Translation and the Human Language Diversity

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> [1]And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.
> [2]And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.
> [3]And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for morter.
> [4]And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top *may reach* unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.
> [5]And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.
> [6]And the LORD said, Behold, the people *is* one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.
> [7]Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.
> [8]So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.
> [9]Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth (*The Holy Bible Genesis 11* 1909: 14).

Translation, as a universal and millenary activity, is intimately linked to the biblical episode of the language dispersal, when God punished men for their pride by scattering them over the face of the Earth. Thus, through the divine will, men were deprived of the unique language gift, being thrown into a diversity of languages. The topic of translation seen as a necessity or as an interdiction, as a possible or as an impossible task has vividly been debated upon over the years. The Myth of the Tower of Babel comprises both the arguments in favour of translation, the latter being the common denominator which mediates the communication among people, and the arguments against translating i.e. the divine curse that forbids trespassing the linguistic barriers. The word is sacred and mysterious, bearing a divine revelation which cannot be transferred from one language into another

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without becoming null. In his seminal work *After Babel*[1], George Steiner refers to the fact that each speaker undertakes a dialogue with himself and with God – „Sibi autem loquator et Deo". The discourse authenticity excludes translation, which would represent, in this case, a blasphemy. Translating means transgressing the divine will, given that, out of the desire of recovering the pre-Babelian language, efforts are being made in order to surmount the frontiers that were established through the creation of more languages. Thus, the act of translating ignores the interdiction of communicating a meaning, which, theoretically, is inaccessible or too complex.

Despite all that, translation has always been considered the natural response to the efforts of recovering the Adamic language. Dante Alighieri's study *De vulgari eloquentia*, that is largely debated upon by Umberto Eco in his *The Search for the Perfect Language*[2], focuses on the project of the "pure" language. People spoke a perfect language, prior to the Babelian accident – the Hebrew that Abraham and his predecessors spoke, a language where words were the image of the very nature of things themselves. Dante describes this language as a *forma locutionis* (Dante, *apud* Eco 2002: 39), in which Maria Corti, cited by the same Umberto Eco, sees the aggregate of principles peculiar to a universal grammar, the formal cause, the general principle configurating the lexical and morfo-syntactic structures of languages, that Adam progressively created, as he denominated things. Therefore, the emphasis falls not on a single language, but rather on a universal matrix of languages. After the *confusio linguarum* incident, this perfect *forma locutionis* – the one allowing the creation of languages capable of reflecting the very essence of things – had disappeared. The project of reconstructing the natural and universal Edenic language brings forth a new concept, i.e. the one of "the illustrious popular language", representing the *forma locutionis* model allowing the modern poet to attenuate the disastrous effects of the Babelian confusion. Dante's project aims at inventing the perfect modern and natural language, without, nevertheless, starting from lost models. He does not condemn the diversity of languages. On the contrary, he highlights the ability of the latter to re-create themselves, "their seemingly biological force" (Dante, *apud* Eco 2002: 42) of regenerating in time – the very principle of the linguistic creativity. Translation has a healing role – it has to cure the post-Babelian wound. George Steiner refers to the Messianic role of translation, since, just like Man's banishment from the Garden of Eden announced a future redemption, in the same manner translation has to respond to the moral and natural imperative of making possible again the linguistic unity. The cross the translator has to carry is, therefore, a heavy one, since s(he)constantly is the victim of his/ her own futile efforts of recovering a perfect language, the genius of which is impossible to infer and recreate in translated texts, which are never complete, always perfectible. The translator bears the stigma of his/ her incapability, of the insufficiency of his/ her endeavours, trying, through agonising retranslations, to get closer to perfection, fully aware, nevertheless, that s(he) will never achieve it. "There is only the

[1] I have used for this paper the 1983 Romanian version of the book i.e. *După Babel. Aspecte ale limbii şi traducerii*, Valentin Negoiţă and Ştefan Avădanei (transls.), Bucureşti, Editura Univers.

[2] I have used for this paper the 2002 Romanian version of the book i.e. *În căutarea limbii perfecte*, Dragoş Cojocaru (transl.), Iaşi, Editura Polirom.

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aspiration towards perfection through perfectibility", a verdict pronounced once more by Gelu Ionescu, in the *Forward* section of Magda Jeanrenaud's *Universaliile traducerii* and also by the author herself, when she claims that, paradoxically, the translator must prove his/ her ability of "accepting the imperfection as being inscribed, by definition, congenitally, within the very translation undertaking" (Jeanrenaud 2006: 269, my translation[3]).

The issue of imperfection is subsumed to the untranslatability postulate, which, starting the 15th century, has ever more attentively been focused upon by scholars, the main causing factor being the linguistic plurality itself. The principle upon which the untranslatability thesis laid its foundations is the fact that it is impossible to reach a perfect symmetry between two different semantic systems. Two linguistic systems cannot have absolute coverage surfaces. The argument of the linguistic diversity must be approached from a Humboldtian perspective, Wilhelm von Humboldt seeing in the plurality of languages a diversity of ways of organizing and interpreting the outer reality. Historical languages are the result of a becoming in time, of the individual national experiences. Each of these languages is a manifestation of a national *forma mentis*, of a spiritual force that is unique and unrepeatable. There have been voices claiming that the act of translation is not a process the success of which should be measurable – the transfer of a content from one language into another is not possible. The spontaneous and dynamic genius of a language – the speech itself – cannot be caught and rendered. A language – a manifestation of the human faculty of communicating through language – is a living organism, each saying being without precedent. Translating would thus mean superficially reconstructing unrepeatability. In his turn, Walter Benjamin considers that untranslatability does not consist in the difficulty of rendering in a certain target language a text that was encoded in a given source language, but that it is the decoding that raises obstacles. The "evanescence" of the meanings of words is largely responsible for the misery Jose Ortega y Gasset refers to in his essay *The Misery and the Splendor of Translation*[4]. It's the very "residue of untranslatability over which no translator, good or bad, will ever triumph" that J.-R. Ladmiral mentions in his work *Traduire: théorèmes pour la traduction* (Ladmiral 1994: 36).

The untranslatability postulate is indeed deeply rooted in the Humboldtian theories regarding the diversity of languages and, therefore, in the existence of countless ways of organizing and interpreting the extra-linguistic world. The philosopher illustrates language as a particularization of the general faculty of language i.e. an expression of the spiritual force of nations, but also as a creative principle, *energeia*, source of the national specificity. Languages, which are in a continuous process of becoming, bearing, therefore, a given historical experience, provide pre-established visions of the world to the speakers of a particular space. Each language bears the imprint of a certain national genius, an individual configurating principle, an unrepeatable internal form. Translation, under such circumstances, would suppose only surface equivalences, the loss being far greater

[3] All translations mine, unless stated otherwise.

[4] I have used for this paper the 1972 Romanian version of the essay i.e. *Mizeria şi splendoarea traducerii*, Andrei Ionescu (transl.) in „Secolul 20", no. 8, p. 117–130.

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than the gains. Each language has its own way of decupating the extra-linguistic reality, of providing images that are always individual, always complete. Reality is analyzed differently, the semantic descriptions of the same physical reality being different from one civilization to another. The Romanian word "pliant" (leaflet), designating a *folded* ("pliat", in Romanian) sheet of paper providing information on a particular topic, is translated into French as "dépliant", designating, therefore, a piece of paper that is *un-folded*. These semantic descriptions regard not only terms of an immediate designation, but also words that refer to different entities, which are known (and recognized) as "indigenous" in some cultural communities and as strange phenomena, in others. This is the case of the Romanian word "oaie" (sheep), which designates, for the Romanians, both the animal and its meat. However, in English, the animal is referred to by means of the word "sheep", while the sheep meat is called "mutton". The same happens also in the case of the pair "porc" (Romanian)/ "swine" – "pork" (English). If the French eat "un rôti de boeuf", Romanians designate the same dish by means of the construction "o friptură de vacă".

The colours of the solar spectrum, which are interpreted in various ways, according to the languages taken into consideration, represent another situation in which languages provide different interpretations to the extra-linguistic reality. Thus, a distinction is made in Hebrew between white, black and red, but a single word is used for designating green and yellow, red being the only colour bearing a connotative value. In Sanskrit some terms have symbolic values, red standing for action, while white is the colour peculiar to contemplation. The words that designate dull colours are associated to the wind, while those designating bright colours are associated to the water. Greek disposes of a single word to designate grey, brown (*ochros*) and yellow-green. It is still in Greek that a distinction is made between vivid colours (red and white) and ill-fated colours (black). A distinction is made, in Latin, between bright colours and faded colours (*albus*/ *candidus*, *ater*/ *niger*). Chinese disposes of five terms designating five musical tonalities, five different flavours and five cardinal points (including the zenith). We can therefore use B. L. Worf's words in order to render the Humboldtian theory regarding the linguistic pluriperspectivism on the same extra-linguistic reality, as a particularization of the faculty of human language: language is, above all, a classification and a reorganization of the continuous flux of the sensitive experience, classification and reorganization that result in a particular structuring of the world (Worf, *apud* Mounin 1963: 46).

The intransmissibility of the national genius equally regards cultural assymmetries, given that historical languages develop a special liaison with the extra-linguistic reality in which they develop. The obstacles that translators must surmount regard, therefore, also the words that designate realities that are inexistent in the target linguaculture. The examples provided by Eugene A. Nida are illustrating for this case. *The Parable of the Sower* can be difficult to understand and, therefore, untranslatable for the Indians living in the desert, who do not spread the seeds, but put each seed into an individual hole, in the sand (Nida, *apud* Mounin 1963: 61). In the same way, rendering the idea of four seasons in a language as Maya, which is spoken in a two seasons tropical area, cannot result in appropriate translations. The

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names the Eskimos give to the various types of snow or the many names of the bread assortments peculiar to the Aix-en-Provence French region cannot be smoothly transferred into Romanian, given that the realities they designate are not familiar to Romanians, being, therefore, very difficult or even impossible to translate.

The endeavour of translating poetry is an extreme case of untranslatability, which has generated vivid debates, over the years. Poetry, the very expression of the essence of a language, cannot be translated from one language into another without considerable loss either at the level of content or at the level of style. The old dichotomy opposing *literal translation* to *literary* (*free*) *translation*, *faithfulness* to *elegance*, the *letter* to the *spirit* of the text to be translated is nowhere more obvious than in the case of poetry translation. When translating poetry, one cannot simply transpose, but (s)he re-creates. A translator must have the gift of writing poetry, s(he) must feel the genius of the source language and re-express the spirit of the latter in the target language – "in order to translate from poets, one must prove to be a poet", as Edmond Cary himself puts it (Cary, *apud* Mounin 1963: 14). From this perspective, the translational phenomenon is an art rather than an activity governed by rules and expectations.

However, translation is always possible due to the cultural and linguistic universals – historical languages are individual cases of a *lingua universalis*. Universalism is, therefore, one essential property of natural languages. Ioan Kohn considers that, although there is a plethora of lexical gaps in any source language as compared to the corresponding target languages, one can always translate, the untranslatability postulate existing only in theory, given that each language bears a certain expressive potential which provides surprising translation solutions. It is the adjusting capacity of every language that Eugene A. Nida refers to in his article *Problems of Bible Translation* (Kohn 1983: 70). Ioan Kohn puts forth a binary classification of universals, highlighting, on the one hand, the universals of humanity as a cultural species and the linguistic universals, on the other hand. The first category includes the deep structures, which reflect the identity of the rationalizing processes, leaving aside racial and cultural differences. People inhabit the same planet, the communication having proved necessary from the beginning of life on Earth, given that it is based on sharing a common somatic experience. The cosmogonic universals theory responds to the scheme of languages seen as extensions of the Adamic pure language, being in a relation of complementarity to one another. As regards the linguistic universals, they concern the (structural) elements that are common to all the languages. The verb or the noun, to take only these examples, represent linguistic constants in almost all the extant languages. The conclusion is that natural languages – intelligible and translatable, in their essence – converge, via translation, towards an initial language, as manifestations of the re-creation of a prime principle:

> The individualization within the universal concordance is so admirable in [a] language, that one can rightfully claim that the whole mankind owns a single language, but also that each person owns a language of his/ her own (Humboldt 2008: 87).

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Abstract

Translation has so far been looked at as both a possible and an impossible task. The myth of the Tower of Babel provides the arguments in favour of the act of translation, but also those against translating – Adam's language became a diversity of languages that need being bridged between, just as it is also true that translation is a blaspheme, since God's will of separating languages is ignored. Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory on the diversity of human language is also approached, since it provides one of the most important arguments supporting the untranslatability postulate – languages are *energeia* i.e. expressions of national geniuses that cannot be transferred from one language to another without being damaged. At the same time, it is still Humboldt who claims the existence of a universal concordance. Individual languages are, in fact, segments of a *lingua universalis* and the much-debated upon (cultural and linguistic) universals are the very proof of this fact.

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