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Sull'in-traducibilità
Trasferimenti, moltiplicazioni, différence

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**Translation doesn't exist:
Translation exists.
A sonic laboratory of coexistence**

Daniela Allocca

Abstract

In *The Translation Zone*, specifically in the chapter on “Translation with No Original: Scandals of textual reproduction”, Emily Apter deals with the issue of translation, linking it to the idea of technical reproducibility. She suggests that in Benjamin’s work there are two issues, the technical reproducibility of the work of art and its translatability, which are somehow connected. What is of concern is that the two works coexist, or rather that a “vital connection” (Benjamin) is detectable between the source text and the translated text, a connection that stems from the voice of the author mixing with the voice of the translator. The implications of such a perspective are strongly ecological (Cronin) and political (Spivak). This article therefore traces the theoretical discourses that highlight the relational, processual, and dialogic dimensions of translation in regard to ideas, conceptions, coexistence of spaces from Cassirer to eco-translation by Cronin.

Champagne that is not produced in Champagne is not champagne.

(M. Cronin, 2017, p. 48)

Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

(G. Stein, 1922, pp. 429-432)

1. Translation and the “possibility of being together”

The theory of relativity, Heisenberg’s *uncertainty principle*¹, designed our theoretical-scientific universe based on fragility and instability, in order to deconstruct the certainties of a thought that was no longer useful. The century had opened in an unstable climate, which was read as a reflection of the old world collapsing. Alternatively, it could have been read as a desire to destabilise the current theoretical discourse with the aim of bringing forward the place where *silent things speak*².

While science confronts the paradigm of uncertainty and instability on the political front, the discourse on integrity and purity is reinforced on the cultural front, which is reflected in a monolingualistic space that does not translate the plurivocity underlying our cultural structure. One of the theoretical reflections that most successfully opens up cultural spaces to a multi-centred dy-

¹ Heisenberg (1958).

² von Hofmannsthal (1902), p. 21: “die stumme Dinge zuweilen zu mir zu sprechen”, my translation, unless otherwise indicated.

namism is Cassirer's dynamic definition of spaces. Cassirer states that an order of the possible coexistence of things is evoked in contemporary thinking about the arts. Recent examples being the workshop "How to Be Together" at the Santarcangelo Festival 2021³ or that of the Venice Architecture Biennale 2021 curated by Hashim Sarkis "How will we live together"⁴.

Describing the order of space by means of Leibniz's thought, Cassirer takes dynamic space to be further understood as the continuous remodelling given by the coexistence and relationship with other structures:

Space does not possess a given structure that is fixed once and for all; rather, it acquires this structure only by virtue of the general context of meaning within which its construction takes place. The function of meaning is the primary and determining moment, the spatial structure the secondary and dependent moment. [...] What connects all these spaces of different sense-character and of different sense-provenance, what connects the mythical, the aesthetic, the theoretical space, is merely a purely formal determination, which is expressed most sharply and concisely in Leibniz's definition of space as the "possibility of being together" and

³ Santarcangelo (2021): "With *How To Be Together* we look at possible forms of commonality, ways of reaffirming our own being multiple, a coexistence of identities as multitudes, and the necessity of living together relying on each other's entanglements and interdependence, as a tentacular and boneless superorganism". Online: <https://www.santarcangelofestival.com/en/show/villaggio-temporaneo-ecosostenibile/> [last seen on 13.09.2022].

⁴ Biennale (2021).

as the order in possible being together (*ordre des coëxistences possible*).⁵

What is the relationship between this definition and the world of translation? What does it mean to accept the *order of possible co-existences* in the multi-lingual space of our everyday life? What is the relationship with the *Poetik der (Un)übersezbarkeit*, suggested by the editors of this book? Might it mean accepting the co-existence of translatability and untranslatability, opening up theories to a systemic, relational and non exclusionary approach? Is there translatability without untranslatability?

In the vision opened up by Benjamin in his text on translation, translation is a space in which the existences of the different translated texts coexist. In his view, the act of translating is not seen as the translation of an “original” text into a new (con)text, but rather what is translated is the *translatability* of the text:

It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected

⁵ Cassirer (1931), p. 102: “Der Raum besitzt nicht eine schlechthin gegebene, ein für allemal feststehende Struktur; sondern er gewinnt diese Struktur erst kraft des allgemeinen Sinnzusammenhangs, innerhalb dessen sein Aufbau sich vollzieht. Die Sinnfunktion ist das primäre und bestimmende, die Raumstruktur das sekundäre und abhängige Moment. [...]. Was alle diese Räume von verschiedenem Sinn-Charakter und von verschiedener Sinn-Provenienz, was den mythischen, den ästhetischen, den theoretischen Raum miteinander verknüpft, ist lediglich eine rein formelle Bestimmung, die sich am schärfsten und prägnantesten in Leibniz’ Definition des Raumes als der ‘Möglichkeit des Beisammen’ und als der Ordnung in möglichen Beisammen (*ordre des coëxistences possible*) ausdrückt”.

with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original. We may call this connection a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital connection. Just as the manifestation of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life.⁶

The concept introduced by Benjamin of a translation that almost reinforces the possibility of a life “after” the original, reminds us that translation is a praxis that takes place in the distance, thanks to the distance. Antoine Bermann returns and performs this concept when he thinks of translation as “l’au-berge du lointain”⁷. The configuration created by Benjamin’s thought interpreted by Bermann highlights how translation can be seen as the product of the relationship between text to be translated and translators, or the space created by the presence of translation that coexists, revives, and creates a vital connection with its “original”. Emily Apter takes up and reinforces this concept in *The translation zone* by guiding us along the links between war and translation, between translatability and untranslatability,

⁶ Benjamin (1923), p. 71.

⁷ Berman (1999).

and the necessity of translation as a potential site of expression of what the text already contains in itself⁸. Translation is a co-creation that co-exists with the original and can enhance the original itself, not by adding or removing something, but rather by constructing a space within which the translated works are, as Haraway would say, “staying with” the original and with all the “trouble” this coexistence entails⁹. This is also linked to the concept of code and of coding, which are inherently linked to that of life. The discovery of DNA made this clear: the code is a complex of information that tells us what to do, how to get a certain shape, and therefore it is a highly productive tool. Haraway herself likens the concept of crocheting to that of code:

The code is so simple: crocheted models of hyperbolic planes achieve their ruffled forms by progressively increasing the number of stitches in each row. The emergent vitalities of this woolly experimental life-form take diverse corporeal shape as crafters increase the numbers from row to row irregularly, oddly, whimsically, or strictly to see what forms they could make – not just any forms, but crenulated beings that take life as marine critters of the vulnerable reefs.¹⁰

Here too it is a matter of vital forms, in this case the code makes it possible for this vital form to manifest itself, it is the model followed, translation may

⁸ Apter (2006).

⁹ Haraway (2016).

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

indeed need to be transformed.

As translation makes use of the transformative principle by supplanting the principle of equivalence, it unfolds its potential as a device capable of communicating and empowering disciplines¹¹. We can therefore also unravel the potential of this theoretical tool on the ecological front by assuming that richness in language as well as linguistic and cultural differences already represent an ecosystem to be taken care of and that cultivating multilingualism and translation already represent ecological practices, but we will come back to this in the course of this essay.

Returning to Benjamin's text, therein he uses various images to expound concepts related to translation. Translation is represented as a "tangent" that "touches a circle", i.e., the text to be translated, "lightly and at but one point, [...] only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course"¹²; two elements that, upon their first encounter, will never meet again. Hence, this describes the relationship between the two texts in the translation whereby the two texts are in or draw different directions. Also, Deleuze and Guattari in their famous text on Kafka insist on the difference between languages and on the relationship between languages. What can be said in one language cannot be said in another, and the whole of what can be said and what cannot be said necessarily varies according to the languages and the relationships that are estab-

¹¹ Bachmann-Medick (2009), pp. 238-283.

¹² Benjamin (1923), p. 80.

lished between them¹³.

The exercise of translation is therefore an exercise in difference, in the balance between what can be led to the other side and what cannot be led. Cultivating translation means cultivating difference. Very often, however, the practice of translation leads to a blurring of differences by way of the economic logic of translatability at any cost imposed by the capitalist economy of the digital world and well demonstrated by Michael Cronin in his *Eco-Translation*¹⁴ and even earlier in other terms by Spivak¹⁵. Where the paradigm of translatability resets the difference to zero, the translator has not achieved their task, there is no translation but mere transport, whereas translation always implies a transformation. ‘Champagne’ cannot be translated because it cannot be transformed but only transported¹⁶.

Precisely because of this series of variants, translation imposes spaces for transformation between languages, that in other words could be “the translator’s task” to put into practice. The tension is therefore between taking care of a space of differences, a space of negotiation, and establishing a space in which “negotium” limits negotiation to mere transportation.

¹³ Deleuze, Guattari (1975).

¹⁴ Cronin (2017).

¹⁵ Spivak (1998).

¹⁶ Cronin (2017), p. 49.

2. A glitch in the matrix¹⁷

The space of translation understood as coexistence also indicates that the translations share the same space as the original and it is only from their coexistence that a space of translatability derives. The awareness that the text has been translated does not conceal the fragility and potentiality of not being original, and does not pretend to illuminate, but lets the opacity shine through the language of the other¹⁸. The space of coexistence is also the space of untranslatability, where different translations can help to make intelligible the semantic field that a term or an expression embrace.

To pay homage to the title of this essay, a case worth highlighting is the (mis)translation of an apologue by Franz Kafka.

Von den Gleichnissen

Wenn der Weise sagt: „Gehe hinüber“, so meint er nicht, daß man auf die andere Seite hinübergehen solle, was man immerhin noch leisten könnte, wenn das Ergebnis des Weges wert wäre, sondern er meint irgendein sagenhaftes Drüben, etwas, das wir nicht kennen, das auch von ihm nicht näher zu bezeichnen ist und das uns also hier gar nichts helfen kann. Alle diese Gleichnisse wollen eigentlich nur sagen, daß das Unfaßbare unfaßbar ist, und

¹⁷ Ironic reference to Rodney Ascher's film (2021) investigating simulation theory.

¹⁸ Sgambati (2013).

das haben wir gewusst. Aber das, womit wir uns jeden Tag abmühen, sind andere Dinge. Darauf sagte einer: „Warum wehrt ihr euch? Würdet ihr den Gleichnissen folgen, dann wäret ihr selbst Gleichnisse geworden und damit schon der täglichen Mühe frei.“ Ein anderer sagte: „Ich wette, daß auch das ein Gleichnis ist.“ Der erste sagte: „Du hast gewonnen.“ Der zweite sagte: „Aber leider nur im Gleichnis.“ Der erste sagte: „Nein, in Wirklichkeit; im Gleichnis hast du verloren.“¹⁹

The title is translated into Italian in various ways: as *Delle similitudini* (On similes) by Ervino Pocar²⁰ and as *Delle metafore* (On Metaphors) by Giulio Schiavoni²¹. In English, it is translated as *On Parables*²². The knot in the translation of this apologue is tied precisely in the German term *Gleichnis*, because of its semantic ambiguity. The author puts the translators in a difficult position, as they will not be able to follow a single interpretation, a single sense, and pushes the reader to search for the sense, or into the space of the coexistence of the senses, of the different meanings that revolve around a single signifier, as revealed by many scholars who have studied the Prague writer²³. Indeed, ‘Gleichnis’ means: ‘image’, ‘metaphor’, ‘parable’, and also ‘symbol’, an image that stands for something else. The parable is a form of storytelling that

¹⁹ Kafka (1931a), p. 359.

²⁰ Kafka (1931b), p. 508.

²¹ Kafka (1931c), p. 322

²² Kafka (1931d), p. 11.

²³ Baioni (1962).

involves the use of a simile to simplify an argument, then to explain a moral teaching. Simultaneously, as a symbol the object is 'equal to', since the adjective 'gleich' means 'equal': it is an image that refers to another meaning, just as a 'code' does.

A picture of a man and a house and a tree of itself says nothing. (If a proper code or set of conventions is supplied, it might: but a code is not picturable, unless with the help of another unpicturable code. Codes ultimately have to be explained by something more than pictures; that is, either in words or in a total human context, humanly understood.) A script in the sense of true writing, as understood here, does not consist of mere pictures, of representations of things, but is a representation of an utterance, of words that someone says or is imagined to say.²⁴

In this sense, the metaphors, symbols, images, *Gleichnisse* of which Kafka speaks could be also a 'code'. The symbols he writes about, with which he writes, need a cross-reference to something else which will, however, always be a symbol. Following this line of thought, I have attempted a (mis)translation using the word: code.

On codes

Many complain that the words of sages are always merely codes, and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. (...) All these codes really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But this, which we struggle

²⁴ Ong (2005), pp. 82-83.

with every day, that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the codes yourselves, then you yourselves would become codes and with that be rid of all your daily cares.

One of them said: "I bet that is also a code".

The first said: "You have won".

The second said: "But unfortunately only in code".

The first said: "No, in reality; in code you lost".

Perhaps the translation moves by shifting rather than by superimposition of sense, the *Gleichnisse* then take us by assonance into the universe of continuous shifts, of 'glitch', that means 'error'. The word derived from *glitsh*, Yiddish for 'slippery place', and from *glitshn*, meaning 'to slide', or 'glide'.

Kafkaesque writing does not want to close itself off in one sense and instead opens up multiple ways of interpretation, therefore of translation. His writing oscillates between meanings because Kafka writes in code. One of Kafka's Italian translators, the poet and translation theorist Franco Fortini, writes about it:

In fact, his work is the only one in the modern world to have the *symbolon* as its declared object. To have the symbol as a subject, that is, to affirm a world in which everything and every word, every feeling and every reason are a sign, symptom and telltale of something else, and in which everything is irrevocably transformed, really means *writing on water* and therefore accepting an infinite gloss, an infinite series of translations.²⁵

²⁵ Fortini (1989), p. 264.

By accepting this invitation to infinite translation and moving beyond the limits of the semantic field, one has wandered in translation to open up new possibilities for interpretation, *Gleichnis* does not and will never mean *code*, but in this wandering between meanings, crossing this word that goes beyond meaning makes us interpreters of the text. Codes are also those of the Jewish tradition contained in the Pentateuch. The code refers to a knowledge that goes beyond the drawing and writing, beyond what is seen, to reveal a reality which is always inside the code: the truths of the code(s). Which allows for multiple meanings and interpretations to coexist. In transporting these words from one code to another, it is possible to go beyond. And yet these *Gleichnisse* will remain *Gleichnisse*, or rather metaphors, similes, because it is not the clarity of the image that is the fulcrum of this apologue, but perhaps the exercise of thinking that questions the possibility of going between worlds, forming the hiatus between codes that allows us to differentiate 'original' and translations.

In phonetics, a hiatus occurs when the meeting of two 'equal' vowels are both pronounced without contractions or elisions. This is a strategy for preserving word characteristics. This can be taken as parallel considering that the history of translation is connected to the history of colonisation therefore, in recent years, the fields of history and theory of translation have been working to make this space one of encounter and to avoid linguistic imperialism as much as possible. The valorisation of difference

has undoubtedly been the most prominent front and continues to be fought for in practices, especially of language care and translation, which play such an important role in our political life. “We do not win and we do not lose in reality”, as narrated in Kafka’s apologue, where the different versions coexist, where the possibilities implicit in the exchange and in the realization and also in the error, as Nasi also suggests, where error becomes a source of creation²⁶, in the *glitch* itself, are underlined as opposed to expecting perfection, a wholeness, a *purity*²⁷ that, as Benjamin warns, does not even belong to the original.

3. Acoustic communities

Many contemporary authors embrace translation as a performing device, as a creative tool starting from their daily experience. One of the privileged observation points is the field of contemporary German-language poetry, where multilingual poetry and concrete poetry are to be found in the research lines of many writers. Berlin is an emblematic case of this experimentation linked, on the one hand, to migratory flows and, on the other, to curatorial practices that, by adopting a perspective of decolonisation, favour the creation of these processes in the literary field and especially in the sphere of sound art²⁸. To

²⁶ Nasi (2021).

²⁷ Douglas (1966).

²⁸ Hodkison (2020).

name a few, projects such as *Weiter Schreiben/Write again* curated by the women's collective *Wir machen das* (founded by Annika Reich and Christiane Kühl) is a platform for literature and music, dedicated to authors from war-torn territories who work together with German-speaking writers²⁹; *Writers-in-Exile*, a Pen Club programme that funds writers for three years (through scholarships, residencies and publications) in order to support them while they live in exile³⁰; *VERSSchmuggel*, a format developed by the cultural centre Haus für Poesie Berlin³¹. All these institutional projects, together with a myriad of projects that move in the off scene and are also more or less mappable, constitute the core of a scene that centres around the poetic word. A poetic word often in translation, multilingual even translingual, and it is these scenes that create what we might call "acoustic communities".

The need to build ecological relationships even within cultural exchanges is given by the constant danger of colonising or being colonised by the language of the other. The term ecology means a relationship with the Other, and in his text *Eco-Translation*, Cronin often refers to the existence of the Other and the establishment of a relationship with the Other as the ecological essence of translation, as well as the search for processes of transformation

²⁹ In the framework of this project, works are presented in the original language and in translation; see Rinck (2018).

³⁰ Haslinger & Sperr (2017).

³¹ The format involves a workshop in which poets writing in German and poets from the host language meet and with the help of a language mediator translate each other from languages they do not know.

that embrace the ecological paradigm of reducing, recycling and reusing.

This is an element that can easily be highlighted particularly in certain performances where translation becomes a writing and performative device. Erika Fischer-Lichte in her *Ästhetik des Performativen*, translated into English with the emblematic title *The Transformative Power of Performance*, emphasizes the value of the theatrical act as an “event” in which the essential element is the relationship with the viewer, which ensures the performance the ability to transform the viewer themselves. The performance as it has been conceived since the 1960s/ 1970s is a work of relational art, in which the viewer is no longer passive but rather is seen as an active participant. The field of theatre and performance today is witnessing a shift, even beyond this axis, towards participation in the performance itself and even in its co-creation. For these reasons, Fischer-Lichte distinguishes between two different stages of what she calls the *performative turn*: first the performance-based self-conception of European culture at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and then a contemporary theory-driven *performative turn* in the humanities and social sciences³². With reference to the first stage, Fischer-Lichte³³ claims, while looking at the fin-de-siècle, that we can witness a transition from a predominantly textual to a largely performative culture. This transformation occurred primarily in the context of theatre and refers to the self-image

³² Bachmann-Medick (2009), p. 88.

³³ Fischer-Lichte (2012).

of European culture at the fin-de-siècle, when the understanding of text-based culture merged into an understanding of culture marked by exoticism, materiality, the theatricalization of everyday life as well as other performative dimensions. The second stage, which is still being enacted and started at some point around the 1980s, is characterized by a focus on the processuality of performance, and especially on the materiality of the media participating in the performance process³⁴. In this framework, there is a shift from Bachmann Medick's *Kultur als Text* (Culture as text)³⁵ to the idea that the text has been weakened in our time, while the notion of performance has been strengthened instead. Therefore, the idea of text as a performative element, as an open work, has been established. In this sense, the role of the translator is very close to those who on the one hand observe, listen and, on the other, actively participate in the creation. In the process of co-creation, what is created is a dialogue in which none of the parties can go forward independently of the other, therefore a dialogue on the same level. The aim is for there not to be any hierarchies between languages, between source and target text.

Additionally, there is a further interconnection between translation and the characteristics that performance has developed, in particular with those defined by Fischer Lichte in regard to the body. She highlights how it is thanks to Judith Butler that the idea of performativity in relation to the body has

³⁴ Wolf (2017).

³⁵ Bachmann-Medick (1996).

been embraced, since Butler claims that there are no fixed identities but that every identity is rather the product of a cultural construction. Hence, identity itself is “dramatic”: “By dramatic I mean [...] that the body is not merely matter but continual and incessant *materilizing* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but in some very key sense, one does one’s body”³⁶. This continuous construction of meaning is also what some contemporary authors offer by playing with language and using translation as a device in a very conscious way. An example can be found in *The Homophonic Translation*³⁷, a project by Cia Rinna, writer, poet and artist and Tomomi Hadachi, performer, composer, poet and visual artist.

In this performance we hear a Japanese-Finnish homophonic translation. Homophonic translation is a translation method based on sounds, not on meanings. In the classic homophonic translation, parody of the initial text often plays a role. In the case of the Rinna-Adachi duo, the work is one of sound experimentation and opens up the space of listening, of understanding, through which one becomes a co-translator. The translation comes to be thanks to analogies and slippages, the hand-to-hand between voices, between languages creates the scene. The importance of the audience, of the performative element, is also emphasised by Hilson in his essay *Homofonic Translation. Sense and Sound*: “The reading and listening public is still some way off accommodating itself to the former, enthralled as it

³⁶ Butler in Fischer Lichte (2012), p. 37.

³⁷ Rinna (2017); Rinna-Hadachi (2012).

is by being absorbed in sonic and textual elements rather than negotiating their delicious artifices”³⁸.

Revisiting the aforementioned task of the translator, who is in this case almost a voice-buster that has the task of recreating, reinterpreting with their own body the voice of the stranger, the foreign body, it is possible to affirm that: translating is not just a passage of information but an act of doubling, multiplication of languages, an “embodied” practice that builds living spaces of an acoustic dimension.

It is also an act of “smuggling”³⁹ foreign bodies, which sometimes is amplified when dealing with writers who work with multilingualism, writers who live in what Yildiz calls a *post-monolingual* condition⁴⁰. Coexistence here also becomes the coexistence of bodies in space, in the space of listening, where the laboratory of possibilities of being together becomes real, the codes that move beyond, besides, beneath turns the spectators into co-translators by creating a temporary community: an acoustic community.

If we do not accept the challenge, perhaps we are missing the chance of translation or of *untranslat-ability*, and thus of the resistance that one language can offer to another language. Resistance to translatability is intended as the praise of difference, or the space for invention of new solutions and balances in the target language in order to be translated. Thanks to this opposition or resistance, the transfor-

³⁸ Hilson (2013).

³⁹ Harvey (2016).

⁴⁰ Yildiz (2012).

mation implicit in the translation process becomes necessary. Might we consider this training for the time when we will all migrate because of climate disasters? Can these poets train us for a cosmopoetic dimension in which our senses are more open to the world?

These poets certainly help us rewrite the relationship of words, create new linguistic forms, lead us to exercise our intuition and thus help us rewrite our relationship with the world around us, proposing deeper empathy and more sympathetic models. Shifting and inverting, intensifying the senses in a continuous game of permutations, translations and transformations also train us to have new visions and adapt to rapid changes. The transformation implicit in the translation process and the linguistic space it creates crosses the boundaries of our communities, of our perception and of our ability to feel together.

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