

Untranslatability and the Cold War: Theory in Context

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Any discussion of the concept of untranslatability must begin with the caveat that what is meant by the term fluctuates wildly. In some cases, it is used to suggest that something *cannot* be translated, in others, that it *should not* be translated, and in still others, that it traditionally *has not* been translated. For example, in the nineteenth century anglophone journal *The China Review*, in a review of Stanislas Julien's *Syntaxe nouvelle de la langue chinoise*, the Scottish sinologist Alexander Falconer (1872-73, 115) mentions certain Chinese characters that serve as "case particles, especially as signs of the accusative." "These characters," Falconer notes, "when not employed as prepositions or illative particles are exceedingly difficult to translate, and are often untranslatable" (115). Here, Falconer appears to use untranslatable to mean "untranslated"—which makes untranslatability more of an empirical fact than an inherent linguistic quality or essential feature. Furthermore, untranslatability for Falconer is indexed by omission. In Barbara Cassin's (Cassin xix) more recent discussion of the topic, however, untranslatability is manifested in the borrowing of key terms rather than in their omission, non-translation as opposed to zero translation, while in Emily Apter's construal, untranslatability is the effect of a "intransigent" nub of meaning" that resists translation (Apter 235), which can be manifested either as non-translation or zero-translation.

The historical study of untranslatability is further complicated by the fact that many contemporary scholars often impose the term onto theoretical positions in which the term is not explicitly invoked. For example, Sergei Fokin (2016) describes early Soviet translation theory as concerned with untranslatability (*neperevodimost'*). None of the theorists mentioned, however, used the term. Rather, they discuss situations in which, due to the incommensurability of natural languages at all levels, literal translation or translation that employs similar linguistic means is not possible. Labeling such instances as untranslatable conflates incommensurability with untranslatability. This, in turn, construes untranslatability's opposite, translatability, as transposability or unproblematic linguistic substitution, a view of translation that greatly circumscribes the translator's agency insofar as incommensurability suggests the need for heightened creativity on the translator's part, as in Jakobson's "creative transposition," whereas untranslatability implies abject surrender. Finally, to the extent that claims of untranslatability rest on an assertion of "fundamental difference, whether genetic or historical," they may, as Eric Hayot suggests, "reproduce the worst habits of Eurocentric thought" (Hayot 1414).

So, rather than dwell on what untranslatability "is", which risks presenting it not only as "transhistorical" (Fani 2020, 5) but as an exercise of the Western epistemic privilege (Mignolo 2012, ix) of presenting "the habits of Eurocentric thought" as universal, I will focus on how the term was operationalized, and in certain cases weaponized, in the context of the Cold War, which John J. Curley (2018, 8) describes as "the central story of the second half of the twentieth century—essential for explaining what happened around the world and why." Indeed, the influence of the Cold War was felt everywhere. As Curley (2018, 8) goes on to note, "Even disputes that, at their start, had little or nothing to do with the Cold War, morphed into important battlegrounds for the conflict." Or, as U.S. poet Robert Frost put it, "I was sometimes like that as a boy with another boy I lived in antipathy with. It clouded my days" (Frost 2007, 231).

Not surprisingly, the ideological incommensurability of the world views or master narratives represented by the two opposing superpowers and embodied in Winston Churchill's image of an impenetrable iron curtain gave the notion of untranslatability particular salience. That being said, the conceptualization of untranslatability in the Cold War context was by no means universal, as it developed differently in different contexts, nor was it static. In order to understand the different valences given to untranslatability in the Cold War, I will examine three distinct contexts: the Soviet context of the nineteen fifties, the US context of the nineteen fifties, focusing on the Russian emigrés Roman Jakobson, Vladimir Nabokov, and Vladimir Vedle, and the post-Cold War context of the Global North.

Untranslatability in the Cold War Soviet Context

In the pre-war period, many Soviet translation theorists focused on the asymmetries between natural languages to argue against literal translation and to assert the fundamental creativity of the translator's task, which will always involve selecting from a range of possible solutions. Rather than relegating such asymmetries to the realm of exception, as instances of untranslatability, these theorists established those asymmetries as the very condition of translatability. Andrei Fedorov makes this point quite explicitly in a chapter titled "The Question of Translatability" from his 1941 monograph *On Literary Translation*:

Rendering the specific features of the syntax of a foreign language, folk sayings, axioms, idioms, images that are characteristic of the individual style of the author being translated, recreating differences in the stylistic coloring of words and phrases, the difference between bookish and the colloquial language of various social groups, differences in the age of words, and differences between old and new language—all these are cases of everyday translation practice, cases that any translator will encounter. (Fedorov 1941, 207)

Back in the late 1920s, Fedorov had provided a more systematic theoretical elaboration for this position in an article entitled "The Problem of Verse Translation" (1927), in which he applies the Formalist concepts of system and function developed by his mentor Iurii Tynianov to translation. Fedorov claims that a literary text, characterized by the inseparability of form and content, is a complex systems of interconnected elements, which he will later describe as a "chemical compound" (Fedorov 1930, 206), so that when any one element is altered, which inevitably occurs in translation due to the asymmetry of languages, the entire system is changed. Hence, translation can establish a relationship of "likeness" (*podobie*) to the source text but never one of "sameness" (*tozhdestvo*).

The xenophobia and paranoia that characterized the early Cold War years in the Soviet context, culminated in the campaign against "cosmopolitanism," which targeted foreign influences of all kinds and had a distinctly anti-Semitic element. The use of foreign words or borrowings became an especially popular object of attack at that time. It was in this context that Fedorov published his *Introduction to Translation Theory* (1953) in which, for the first time, he introduced the notion of "untranslatability," projecting it onto the West as a fallacy produced by "idealist philosophy," which, unlike Marxist philosophy of language, posited a distinction between thought and language. Fedorov then invokes the Soviet rhetoric of optimism to describe the Soviet position on translatability, namely, that all things are translatable if you accept that the translation may not be formally equivalent, meaning that it may not render a noun with a noun, a verb with a verb, and so on. Western writing on translation, on the other hand, is characterized by deep pessimism over the possibility of producing what Fedorov refers to as a "full value" translation, that is, one that need not be inferior to the original that pessimism, Fedorov argues, that is manifested in frequent claims of untranslatability. While untranslatability is absent from Fedorov's previous work, it appears in five of the eight chapters of his 1953 *Introduction to Translation Theory*, where it is very clearly mapped onto Cold War binaries.

Untranslatability in the Anglophone Cold War Context

While Soviet writings on translation began soon after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, increasing steadily throughout the twenties, thirties and forties, Western thinking on translation really took off after the Second World War. Before that, attention to translation was at best “incidental and desultory” (Holmes 1988 [1972], 173). Without a firm theoretical foundation to rely on, Western thinking on translation in the post-war years was greatly influenced by the recent experience of translation during the war, in particular, the successful breaking of the Nazi secret code, a model reinforced in emergent writing on machine translation. The degree to which this translation model captured the popular imagination in the Anglophone West in the post-War years is evident in Winston Churchill’s description of the art of painting from his *Painting as Pastime* of 1948:

The canvas receives a message dispatched usually a few seconds before from the natural object. But it has to come through a post office en route. It has been transmitted in code. It has been turned from light into paint. It reaches the canvas [as] a cryptogram. Not until it has been placed in its correct relation to everything else that is on the canvas can it be deciphered, is its meaning apparent, is it *translated* once again from meter pigment into light. (qtd. in Curley 2018, 14; italics added)

The model of translation as code-breaking was predicated on the easy separation of form from content, a peeling away of the outer shell of the form in order to extract the core meaning. This is evident in the 1958 volume *Aspects of Translation*. As A. H. Smith (1958, vii) writes in the preface: “To translate is, as Dr. Johnson defined it, ‘to change into another language, retaining sense’. It would, perhaps, be wiser to qualify this definition, and suggest that to translate is to change into another language, retaining as much of the sense as one can; for some of the original effect is almost always lost.” This privileging of sense is evident too in the introduction by Leonard Forster (1958, 1; italics added): “I want to consider translation as the transference of the content of a text from one language to another, bearing in mind that we *cannot always* dissociate the content from the form”—*not always* suggests that it can be done most of the time.

In other words, while the Cold War manufactured “fundamental difference,” it also promoted utopian fantasies of science transcending difference, as evident in early writings on machine translation, in achievements in space travel, and in the “deep structures” of Chomskian linguistics. That utopian post-war model of transposability informed political thinking of the time as well, specifically in regard to the founding of global institutions, such as the United Nations, meant to avoid future wars. As the Nigerian poet and playwright stated in regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948: “All that this document requires therefore is simply that it be rendered in all the accessible languages of all societies” (qtd. in Slaughter 2007, 6). A similar tone is struck by poet W.H. Auden in a 1950 review of a volume of Greek poetry in translation: “Every translator is an international agent of goodwill” (Auden 1950, 183).

This utopian vision of translation as transposability soon engendered a backlash, however, as expressed in increasingly absolute claims for the untranslatability of poetry, claims predicated on the inseparability of form and content. This was expressed by Robert Frost in his 1957 “Message to the Poets of Korea,” written only a few years after the armistice was signed ending the hottest conflict of the Cold War: “The language barrier has so much to do with individuality and originality that we wouldn’t want to see it removed. We must content ourselves with seeing it more or less got over by interpretation and translation. We must remember that one may be national without being poetical, but one can’t be poetical without being national” (Frost 2007, 182). This is a position poet

Peter Robinson describes as reflecting “the spirit of the Cold War” to the extent that it is characterized by a “linguistic essentialism” (Robinson 2014, 25). In that regard, it is important to remember that while most of the work of Sapir and Whorf on linguistic relativity was published in the thirties and forties, the phrase “the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” was coined in the fifties, a sign of the concept’s new relevance in the context of the Cold War.

The dichotomy of art and science that was emerging in the Anglophone Cold War context was reified in C.P. Snow’s now famous lecture of 1959, “The Two Cultures,” in which he lamented the increasing hermeticism of scientific and humanistic cultures, another manifestation of the Cold War obsession with incommensurability. In that same year, Roman Jakobson published his seminal essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” which presents two, almost diametrically opposed, visions of translation. In the first few pages Jakobson makes the argument that anything can be translated, albeit by alternative linguistic means, or, as Jakobson expressed it: “Languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey” (1959, 236). This is a position that is perfectly consonant with Soviet writings on translation, which should come as no surprise, as Jakobson was a founding member of Russian Formalism and worked very closely with Fedorov’s mentor Iurii Tynianov, even after Jakobson’s emigration to Prague. In fact, he and Tynianov co-authored a seminal work of Formalist scholarship, the essay “Problems in the Study of Literature and Language” (1928). In that first section of the 1959 essay, Jakobson appears to dismiss claims of untranslatability based on linguistic relativity: “Both the practice and the theory of translation abound with intricacies, and from time to time attempts are made to sever the Gordian knot by proclaiming the dogma of untranslatability” (1959, 234).

Jakobson then goes on to discuss instances in which the form is very closely connected to the meaning, as with allegorical figures whose biological gender is often a reflection of the word’s grammatical gender, which may be different in different languages. He ends with a discussion of the semantics of phonetics and of paronomasia, which are characteristic of poetry, leading him to proclaim that such works require “creative transposition.” His complete avoidance of the word translation here is striking and represents a divergence from Soviet positions. Is this or is this not a form of translation? If it is, then does the use of the adjective “creative” suggest that the translation described in the first part of the essay requires no creativity, again a position that is distinct from that of Soviet scholars, who held that the asymmetry of languages will present the translator with an array of options and that the selection and coordination of those options is a highly creative task. If transposition is not translation, then isn’t this a somewhat obfuscated claim of untranslatability, which would again place him at odds with the Soviets? Jakobson kept abreast of Soviet scholarship and may have been aware of the charge made by Fedorov and others that untranslatability was an idealist fallacy.

Around that same time, Jakobson’s fellow emigré Vladimir Nabokov was contemplating the possibility of what Fedorov termed a “full value translation,” that is, one that did justice both to the form and to the content of the original, in regard to his project of translating what is often described as the greatest work of modern Russian literature, Alexander Pushkin’s novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*. Indeed, as Nabokov writes in his biographical note on Pushkin in a 1944 collection of translations: “It seems unnecessary to remind the reader that Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837) was Russia’s greatest poet but it may be preferable not to take any chances” (1944, 37). While reading any one essay by Nabokov gives the impression that his positions, which are always expressed with immense self-assurance, were static and fully formed, they in fact underwent an evolution in the Cold War context, which can be traced from his collection of translations, *Three Russian Poets: Pushkin, Lermontov and Tyutchev*, of 1944, through his 1955 essay “Problems of Translation: ‘Onegin’ in English,” to the actual foreword to his translation of *Eugene Onegin*, which was published in 1964.

The 1944 collection, which includes no introduction by the translator, only biographical notes at the end, contains translations of short lyric poems by three of Russia's greatest poets of the nineteenth century, Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Fyodor Tyutchev. All the translations are rhymed and metered, and no mention is made of translation, although Nabokov does take the opportunity in the biographical notes to criticize any attempt to limit the creative autonomy of the poet, be it by the "grossly uncultured Tsar," "the well meaning critics of the civic school that dominated public opinion in the Sixties and Seventies," or by "Marxism" (1944, 37).

Nabokov's essay of 1955 indicates that Nabokov had moved away from producing rhymed and metered translations of Russian poetry as he worked on translating *Eugene Onegin*, which led him to advocate for "literal translation," describing the phrase as "tautological since anything but is not truly a translation but an imitation, an adaptation or a parody" (2010, 77). This was a position completely antithetical to Soviet positions, which rejected literalism as inaccurate, associating it with "mechanical carrying over" (Fedorov 1953, 280). Nabokov arrives at this position by acknowledging the inseparability of form and content in poetic works:

The problem, then, is a choice between rhyme and reason: can a translation while rendering with absolute fidelity the whole text, and nothing but the text, keep the form of the original, its rhythm and rhyme? To the artist whom practice within the limits of one language, his own, has convinced that matter and manner are one, it comes as a shock to discover that a work of art can present itself to the would-be translator as split into form and content, and that the question of rendering one but not the other may arise at all. Actually what happens is still a monist's delight: shorn of its primary verbal existence, the original text will not be able to soar and to sing; but it can be very nicely dissected and mounted, and scientifically studied in all its organic details. (2010, 77).

Here, Nabokov, the lepidopterist, advocates for mounting and dissecting the original in translation in order to study it. He then goes on to illustrate his literal translation approach with two verses from *Onegin* which he describes sarcastically as "untranslatable"—placing untranslatable in quotation marks as his literal approach is, he argues, the only viable method of translation.

By the time the translation is finally published, in 1964, Nabokov will nuance his position by proposing a tri-partite typology of translation approaches, situating literal translation between paraphrastic and lexical, and stating his position on verse translation in a more unequivocal manner: "We are now in a position to word our question more accurately: can a rhymed poem like *Eugene Onegin* be truly translated with the retention of its rhymes? The answer, of course, is no. To reproduce the rhymes and yet translate the entire poem literally is mathematically impossible" (1964, ix).

One can point to a number of overlapping Cold War contexts shaping the evolution of Nabokov's views on the translation of poetry. Most obviously, as an immigrant displaced by the war, Nabokov found work in a department of foreign languages; the need to provide a translation for his students was a major factor behind his translation of *Eugene Onegin*, as he mentions in his foreword: "The writing of the book now in the hands of the reader was prompted about 1950, in Ithaca, New York, by the urgent needs of my Russian-literature class at Cornell and the nonexistence of any true translation of *Eugene Onegin* into English" (1964, xi). In a broader sense, however, the experience of involuntary exile may have led him to construe the untranslatable original as a metaphor for an irretrievable homeland—the Russia he knew as a child was not only far away geographically, it was also, following the Bolshevik Revolution, a thing of the past. The entangling of geographic and temporal displacement appears again and again in Nabokov's work, most hauntingly perhaps in the opening pages of his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, written shortly after

the war but dealing with his life before the war, “with only a few sallies into later space-time” (1966, 8). He opens the autobiography with a description of the panic he felt when seeing a home movie taken of his family before his birth, with an empty baby carriage in front of the house. This conflation of temporal and geographic or physical displacement is connected more directly with translation, however, in the postscript Nabokov wrote for his Russian translation of *Lolita*, his first major work written in English, the success of which allowed him to quit his job at Cornell. In that postscript, he asks himself who he is translating the novel for—as the novel could never be published in the Soviet Union, there was no way for his *Lolita* to return “home” in translation; he then imagines a sorry group of Russian emigrés sitting in a café in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, as the only possible readers of the translation. For the emigré writer, translation is an act of geographic and temporal displacement done for readers who are themselves temporally and geographically displaced.

The connection between untranslatability and exile is more explicitly expressed by a fellow Russian emigré Vladimir Vedle in an essay from 1960 entitled “On the Untranslatable,” in which a discussion of the untranslatability of verse ends with a mention of two poems by Pushkin that conflate geographic and temporal displacement:

When translation deals with a poem, where sound and sense are inseparably linked in a whole from the first line to the last, which gives the impression (which is impossible to definitively verify), that not only can one not alter a single word, one cannot alter even a single vowel or consonant. In dramatic or epic poetry (not to mention prose), [...] there is a thematic basis which allows for translation “with one’s native words,” and therefore can be rendered without much difficulty into a literate translation. There is an untranslatable remnant here as well, but to analyze those remnants it is better to examine poems that are entirely or almost entirely composed of such a remnant and that, like “On the Hills of Georgia” or “Under the Blue Skies of One’s Native Land,” can never be rendered into “own’s native words.” (1973, 148-149)

The first poem mentioned was written in 1827 when Pushkin was traveling outside Russia proper, in the Caucasus region, revisiting the site of his internal exile, while the other was written in 1826 in memory of a former lover, Amaliia Riznich, whom he had met during his Southern exile and who later died of tuberculosis while in Florence. Both poems connect reminiscence and loss, forms of temporal displacement, with geographic displacement.

Another way the Cold War context influenced Nabokov’s view of the translation of poetry was through his increasingly antagonistic relationship with Roman Jakobson over the course of the nineteen fifties, largely on political grounds—Nabokov felt Jakobson was not sufficiently anti-Soviet. This may have led Nabokov to assume a position on translation that was distinctly different from Jakobson’s “creative transposition,” which in Nabokov’s typology would fit under paraphrase (see Baer 2011). But, in a broader sense, Nabokov’s position on the impossibility of verse translation, often described as idiosyncratic, was in fact aligned with the views of his contemporaries, such as Frost and Jakobson, who constructed poetry as a bastion of humanism against a rising tide of scientific positivism and a model of translation as universal transposability.

Conclusion: Untranslatability in the Post-Cold War World

It may seem strange to include discussions of untranslatability from the 2010s in an article about the Cold War, but the Cold War casts a very long shadow. When the initial euphoria over the fall of communism wore off, the “end of history” began to look more like the return of the repressed. As Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes comment:

In the aftermath of 1989, the global spread of democracy was envisioned as a version of the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty, where the Prince of Freedom only needed to slay the Dragon of Tyranny and kiss the princess in order to awaken a previously dormant liberal majority.

But the kiss proved bitter, and the revived majority turned out to be more resentful and less liberal than had been expected or hoped (2019, 20)

They might have added that the Prince of Freedom too turned out to be more resentful and less liberal than most pundits and pollsters imagined. (Unfortunately, Krastev and Holmes tend to blame the failed transition on Eastern Europeans rather than considering the effects of Western monetary policy and political pressure.)

In any case, these two periods in the post-Cold War—the period of euphoria and the period of disenchantment—were reflected in writings on translation that appeared in the Global North. The nineties saw a boom in the use of translation as a metaphor for migration and global movement, most notably in the work of Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, unburdened by any consideration of the messiness and expense of actual (interlingual) translation (see Baer 2020). The second period, that of disenchantment, was signaled, one could say, by Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000), which looked at translation in the other direction—from the metropole to the global periphery—as a way to challenge the universal claims of Western theory and to lend agency to the (interlingual) translators of that theory. Indeed, my own research on book reviews of translated literature in the *New York Times* saw a pronounced shift in the tone of translation criticism in 2000, toward greater pessimism about the possibility of translation, alongside an obsession with works dealing with the Cold War and its aftermath (see Baer 2017a). This was also the time when the memoir of the East German transvestite Charlotte von Mahlsdorf was repackaged for Western audiences. What had initially been marketed as a feel-good story of emancipation in the 1995 English translation of the memoir, *I Am My Own Woman*, was turned into a gloomy tale of corruption and betrayal in Doug Wright's play, *I Am My Own Wife* (2004) (see Baer 2017b). So, the fact that Cassin's and Apter's work on untranslatability appeared in that specific post-Cold War context of disenchantment and pessimism, which saw the rise of ethno-nationalist authoritarianism across the world, should invite a critical examination of whether such claims of untranslatability—especially Apter's essentialist construal—are more symptoms of our cultural malaise than they are constructive interventions.

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