a positive understanding of translation that is derived from it.

Walter Benjamin draws an important distinction about translation in *The Task of the Translator* (1999). On the one hand, there is the conveying of meaning from one language to another in the strict sense, and on the other hand, the essence of the work. Therefore, the task of the translator is not only the translation of words. The translator's task, and in a sense his or her "fidelity" to the original work and the author, lies in understanding the spirit and cultural context of the work. Here the idea of essence resurfaces again under the name of "aura" or "spirit". However, it is not the essence of a particular language or of "language" in general that is at stake in the broader essences of untranslatability, but rather the essences of single works.

Following Benjamin, the question of whether translation is an interpretation or an attempt to approximate the original work emerges more forcefully. For the hermeneutic tradition, the issue here is clear. Hans Georg Gadamer stated that translation is only an "extreme case of interpretation (387)". But this is not an issue for those who come from that tradition. Derrida, along the same lines, states that "translation is neither an image nor a copy (180)". Thus, the fact that translation is an interpretation is not an obstacle to the translatability of texts, but rather a phenomenon that makes the translation more creative. Indeed, for Derrida, translation is a "poetic transposition (189)". In contrast to Benjamin, then, the translator's task and fidelity is not to grasp and convey the "spirit" or the "essence" of the text, but to recognize and pursue the text as something that is constantly living and expanding.

When we turn to Ricoeur, who is an eminent representative of the hermeneutic tradition, a theory-practice dichotomy emerges, as mentioned in the previous section:

> Ricoeur concludes that translation happens all the time – it is not impossible – yet it can never be finished – it is not conclusive. Translation between languages is thus imperfect and unfinished, but this should not surprise us, for even within a single language it is always possible to say the same thing in a different way. We can only criticize a translation through a retranslation, and these retranslations happen all the time. Think of how often so-called classic texts have been translated over long periods of time: the works of Aristotle or Virgil or Dante. New translations emerge over time because language is always changing; the English of the nineteenth century sounds archaic to a modern ear (Foran 99).

Ricoeur, like others, begins with a negation. Translation is, in a sense, impossible. In fact, it is facile to trace a myriad of bold statements in Ricoeur's corpus toward this point. In every translation there is always the space for another kind of translation, because neither language is the same nor reducible to each other. Therefore, the dream of the perfect translation has to be abandoned. Because in the expectation of perfect translation there is a "wish that translation would gain, gain without losing (9)." The desire for perfect translation is a kind of effort to "abolish the memory of the foreign and maybe the love of one's own language (9)."

Ricoeur's original gesture stems from replacing the classical dichotomy between the translatable and the untranslatable with one of another. Here it is the dichotomy between fidelity and betrayal. The translator is always caught between two sides: on the one hand there is the foreign text, author, and culture, and on the other, the future readers of the translation. The translator acts then as a kind of mediator, seeking to bring the author closer to the reader and the reader to the author (23). It goes without saying that this endeavor is bound to fail some of the time or to a certain extent. The translator has to make choices and compromises, and like all trade-offs, what is gained is balanced by what is lost.

This is precisely why it is important to abandon the ideal of perfect translation. Otherwise, if every translation is incomplete in the framework of this ideal, it would become oppressive and restrictive for the translator (5). However, the task of the translator is to create "equivalence without adequacy (10)." In this way, the translator would thus become "liberated to find happiness as a host welcoming the foreign at home (Rawling 176)." Ricoeur employs the expression "linguistic hospitality", which refers to welcoming the language of the other in our own, and which has also marked the studies on Ricoeur in the context of translation. The point is that he uses the aforementioned term in a very few moments and with scarce explanations. As such, one has to acknowledge the fact that "he never provides a sustained discussion of how this notion might guide the practice of translation (Davidson 6)." Yet Ricoeur's attitude remains self-evident.

Ricoeur's approach is typical of the pattern we have outlined in this section. What follows is the acceptance of a negative determination that can be completed as "translation is therefore impossible" and the development of an appropriate understanding. Instead, the formulation goes on to suggest that "translation is necessary in spite of this, or even precisely because of this". The overarching and essential problems of untranslatability are replaced by relatively minor ones. The classical dualism is replaced by the dualism of fidelity and betrayal, particularly in the case of Ricoeur. Nonetheless, dichotomies and problems do not vanish, they only relocate. The translator's task is to be aware of these problems, to confront the impossibility of perfect translation, and to display conflicting fidelities to the author, to the text, and, at times, to the future reader.

Hypertranslation as Another Framework

Although the term hypertranslation was coined by Badiou, not abstractly but through an embodied example, it is not necessarily an exceptional conception that is exclusive to Badiou. Here, we will presently argue that hypertranslation offers a framework that is entirely different from the approaches and problems hitherto discussed. We will focus on a concrete example to illustrate this understanding, and then suggest that Rancière might also be included in this category. Finally, we will reserve the problems and limitations of hypertranslation for the next section.

The text on which Alain Badiou has carried out the hypertranslation was Plato's *Republic*. What he means by this expression is a translational rewriting, in other words, an activity of retranslation and rewriting, as it is explicit in the book that emerged. It is not feasible to cover all this here, but Alain Badiou's relationship with Plato, and his self-definition as a "Platonist" goes back much further than the translation activity in question. Furthermore, it characterizes almost all of Badiou's philosophy. As such, Badiou refers to his philosophy as "the Platonism of multiplicity (1989 85)", an expression that may seem contradictory at first glance.

According to Badiou, translations so far have been carried out from a philological perspective, by those who specialize in the language required for translation. This is especially true of translations from Ancient Greece. However, translation activity in philosophy should be different. Translation is part of our circulation in the history of philosophy (2015 13). This in itself indicates the changing framework; it is no longer a question of linguistic skill, the difference between languages, the essence of language, etc., but of interpreting the history of philosophy. For Badiou, the question is more accurately about how Plato is useful today. Therefore, the evaluation of a good translation of Plato should not be based on the degree to which it conveys the original text – nor on the degree to which it is a "good copy", but on how fertile it is today (14).

Badiou begins his project, in which he finally produces a rewritten *Plato's Republic* rather than a translated text. The question of division has always appeared to him as absurd, and, as he goes on to argue, could only be meaningful for Alexandrian grammarians (xxxii). Whereas the Greek text is divided into ten books, his translation has grown to sixteen, or eighteen if the preface and the afterword are included. In order to update the text, Badiou has taken liberties with references, changed some historical and scientific examples, adapted the myth of the cave to the movie theater, and made the dialogues more objectionable to other characters and even introduced some of the arguments by them in order to remove the theatricality of the dialogues. He also removes Adeimantus from the dialogue, replacing him with a female character named Amantha (xxxiii). As for terminological changes, he enumerated them as follows:

> I changed the famous "Idea of the Good" to the "Idea of the True," if not simply to "Truth." I also changed "soul" to "Subject." Thus, in my text, they'll speak of "a Subject's incorporation into a truth" rather than of "the soul's ascension toward the Good," and of "the three agencies of the Subject" rather than of "the three-part division of the soul." What's more, the famous three parts, which are often called "appetite," "spirit," and "reason," will be reprised, qua agencies, as "Desire," "Affect" and "Thought." I also gave myself permission to translate "God" as "the big Other," or even sometimes as "the Other" tout court. At times, I deliberately proposed several different French words that accord with a single Greek word. Take, for instance, the formidable word Politeia, from which Plato's book borrows its traditional title. Translating it as "Republic" has no meaning today, if it ever had one. In my text I used at least five different words, depending on the context, in the various passages where I came up against politeia: "country," "state," "society," "city," and "system of government" (xxxiv).

Following all these interventions, Badiou predominantly follows Plato in terms of content. As in the original *Republic*, the book begins with the issue of justice, an issue that continues to be the driving force throughout the book. However, some of Badiou's interventions completely change the text, to the point of almost reversing its main arguments. For example, in the chapter on the justification of specialization, Badiou drastically changes the original text. Socrates says:

> Underlying the division of labor, which has been in existence for several thousand years, there are two beliefs, which are as dubious as they are deeply ingrained. The first is that nature didn't give all people the same abilities. One person, it's said, is naturally good at one kind of work and another person is good at a different one. The second is that it's preferable for someone who has mastered a particular skill to devote himself to it full-time rather than spread himself thin, doing several different ones at the price of being less efficient at each of them. You can guess the obvious conclusion all by yourself (66).

While the original text is largely followed, the dissolution of the division of labor is bound to bring about numerous changes in the new text. Indeed, without a division of labor, being a soldier would not be a separate profession, and every citizen would have to defend his or her country in case of war. In this case, education, which in Plato's text is divided into classes, would be spread across society. If military service is not a separate profession, there is no separate education required for military service. Education is general and for everyone. As a result, the majority of what we might call "the people", who were left out in the original *Republic*, are taken into account here. Moreover, this argument even undermines one of the most popular conclusions of the text, the "philosopher-king", since all the people can be philosophers and therefore all the people can rule (182).
In a way, the original text is still followed: philosophy is necessary for rule and only those who know philosophy are able to rule society. On the other hand, the original text has changed completely, since it is now possible for everyone to fulfil that station, learn philosophy and run the society. As many aspects are retained, despite this major change, all the questions that one might argue with in the original text, or seek answers to, are also present in Badiou's hypertranslation: What is a good life? Who should be a ruler, what is justice, and what is virtue? Finally, also related to this intervention, the myth deployed by Plato to legitimize social hierarchy is altered in Badiou's rendition. More precisely, after quoting the original myth, the following addition is introduced:

> Except that the myth, according to some people, doesn't end there. One day, say these subversive preachers, a counter-god of sorts will appear, though we don't yet know in what form. Will it be just one man? A woman of radiant beauty? A whole team? An idea, a single spark that can set the whole prairie on fire? It's impossible to know. But in any event this counter-god will melt down all the Phoenicians, or maybe even humanity as a whole, and will re-make them in such a way that all without exception will henceforward be made up of an undifferentiated mixture of earth, iron, gold, and silver. They'll consequently have to live indivisibly, since they'll all share identically in the equality of fate (109-110).

Badiou himself is aware that he has departed too far from the original text in places, and he states that this is due to a "higher philosophical fidelity (xxxiii)." Classical dichotomies such as translatability/untranslatability are no longer relevant here. Furthermore, dichotomies such as fidelity/betrayal, which could have replaced them, have also been completely displaced. In Badiou's case, what can be seen as betrayal can only be repetition. Ultimately, as Spitzer notes in the preface to the English translation of the text in question, hypertranslation is a process of painstaking reflection on every word, concept and sentence, in which the source text is transformed into "something startlingly new" (xxiv).

Before addressing the limitations of hypertranslation, it should be noted that Badiou's endeavor has not received enough attention in the existing literature. For one thing, the work has been translated into English, Chinese, Spanish and Turkish; but the new frameworks it presents, and the intellectual challenges it raises, have not yet been adequately reflected upon. As such, the question of how it can inspire future work, or what existing work can be considered within the framework of hypertranslation, or converge upon it, remain entirely open. We think that some other philosophical translations that preceded or followed it converged and overlapped with hypertranslation (albeit without ever designating or uttering the term). One of these is Rancière's *The Nights of Labor* (1989), which, although we cannot treat it in the same scope here, and even though it itself is not so comprehensive and therefore not a "hypertranslation" in the strict sense, might still be regarded under this framework.

What we encounter in the case of Rancière is not the translation of a text, let alone a major text in the history of philosophy. Rancière takes the writings produced by workers in nineteenth-century France and evaluates them quite differently from the context to which they belong. "It was necessary for me to extract the workers' texts from the status that social or cultural history assigned to them—as manifestations of a particular cultural condition. I looked at these texts as inventions of forms of language similar to all others (Ranciere and Panagia 116)." Or, as Ruitenger puts it:

> "Rancière displaces the workers' texts from the dominant interpretive framework, in which they were seen as representations of a class condition, by putting them into an interpretive framework in which they could be seen as literary, intellectual products… This translation makes possible a different view not only of the texts but also of the authors of the texts themselves. Rancière reads the texts as evidence of the authors not as workers seeking equality, but as thinkers expressing a fundamental equality they already possess (428)"

In a nutshell, Rancière attempts to bring these texts closer to his own philosophical commitment. Certainly, he does not change the texts in the way Badiou does. But he changes the context in such a way that the way the texts are perceived changes completely. In this respect, it is similar to the way a reading of Plato through Badiou which changes Plato altogether. Rancière's most original move is to carry out this process in the same language, in French. We think that this attempt, usually referred to as interdiscursive translation, also converges to hypertranslation and can expand its boundaries, making it not only an exceptional experiment specific to Badiou.

Limitations of Hypertranslation

Before addressing the limitations of hypertranslation, it is important to note that we do not intend to set up a hierarchy between it and other translation approaches. Indeed, the reason for this is that hypertranslation has many practical and theoretical limitations. It cannot be a general method of translation. Hence, it cannot be a surrogate for other existing approaches to translation. Nonetheless, it does offer a new and precious framework and its current limits can be greatly extended. In our view, its current limitations and shortcomings can be summarized in three ways.

The first is that Alain Badiou, who coined the term and is associated with it, is a highly recognized philosopher, whose works have been translated into almost every major language. When Badiou completed his hypertranslation project, in which he rewrote *The Republic*, it was 2013, so Badiou already had many seminal works that had been translated into different languages and he was already well-established. Moreover, Rancière, whom we have brought closer to him, is arguably one of the most renowned and prominent thinkers of our time. Our point here is that it is in many ways impossible for someone unknown or obscure to carry out a similar project. For, in addition to the difficulty for the author to get such a book published, and even in the miraculous event that this does happen, readers would probably not find it worthwhile to examine how a no-name author rewrote *The Republic*. Thus, while all other conceptions of translation are open to virtually anyone and can be carried out by young scholars and even students, hypertranslation is only possible for highly recognized thinkers who already have a career and a stable readership. This problem cannot likely be resolved, and hypertranslation cannot be as widespread as other forms of translation, but some improvements are certainly attainable. For example, an academic publisher could launch a hypertranslation series. In this way, while still maintaining a certain limitation, a large number of scholars could be involved in an exciting and creative experiment.

Secondly, while Badiou understands fidelity to a philosopher in terms of bringing him up to date and deriving contemporary answers to the questions he poses, it is quite difficult to draw the line here. There is no objective criterion for distinguishing at what point this is a well-considered expression of, in Badiou's words, "a higher philosophical fidelity" and at what point it is the opposite. Perhaps there is no need at all for that sort of criteria. Yet, there is no doubt that making a philosopher say things he has never said, and therefore taking a position he has never defended, would create ethical and political difficulties. Again, as Badiou says, if we are to address this difficulty in terms of the fertility of the emerging work, there needs to be a vibrant academic environment that can acknowledge this fertility. Ultimately, hypertranslation needs to receive more attention and value. As it stands, however, it does not seem to have generated much excitement among scholars, given the scarcity of what has been written about it.

Last but not least, hypertranslation poses an enormous challenge as it requires incomparably longer time than any other conception of translation. Badiou, for example, states that he spent five years on the project. In fact, hypertranslation requires rethinking the entire text over and over again, going over every word, sentence and problem. In addition, if the hypertranslation is from a major philosopher, their corpus has to be considered significant. So, in this regard, besides all the creativity and experimentation, it also requires a kind of specialization. In that sense, it is similar to the limitation that we mentioned in the first point. On the other hand, it could very well be carried out by young researchers as a doctoral project, if properly planned. But it needs professors, institutions and processes to allow it, and above all to encourage it.

Conclusion

This article itself undoubtedly has some limitations. In order to provide a panoramic structure, we could not elaborate further at many points. Only two names are mentioned when discussing untranslatability, for instance. In the following section, we dwelled more on Ricoeur. In both sections, we could not provide a practical example or a close reading.

We aimed to outline a framework of both untranslatability and problem-affirming translatability, and then to illustrate how hypertranslation ruptures this framework. We have shown that hypertranslation creatively overcomes the classical dichotomies, for example, between the language of the translation and the language of the original work, problems inherent to a specific language or to the language as a whole. We have demonstrated that hypertranslation also provides a different framework for another dichotomy, that of fidelity/betrayal. Finally, we have addressed problems, even impasses, some of which are inherent to hypertranslation, while others are related to academic culture, and we have suggested certain solutions.

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