

Translation as Idea and Practice: A Detour via Walter Benjamin and Arun Kolatkar

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Abstract: The paper surveys the field of translation studies from the perspective developed in several essays from the early twentieth century by the German author Walter Benjamin to propose the argument that translation might be viewed not simply as the transference of meaning and significance from a source to a target language. Benjamin, invoking the Judaic-Christian fables of the Fall and the Tower of Babel, proposed the idea of a third ur-language, which captures the idea of an ideal language which might be the virtual referent in every act of poetic translation, such that both target and source versions of a poem might be said to refer to this ur-language. This is not a view of translation that is likely to appeal or persuade everyone; however it is interesting enough to be put to a test. The paper does that by comparing two translations into English of a poem in the Indian language Marathi, one of which is by the poet of the Marathi original. My analysis of the two translations leads to an assessment of one as better than the other, for reasons which subsidize the conclusion that capturing the spirit of an original might sometimes prove more effective than aiming for a scrupulously literal approach.

Key words: translation; Walter Benjamin; Arun Kolatkar

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标题：作为思想与实践的翻译：一条经由本雅明与阿朗·科拉卡尔的迂回路线

内容摘要：本文借助 20 世纪早期德国作家瓦尔特·本杰明在数篇文章中形成的观点，对翻译研究领域进行了梳理，认为翻译不应该仅仅被视为是从源语言到目标语的意义传递。本杰明引用通天塔倒塌的犹太-基督寓言，提出了第三原初语言的概念，这是一种能够成为诗歌翻译过程中所有的意义指涉物的理想语言，目标语和源语言的两个诗歌版本都可指向这种原初语言。这不是一种迎合于大众、或者强求大众认可的翻译观点，而是一个值得探讨的方向。本文对比了由印度马拉地语译为英语的两个诗歌版本（其中一个版本是由诗

歌马拉地语的创作者翻译)。通过分析,本文对两个版本诗歌的高低做出了评价,由此认为,领悟源语言精神的翻译方式优于小心翼翼的文学翻译方式。

关键词:翻译;本雅明;阿朗·科拉卡尔

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Translation is premised on the plurality of languages. We take this plurality for granted, as we do with racial or cultural or religious difference, though we know, as with those other kinds of difference, that what is good in principle as part of the diversity of life, can be difficult to deal with in practice. The Hebrew myth of the Tower of Babel claims that all humanity once spoke one language. This unity was made into a plurality by God, for reasons that differ from one interpretation of the myth to another. The result was a babble of tongues. Mutual unintelligibility across languages is the plight of large portions of humanity. That is where translation comes in, as a form of intervention, which we need, regardless of whether it can ever succeed fully.

A language is a way of making sense of the world. To learn a language is to learn to look at the world through its lens. In an obvious sense we all live in the same world; but almost equally obviously, how we see that world, and what we have learnt to look for in that world, are related to the language that mediates between perception and cognition. It is likely therefore that while a large of part of the world of reference encompassed by a language may be shareable with or similar to that encompassed by another language, there are innumerable vital differences.

One way of making the distinction is to think of the somewhat simplified but useful distinction between denotation and connotation. Signification is more than a matter of denotation, since it is also connotative, and in ways that might be unique to a language and its correlation to a whole schema that we might call its linguistic culture (which would include the ways in which a language is tied up with a community's beliefs, values, historically recurrent concerns and preoccupations).

In such contexts, translation serves as a kind of bridge over which whatever can be conveyed of one linguistic world is carried across to the other linguistic world. If communication were a matter of mere denotation, the relations between words and what they refer to might be conveyed across that bridge readily. But how words constitute reference is complex. Language is never simply denotative. The figurative has a huge role to play in its everyday use, and even more so in its literary use. That is what makes translation difficult, and the difficulty increases in direct proportion to how much of the significance of what the words convey depends on connotations specific to the language, its unique properties as a medium, and its unique angle on the world of experience. Translation as a task or goal thus raises a number of questions. How does the material expressed in one language find re-expression best or ideally in another language? Given

that a literary form such as poetry signifies meaning in a complex way, involving the interplay of elements at the levels of sound, rhythm, lexical and syntactic specificity, and figurative usage, how shall a translator balance the claims of the complex interplay of elements in looking for equivalents in the target language? What does one remain loyal to in translating from one linguistic world to another?

Let us consider an answer to such questions from the distant past before turning to more recent views: *An Open Letter on Translating* (1530), by Martin Luther. He writes:

I also know that in *Rom. 3*, the word “solum” is not present in either Greek or Latin text - the papists did not have to teach me that - it is fact! The letters s-o-l-a are not there. And these knotheds stare at them like cows at a new gate, while at the same time they do not recognize that it conveys the sense of the text - if the translation is to be clear and accurate, it belongs there.... In all these phrases, this is a German usage, even though it is not the Latin or Greek usage. (Luther, Web)

“Clear and accurate”, says Luther, and therein lies the problem. The notion of clarity, like accuracy, is not a purely lexical matter, though it might seem so at first glance. Both are thoroughly implicated in the interpretive aspect of translation, which is also a politicization of the relation between two cultures, as the robust polemics of the *Letter* makes plain. In the politics of translation, literalism is enforced by the “papists” because tradition as authority would have the translator treat each exact word and phrase as a true melding of intent and expression, of thought-feeling-idea and its vehicle of words. Luther would split the two: intention from expression, content from vehicle. All translation, in some sense, is transgression. Its defense, as in Luther, is that the translator aspires to remain true to what is believed to be the spirit of the original author’s intention, even though that the translator might choose to abandon the idea of finding exact equivalents to the letter of the original.

In the conventional view of translation, so long as the force of literalism pervades the field of translation, the words of the original carry the weight of something virtually sacrosanct: the source text is primary; the translation is merely a shadow or a copy in its margins, a form of scrupulous annotation. That is certainly true of many translations, whether of sacred or secular texts. But the matter is not that straightforward, as we can see when we turn once again to Luther:

Now when the angel greets Mary, he says: “Greetings to you, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.” Well up to this point, this has simply been translated from the simple Latin, but tell me is that good German? Since when does a German speak like that – being “full of grace”? One would have to think about a keg “full of” beer or a purse “full of” money. So I translated it: “You gracious one.” This way a German can at last think about what the angel meant by his greeting. Yet the papists rant about me corrupting the angelic greeting - and I still have not used the most satisfactory German translation. What if I had used the most satisfactory German and translated the salutation: “God says hello, Mary dear.” (for that is

what the angel was intending to say and what he would have said had he even been German!)
(Luther, Web)

Luther subscribes to what we might refer to as an equivalence or correspondence theory of translation. The original has to sound right in the translated language, and if that requires departures from the literal words or phrasing of the original, so be it. There is a long tradition of such translations in the English language, from Alexander Pope's translation of *The Iliad* (1715-1720) to Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1859). With the example of Ezra Pound's *Cathay* (1915) translations backing Robert Lowell's *Imitations* (1961), it has become customary for contemporary poets to essay "translations" of works in languages that the poet may not be master in, which pass muster as "adaptations" or "versions".

They justify themselves primarily by this criterion: that the rhythm, colloquial feel and idiomatic usage has to feel "right" in the language of translation. The answer to "how to translate?" has to be intuitive rather than programmatic; less a matter of sitting with a dictionary than trusting your instinct for how it sounds in the language of translation. Any assessment of the relative success or failure of such types of translation is anticipated by Luther in the invocation of an interpretive community. It is they who speak the kind of German he aspires to for his translation that are the apt judges of whether his choices work or not, in German; though the issue of the relation between source and target language would have to depend on the judgment of the truly bilingual reader.

Let me turn now to a less distant German author for an approach to translation that has more to say than the correspondence theory of translation, or rather, has a twist to add to the theory: Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). The central idea of his essay, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", which was written in 1916, but remained unpublished during his lifetime, is in the nature of an unusual claim. It argues that the representational nature of language is the consequence of a fall from an originary correspondence between language as a system of names and the essences of things as created by God. This idea also provides a foundation for a later and better known essay by Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" (1921), which prefaced his translation of Baudelaire into German.

The argument of the 1916 essay articulates a belief that language only expresses that in relation to the world of things which is expressible in and as language: in this sense, language only expresses itself. This leads to the claim that "Within all linguistic formation a conflict is waged between what is expressed and expressible and what is inexpressible and unexpressed" (Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 66). Language names a correspondence between the thing named and the ability of the name to express its linguistic being as perceived and perceivable by the human mind, while "The absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God" (*Selected Writings* 68). Language is thus always already "the translation of the nameless into name" (*Selected Writings* 70), and its history measures "the decay of the blissful Adamite spirit of language" into "prattle." The plurality of languages is a symptom of the Fall (*Selected Writings* 71), an enslavement in "the Tower of Babel" (*Selected Writings* 72).

This is what we could describe as a mystical view of language. According to Benjamin, in the creation myth shared between the Judaic and Christian systems, God created the things of the world in such a way that the innate being of each created entity was expressible through a primordial language. Adam and Eve spoke that language, and as in all pagan and post-pagan myths, Adam was the first namer, the first poet who spoke the true nature of the being of all created things. With the Fall, mankind lost touch with this primordial language, and resorted to a babble of other tongues. So when one approaches the task of translation, in the Benjaminian version of fable, one can think of source and target language as both part of the babble: languages A, B, etc. in a series that relates only distantly with the lost original, language X, the primordial language. Translation becomes not the task of providing a system of equivalences for language A in language B but of inferring how the text in language A might have had its being in language X, and then work out how that being might find embodiment in language B.

It might be stressed that Benjamin uses the Jewish-Christian fable as a figure of speech, an etiological myth that turns his back towards the story of how language(s) might have evolved as the human race spread over space and time from some mythically singular source, in order to face the source itself, and to treat it as a loss which can only partially be recuperated. Again, I would read a figurative element as central to his quasi-mystical-magical emphasis: not a Biblical Fall but a genuine loss of correspondence between things and concepts, between objects and their true names. In this perspective, the plurality of languages is a tragic fate. In that context the task of translation is amelioration and restoration. It is the recuperative idea that there was once a singular Language-X that makes it possible for him to speak of reaching from Language 1 to Language 2 via translation only by imagining what that utterance might have been in the lost Language X. This may seem to many a strange idea; but to others, it can have the power to suggest deeper reflection on what is under way when translates, as we say, from one language into another, as remarked eloquently by George Steiner:

Echoing Mallarmé, but in terms obviously derived from the Kabbalistic and gnostic tradition, Benjamin founds his metaphysics of translation on the concept of “universal language”. Translation is both possible and impossible—a dialectical antinomy characteristic of esoteric argument. This antinomy arises from the fact that all known tongues are fragments, whose roots, in a sense which is both algebraic and etymological, can only be found in and validated by “die reine Sprache”. This “pure language”—at other points in his work Benjamin will refer to it as the Logos which makes speech meaningful but which is contained in no single spoken idiom—is like a hidden spring seeking to force its way through the silted channels of our differing tongues. At the “messianic end of their history” (again a Kabbalistic or Hasidic formulation), all separate languages will return to their source of common life. (Steiner 66)

The invocation of a third, missing or lost, language by Benjamin is not a mere mystical fantasy. More recently, Paul Ricoeur brings it up in his lecture on translation:

In a good translation, the two texts, source and target, must be matched with one another through a third non-existent text. Indeed, the problem is saying the same thing or claiming to say the same thing in two different ways. But this same thing, this identical meaning is not given anywhere in the manner of a third text, whose status would be that of the third man in Plato's *Parmenides*, a third party between the idea of man and the human examples that are thought to participate in the real and true idea. In the absence of this third text, where the actual meaning would lie, the semantic original, there is only one recourse, i.e. the critical reading of a few, if not polyglot then at least bilingual, specialists, critical reading equivalent to a private retranslation, where our capable reader redoes the work of translation, for his own purposes, taking on, in turn, the test of translation and meeting with the same paradox of an equivalence without adequacy. (Ricoeur 7)

Having made room for a Benjaminian view of translation, I would like to turn from concepts of translation to the practice of translation. One of the ways in which the usefulness or limits of concepts can be clarified is by applying them to multiple translations of the same text. In the following case, the original poem is in an Indian language, Marathi, which is a derivative from Sanskrit, and is spoken by over 20 million speakers in the western central portions of the Indian peninsula. The author was an Indian poet and artist, Arun Kolatkar (1931-2004). And here are two translations. One of them is by the poet, and you can take a guess at which one.

Translation 1

Pictures from a Marathi Alphabet Chart

Pineapple. Mother. Pants. Lemon.
Mortar. Sugarcane. Ram.
How secure they all look
each ensconced in its own separate square.

Mango. Anvil. Cup. Ganapati. Cart. House.
Medicine Bottle. Man Touching his Toes.
All very comfortable,
they all know exactly where they belong

Spoon. Umbrella. Ship. Frock.
Watermelon. Rubberstamp. Box. Cloud. Arrow.
Each one of them seems to have found
Its own special niche, a sinecure.

Sword. Inkwell. Tombstone. Longbow. Watertap.
Kite. Jackfruit. Brahmin. Duck. Maize.

Their job is to go on being themselves.
And their appointment is for life.

Yajnya. Chariot. Garlic. Ostrich.
Hexagon. Rabbit. Deer. Lotus. Archer.
No, you don't have to worry.
There's going to be no trouble in this peaceable kingdom.

The mother will not pound the baby with a pestle.
The Brahmin will not fry the duck in garlic.
That ship will not crash against the watermelon.

If the ostrich won't eat the child's frock,
The archer won't shoot an arrow in Ganapati's stomach.
And as long as the ram resists the impulse
of butting him from behind

what possible reason
could the Man-Touching-his-Toes have
to smash the cup on the tombstone?

Translation 2

The Alphabet

anvil arrow bow box and brahmin
cart chariot cloud and compost heap
are all sitting in their separate squares

corn cup deer duck and frock
ganesh garlic hexagon and house
all have places of their own

inkpot jackfruit kite lemon and lotus
mango medicine mother old man and ostrich
are all holding their proper positions

pajamas pineapple rabbit and ram
sacrifice seal spoon and sugarcane
won't interfere with each other

sword tap tombstone and umbrella
 warrior watermelon weight and yacht
 have all found their eternal resting place

the mother won't put her baby on the compost heap
 the brahmin won't season the duck with garlic
 the yacht won't hit the watermelon and sink

unless the ostrich eats the baby's frock
 the warrior won't shoot an arrow into ganesh's belly
 and if the ram doesn't knock down the old man

why would he need to smash the cup on the tombstone?

I propose to compare the two translations to highlight a few salient features of contrast. I will then relate them to the original poem, and then propose my own subjective assessment, from which one can derive some implications for a Benjaminian perspective on the practice of translation.

First, a few words about the poem and how it goes about its task of provoking and tantalizing as well as puzzling and frustrating the reader. It is an experimental and postmodernist work: it is self-aware and intent on not presenting itself to the reader for straightforward understanding either as a narrative or as the expression of feelings or ideas about anything that can be pinned down neatly as an obvious topic or a self-evident theme. It functions as a thought-bubble, at once whimsical and serious, about how a child is taught the alphabet with the aid of a chart that link individual sounds with objects and their associated commonplace images. The randomness of collocations is the starting point for a series of reflections on the collisions that could occur in life or in social ordering if objects escaped the rectangular spaces that contain them in the chart and were to mix, as in real life they sometimes do. The resulting possibilities would disturb the social ordering and the neat roles society assigns individuals, of which the chart is part. The poem reflects on how even the process of teaching a child the sounds of the alphabet can at once both help engender a sense of order to society and reveal a potential for its disturbance.

Turning to the translations T1 and T2, we begin by noting that the sequence of sounds represented in the chart refers to the vowels and consonants of Marathi. The normal practice is to start with the vowel sequence, and then proceed to groups of consonants. In this respect T1 sticks close to the original: the objects referred to are precisely what the poet sees in the chart which he and T1 transcribe. In contrast, T2 departs from the actual nouns-objects of the chart and the Marathi original, and substitutes its own series, which is the alphabetical sequence of the English language. This contrast helps us point to a significant aspect of translation as a set of choices each entailing abandoning some element of correspondence to the original in order to keep close to some other element of the original. T1 is literal and scrupulous in sticking to the vowel-consonant

sequence of the Marathi original, which follows the chart, which conforms to the practice of teaching Marathi in school in India. T2 abandons that in order to create an equivalence that might be easier for readers of English to grasp, who are likely to be unfamiliar with Marathi and its phonological pedagogy.

Thus the choice of the alphabet sequence of English in T2 is unfaithful to the original in literal terms. It does so in order to remain faithful to it in a different sense: in recreating a corresponding sequence that will make as much sense to the reader in English as the original does to the speaker of Marathi. It might also be worth adding that in formal terms, T1 is mostly in 4-line stanzas, with lines of varying length, while T2 is in 3-line stanzas with a more regular line-length. That makes T1 much longer than T2; or put another way, T2 appears more economical. T1 uses standard punctuation, whereas T2 largely abjures punctuation. The effect produced by T1 is more conventional; that produced by T2 is more modernist in feel, and neater in pattern and rhythm. Given that the original poem is in 3-line stanzas, and uses no punctuation, T2 might be said to fare better at representing this aspect of the original.

There is much more that merits analysis, both as interpretation and comparison between T1 and T2, but I intend to stop with the analysis at this point in order to propose a value judgment which implies a view of translation. T2 works better, in my opinion, than T1, both as a poem in English, and in capturing the spirit of the original which T1 loses sight of though it remains faithful to every lexical-semantic nuance of the original. Ironically, while T1 observes the letter of the law, T2 captures the spirit. Where does that evaluation leave us when it comes to Benjamin's idea of a ghostly third entity that might have a role to play in mediating between the original and the translation? A literal translation that cannot quite capture the spirit of the original may have its own fidelity to uphold, but when a translation captures the spirit of the original, we are likely to be far more generous in the license we give it to depart from the letter of the original.

It is tempting to object that the notion of a primordial language is a needless fiction. But even Luther implies a language X, since what he translates is not the letter but the spirit of an original. When the entire ensemble of linguistic-cultural options in English (word-choice, idiom, colloquialism, rhyme, pun, onomatopoeia, allusion, joke) has to be provided an equivalent ensemble in Marathi, does Kolatkar's practice imply anything like a language X that could be the tacit ultimate arbiter or criterion of translational adequacy between English and Marathi? Or can one compare the Marathi version to the English original and work out how the detail matches up to, or fails to match up to the original, without the need of any mediatory and ghostly reference to, or invocation of, a language X? As remarked by Andrew Benjamin of what we have here called language X, "In being both summoned, yet not present, it marks the necessarily incomplete nature of any translation" ("The Absolute as Translatability" 120-21). My view of the matter is that Benjamin's idea helps understand how the work of translation progresses by making of the translator's intuitions and choices as guided by the spirit of the absent third to which both source and target text point, a language X that exists as the idea of language which enables the practice of translation.

Notes

See *The Book of Genesis*, chapter 11.

See Kolatkar 1993: 68-9.

See Dharwadker 1994: 116.

See Patke 2006: 202-06.

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