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"My Idiolect, If I Have One": Translation in a Single Language

Abstract: Criticism of translations is often framed in terms that derive from a normative definition of languages. "Nativization," "foreignization," "correctness," and "inaccuracy" are terms that affirm the identity of, say, French with itself, and its difference from other languages. But this confidence about identity crumbles when we look more closely at languages –any language – and their speakers. A language may, of course, have an institutionalized norm supported by school systems, dictionaries, grammars, the press, and even a national academy, but the speech of any individual will be more or less discrepant from such norms; moreover, languages accumulate words, sounds, meanings, and structures from other languages over time. If we conceive of languages as never being quite identical with themselves, how are we to think of translation? Through a critique of some interpretive gestures in Heidegger's famous essay "Das Wort" (from *Unterwegs zur Sprache*), translation and word-borrowing are proposed as two interrelated places "wo das wort gebricht" (Stefan George).

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"My language, if I have one," said Derrida, "is French," but then he went on to point out that he had grown up in Algeria hearing Arabic and Berber, living with relatives who spoke Judaeo-Spanish amongst themselves, and that Parisian French was something he learned at school – so his "if I have one" was no mere flutter of modesty, but a sincere autobiographical questioning (Derrida 1998, 1). He then pointed out, in the same essay, that a language is not the sort of thing that anyone "has"; the way to "have" a means of communication is to have it in common with other people, each of whom "has" it differently from oneself; and that is how a linguistic community is assembled. *Communauté inopérante*, *communauté inavouable* (cf. Nancy 1986; Blanchot 1984).

How about this, then, as a follow-on from Derrida's observation: a "linguistic community" is called thus not although, but because it does not really form a commons, it does not share an identity so much as it has a common outside frontier with other so-called linguistic communities, a frontier which is also porous and dissolving: both inside and outside the frontier, a community is an ongoing struggle over what the commons will be.

You can take this in a Bakhtinian way – the word is always an answering word (Bakhtin 1981) – or in a sociological way – people compete for prestige in a linguistic field (Bourdieu 1979) – but I would like today to tug on the loose ends of the common definition of a "language," in order to make trouble for some ideas about translation that depend on an overly clear sense of what a language is and does.

A poem by Stefan George, made famous by Martin Heidegger's commentary in *On the Way to Language*, has often been taken to express the priority of language over reference. This positing power of language is held to gleam particularly brightly in its final line: "Kein ding sei wo das wort gebricht." The poem tells, in metre and vocabulary reminiscent of fairy tales, of an adventure with language and meaning. The speaker brings back "to the seam" or border of his country a "wonder from afar or a dream," and waits to learn from "the gray Norn" how it should be called. The Norn, after a long search, replies that no such thing is found "here on the deep earth," and the speaker suddenly watches the "wonder from afar" escape his hand. Thereupon he learns, "mournfully, renunciation": "no thing may be where word breaks off" ("So lernt ich traurig den verzicht: / Kein ding sei wo das wort gebricht"; quoted in Heidegger [1959, 162–163]; the translations of George are my own, but see also Heidegger, trans. Hertz [1971, 60]).

This fable, as explicated by Heidegger, is often taken as evidence of a "linguistic turn," an exhibition of the performative power of language. No longer will the speaker of the poem suppose that things pre-exist words and that words are affixed to things like indifferent labels: rather, the power of language causes a thing to be the thing that it is. The Stefan George poem called "Das Wort" and the Heidegger essay of the same name tell us, it is supposed, something about Language as such. (For exegeses of this kind, see Mehring [1992, 129–130]; Lehnen [2011]; Thomä [2013, 266–267]; Appelhans [2015, 292–297]). The failure of Language opens a gap in Being wherein the Word can dwell. "For poetry is not an expression of experience, but an experience of language" (George, quoted in Lehnen 2011, 37; my translation). What the speaker renounces is a facile, instrumental relation to language, and nothing could be more fitting in Heidegger's opinion: "this [concluding] line makes the word of language, makes language itself bring itself to language, and says something about the relation between word and thing [...]. Only where the word for the thing has been found is the thing a thing. Only thus *is* it. [...] The word alone gives being to the thing." Or, more closely considered, "something *is* only where the appropriate and therefore competent word [*das geeignete und also zuständige Wort*; Heidegger 1959, 165] names a thing as being, and so establishes the given being as a being" (Heidegger, trans. Hertz 1971, 63; emphasis in original). The legal and bureaucratic resonances of *geeignet* and *zuständig* are noteworthy: as if appealing to the Norn, Heidegger is making an argument from jurisdictional authority. The power to give "being to the thing" that

Heidegger ascribes to language correlates with arguments familiar from Ferdinand de Saussure, Judith Butler, and a host of other representatives of the "linguistic turn" in one form or another. What is wrong with that, as long as we are among those people who live in language, above all poets and writers?

It has always seemed to me that Heidegger and the interpreters of his interpretation advance a little too quickly to the register of Language-as-such, without pausing to ask whether something here might be being said about a particular, local, empirical language, say German. No more than Fruit-as-such does Language-as-such offer itself to our inspection: what we get is apples, oranges, French, English, Wendish, Malay, Kinyarwanda. Is it a universally recognized truth that German is the philosophical language par excellence, or is that a position open to challenge from other languages in which thinking has occurred, and where different constellations of meaning have been recorded? Certainly, local colour surfaces in the details: the whole anecdote happens on the "seam" of the speaker's country, and a – perhaps Wagnerian – Norn pronounces on the fate of the object from afar. Is the fable perhaps a story about the German language specifically, a language that has manifold historical relations with other languages, relations that run the gamut from happy hybridization to exclusion and repression? Might a poet like George, receptive to ideas and forms from France and indebted in particular to Mallarmé, who praised Poe for his power to "give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe" (Mallarmé 1945, 70; my translation), have felt disapproval from the Teutonic Norn? Some of Heidegger's comments follow just such a local pattern. Distancing himself from the view that sees in words merely a means of more or less efficient communication without deep historical roots, he pours scorn on sputnik: "Take the sputnik. This thing, if such it is, is obviously independent of that name which was later tacked on to it. But perhaps matters are different with such things as rockets, atom bombs, reactors and the like" (Heidegger, trans. Hertz 1971, 66). *Sputnik* is self-evidently not a German word. The object it refers to is so radically ungrounded that it must revolve around the planet forever without a home. For Heidegger, technological objects like this have no authenticity, but are fabricated and rashly named by the "hastiness of thoughts" (Heidegger 1959, 165; my translation) of modern technology. His scorn envelops both the artefact and the word. A language that would pick up and appropriate words from nowhere and anywhere, random assemblages of sound like *sputnik*, is the language befitting that "hastiness of thoughts."

Despite Heidegger's innuendo, *sputnik* is not actually extraterrestrial, but Russian. It is not entirely a foreign word either, even for the German speaker, because the Slavic root *put* that forms its core (*s-* "with" + *put* "path" + *-nik* "agent" = "fellow-traveller") derives from the same Indo-European root as German *Pfad*, English *path*, Latin *spatium*, and Greek *pontos*. Boundaries are relative.

The quick passage from the promotion of the German language with its deep roots and artisanal heritage of "poetically preserved" (Heidegger 1959, 172; my translation) words to disparagement of the rootless *sputnik* reminds us that we cannot leap up to the empyrean of Language-as-such before dealing with specific languages and their competition. Empirical languages do not usually have clear borders, nor do they have centres (just ask a dialectologist or diachronic linguist). Although some countries have an academy for the upkeep of the national tongue, prescription always runs far behind description. No Norn passes judgement on the words and things that are to have currency between the non-existent "seams" of German, Spanish, Russian, and so forth. Purity is a repressive ideal. Languages are macaronic.

The hybridity of languages is a consequence of the mobility of human beings. As rare as it must be for an authentic word to precede the thing, the new thing that arrives on the horizon of a linguistic community is often accompanied by an exotic word that names it, and how better to name a truly new thing than with a truly new or imported word? Sputnik may have been the first of its kind, and its kind should bear a far-fetched name in consequence; but it was not long after 1957 that *sputnik* had become an English word. The acceptance of such fellow-travellers is the norm of linguistic development, and always has been.

If we consider languages as shading into one another, historically related or bearing the traces of recent grafts and imprints, what then is translation? You cross the Rhine going eastward and you go in a fraction of a second from a zone where French is spoken, with pronunciation and grammar specified by schoolbooks, broadcasting networks, newspapers, and a French Academy, to a zone where German is spoken, with the corresponding institutions and social behaviours. At any moment, it can be stated which of the zones you are in. That is, perhaps, how it looks from an administrative point of view, where laws and other institutions have to operate uniformly across a whole national jurisdiction, and otherwise are not really performing as they are supposed to. And the national markets for media, the broadcasting entities – France Culture and the Deutsche Welle, or what have you – go along with this fiction of distinct languages spoken exclusively within clear borders.

But think about this as a dialectologist would. On the two sides of the Rhine, or of any border that can be crossed, you have not a clear division of languages but a shading of local patterns of speech, a *patois alsacien* and a *rheinische Mundart*, a German-influenced French and a French-influenced German. Similarly for the Spanish–French border, the Austrian–Italian border, and so on. You might think that it is like being between two radio stations, each emitting its own signal, and the signal getting stronger or weaker as you approach or depart from the capital city. But dialect is rarely so uniform and predictable a gradation as that. Mass media such as public schools, radio, and television have altered the linguistic land-

scape; people are more mobile than they were before; the idea that language is firmly rooted in place and can be charted on a map applies ever more loosely. My idiolect, which I might begin by thinking is the thing I absolutely possess with no possibility of alienation, turns out to be one of those conditional things about which I can only say "mine, if I have one."

My point is that the simplistic representation of languages as unbroken jurisdictions, as self-contained zones of homogeneous code, as clearly differentiated from one another, as *somebody's*, lies behind the terminology we see used in most current translation theory: nativization vs foreignization, the norm vs departure from the norm, the ethical relationship between self and other. I think such terms give us a misleading clarity about the task translators have before them. And once we reject these simplistic ideas about language, we should question the translation theories built out of them.

Let me start with the ethics of translation, since that is such a powerful term. As early as the 1980s, Antoine Berman denounced the "egocentric" mode of translation, in which whatever foreignness inheres in the text to be translated is suppressed so that the end product is maximally user-friendly (Berman 1999, 27–29). This amounts to a betrayal of the goal of translation, which for Berman is to go out and encounter strangeness and then to report on it in a way that does not deny its difference from one's own language and culture. Fair enough, I say; but "strangeness" is already an egocentric term, it makes sense only with reference to a home base, and presumably that home base in a language and culture is something one shares with others. To translate *The Tale of Genji* in a way that will make it easy for speakers of English or German to see some beauty in that novel is not necessarily a selfish thing to do. One could even play the ethical card another way, and argue that a highly scholarly translation that directly emulates as many features of the Japanese text as possible is egocentric in terms of the difference between the highly educated public able to appreciate it, and the broader public, not necessarily specializing in the institutional and social history of East Asia, that might nonetheless be tempted into reading *Genji* by a less rebarbative translation.

The avowed aim of many theorists of translation is to prevent the "violence of translation" and in particular to stand athwart the tide of Anglo-globalism. They view foreignizing translation or the dictionary of untranslatables as making

> a strategic cultural intervention in the current state of world affairs, pitched against the hegemonic English-language nations and the unequal cultural exchanges in which they engage their global others. Foreignizing translation in English can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interests of democratic geopolitical relations. (Venuti 1995, 20)

That is all well and good. But those of us who deal more persistently with other cultures, who are far enough inside their jurisdiction to discover their chauvinism as well as our own, or who deal with texts and translations that are older than, say, one hundred and fifty years, are apt to find this mission statement not particularly helpful. It is so prescriptive that it fails to be descriptive; it is so wary of universalizing that it is not concerned to make itself functional outside its immediate present-day context. For me, this is a serious flaw, and I invite you to return to the scene of translation, in all cultures, in all recorded pasts, in order to find out from the testimony of those who were there what translation brought about and what interests it served. In *Translation as Citation* (Saussy 2017), I present an argument about what translation has done in relatively remote times and places – to wit, China between the third century CE and the early twentieth century – and consider translations done not only to incorporate the foreign thing but to project the native thing into a foreign space. I find in these cross-linguistic borrowings a history of seventeen hundred years of sputnik-making.

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