

## As if: truth and fiction in translation theory

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### Abstract

Chesterman (1997) set out a “Popperian” theory of translation according to which translators aiming for the perfect translation resemble scientists seeking objective knowledge and truth. Yet Kuhn (1962/2012) showed how Popper’s account of science does not adequately describe periods of “normal” science, but only infrequent, “revolutionary,” paradigm changes. Moreover, both science and the theory and practice of translation depend on many useful “fictions” as defined by Hans Vaihinger (1924): constructs that are known to be false but which prove useful. Fictional notions to which translators often have recourse include lexical and conceptual equivalence; the translator as a coordinative bilingual with different conceptual representations in the source and target languages; and the implied reader. This article outlines how equivalence is only partial (as each word in a translation pair is likely to have aspects of meaning specific to one language); how proficient bicultural translators are likely to be compound bilinguals with a single integrated conceptual system; and how a reader without the translator’s conceptual system or mental lexicon will probably understand words differently. But as Venuti (2013) points out, translation involves exorbitant gain as well as irreparable loss, as it unavoidably releases meanings that work only in the translating language.

### Keywords

Translation, truth, fictions, equivalence, bilingualism

## 1. Chesterman's Popperian theory of translation

In quite a well-known book about translation theory and practice, Andrew Chesterman (1997, p. 2) set out a "Popperian theory of translation," in which translators, said to be aiming for the "perfect translation," are co-opted into Karl Popper's quest for objective scientific knowledge, inspired by the ideal goal of "truth" (p. 141). In this article I will argue that, on the contrary, both the theory and practice of translation depend to a great extent on "fictions," as the term is used by Hans Vaihinger in his *Philosophy of 'As If'* (1924). By fictions, Vaihinger meant ideas whose theoretical untruth, incorrectness or falsity is readily admitted, but which nonetheless have great practical utility. *Pace* Chesterman (1997), I will suggest that translation can rarely be assimilated to a quest for either truth or objective knowledge, and usually depends on widely shared translatorial fictions.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Scientific method: Kuhn vs. Popper

Many translators revise their translations, perhaps many times, hoping thereby to improve them. Chesterman (1997, p. 141) declares that this process "conforms exactly to Popper's schema of the evolution of scientific knowledge, inspired by the ideal goal of 'truth'". He bridges the gap between a *translation* (the rendering of a text in one language into another) and theoretical *knowledge* (or at least belief) by asserting that "a translation product is a theory, literally a view or a vision, of the source text," which can be continually revised "in a (theoretically) endless process inspired by the ideal of 'perfect translation.'" Chesterman adds that "The ultimate unattainability of both truth and perfection is irrelevant" (p. 141), and implicitly disparages "the positivist idea of a truth-out-there, something objective and absolute" (p. 10), but without abandoning the notion of truth *tout court*. Yet even if we accept the redefinition of a translation as a theory of the source text, we are not obliged to endorse Chesterman's Popperian concepts of "tentative theory, error elimination, and the evolution of objective knowledge" (p. 2).

According to Popper (1953/1963, 1959), scientists make testable conjectures and propose theories and then attempt to refute or falsify them by experimentation, tentatively accepting the theories if the critical efforts are unsuccessful. This process is seen as gradually leading to objective knowledge. As Chesterman (1997) puts it, "Theories do not lead to 'the truth,' but they do aim to get increasingly closer to verisimilitude" (p. 17) or "truthlikeness" (p. 19). Thomas Kuhn (1962/2012), however, argues that most of the time – in periods of what he calls "normal science," as opposed to much rarer periods of "revolutionary," paradigm-changing science – researchers accept the dominant theories unquestioningly, and are *not* trying to refute or falsify them.

Indeed Kuhn (1977) argues that normal scientific research "is a highly convergent activity based firmly upon a settled consensus acquired from scientific education and reinforced by subsequent life in the profession" (p. 227) and that "a rigorous training in convergent thought

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<sup>1</sup> To respond to a book over 16 years after it was published (even if one is essentially using it as a straw man) generally requires a good reason; in this instance I incorporated my objections to Chesterman's account of translation into a talk at a seminar with a visiting speaker, Lawrence Venuti. The talk included Venuti's (1995) concept of *foreignization* in its inventory of fruitful fictions of translation; for reasons of space and coherence, I have cut that part from this written version. Chesterman's book remains an excellent summary and critique of a large number of translation theories and practices which does not in fact require a Popperian or memetic underpinning.

has been intrinsic to the sciences almost from their origin” (p. 228). The natural sciences tend to have “a firm orientation toward an apparently unique tradition” (p. 232) to which the scientist “requires a thoroughgoing commitment” (p. 235). In fact the “pattern of rapid consensual scientific advance to which recent centuries have accustomed us” generally depends on one consensus giving way to another, “and alternate approaches are not ordinarily in competition” (p. 232). The natural sciences appear to be very different from the human and social sciences (including translation studies), which are characterized by the jostling for position of rival schools and theories, with researchers who are in what we might call the “postmethod condition,”<sup>2</sup> in which a multitude of local, contingent approaches are legitimate and there are no established methods (scientific, hermeneutic, pedagogical, etc.) that guarantee success.

Of course, most of the time, scientific research throws up anomalies and discrepancies: researchers’ theory-induced expectations and their observations and results never quite agree. Although “each of these anomalies or incompletely understood phenomena could conceivably be the clue to a fundamental innovation in scientific theory or technique,” it is generally assumed that “all but the most striking and central discrepancies could be taken care of by current theory if only there were time to take them on” (Kuhn, 1977, p. 236). Yet after a certain point, anomalies and unassimilated observations “impinge with gradually increasing force upon the consciousness of the scientific community” (p. 262). This leads to scientific paradigms being challenged, so that traditional theories, concepts and techniques have to be abandoned and replaced by new ones. The result is what Kuhn calls paradigm shifts and scientific revolutions, but these don’t happen every day, and generally require a Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein or Bohr to set them in motion. In short, Kuhn suggests that Popper “has characterized the entire scientific enterprise in terms that apply only to its occasional revolutionary parts” (p. 272). The same is true of theorists such as Chesterman who endorse Popper’s logic of scientific discovery.

Importantly, however, “only investigations firmly rooted in contemporary scientific tradition are likely to break that tradition and give rise to a new one” (Kuhn, 1977, p. 227), and “for the scientific community as a whole, work within a well-defined and deeply ingrained tradition seems more productive of tradition-shattering novelties than work in which no similarly convergent standards are involved” (p. 234).

Thus more often than not, most scientists are *not* attempting to refute their conjectures and tentative theories, but rather to solve puzzles within the existing tradition. Kuhn (1977) asserts that scientists “restrict their attention to problems defined by the conceptual and instrumental techniques already at hand” (p. 262).<sup>3</sup> Even so, “most new discoveries and theories in science are not merely additions to the existing stockpile of scientific knowledge,” and in order to assimilate them, “the scientist must usually rearrange the intellectual and manipulative equipment he has previously relied upon, discarding some elements of his prior belief and practice while finding new significances in and new relationships between many others” (pp. 226-227).<sup>4</sup> Hence as well as convergent thought, scientists require the flexibility

<sup>2</sup> I borrow this term, presumably adapted from Lyotard’s (1984) *Postmodern condition*, from Kumaravadivelu (1994, and many subsequent publications) who applies it to language teaching pedagogy.

<sup>3</sup> Denison (2010, p. 105) proposes a word for this – *WYSIWYTCH*, from ‘what you see is what your theory can handle.’

<sup>4</sup> Kuhn (1962/2012, p. 170) does not describe successfully solved puzzles and new scientific discoveries as progress towards “truth” or “one full, objective, true account of nature,” but rather “in terms of evolution from

and open-mindedness that come with divergent thinking, and indeed Kuhn suggests that an “essential tension” between these two modes of thought is implicit in scientific research (p. 227).<sup>5</sup> I will return to the linguistic and translation implications of revolutionary science below.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Truth and fiction

My main objection to Chesterman’s Popperian account of translation, however, is not the erroneous assumption that scientists are endlessly trying to refute their underlying beliefs, but the notion that in revising their translations, translators are eliminating errors in the pursuit of objective knowledge and truth. They may well eliminate what they perceive to be errors, but the practice of translation is often inspired by underlying theoretical beliefs that are widely known *not* to be true, but rather to be fruitful fictions. I will elaborate on some of these shortly.

Moreover, notions of truth, knowledge and perfection are necessarily and inherently relative and contingent for a translator who believes, for example, any of the following: that translation is necessarily indeterminate because of both referential and holophrastic indeterminacy (Quine, 1960); that texts are intrinsically unstable, so that there is nothing to which a translation could be equivalent, and that words can break with any given context and be grafted into an infinite number of new ones (Derrida, 1988); that canonical texts repeatedly offer up new meanings to new epochs (Kermode, 1985); that no-one can totally put aside the prejudices and beliefs of their particular context, so that the most one can hope for is a “fusion” of the translator’s or reader’s “horizon” with that of the text (Gadamer, 1960/2004); that all readers have particular interpretive strategies, perhaps shared by an “interpretive community” (Fish, 1981) and perhaps not; that all interpretation is likely to display the workings of the reader’s unconscious (Holland, 1975); that a translator may unknowingly be ‘hailed’ or ‘interpellated’ by a hegemonic ideology (Althusser, 1984); that translation is necessarily a refraction, rewriting or manipulation, reflecting a certain ideology and a preferred poetics (Lefevere, 1992); that the way a text is translated depends on its *skopos* or purpose, as determined by whoever commissions the translation, in accordance with the assumed values and norms of the intended readers (Vermeer, 2000); and so on – this list of theoretical positions could easily be extended. Some of these theories are more frequently applied in literary criticism than, say, in legal or scientific translation, but many of them will be familiar to translators with a degree or two in the Humanities (or indeed Translation Studies).

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the community’s state of knowledge at any given time” towards what we wish to know now. Science, like biological evolution, develops *from* somewhere but does not necessarily move “nearer to some goal set by nature in advance.” Cf. T.S. Eliot (2014, p. 15) on philosophy and truth: “The token that a philosophy is true is, I think, the fact that it brings us to the exact point from which we started”!

<sup>5</sup> This suggests, perhaps, that bilinguals might make good scientists, as for the past 50 years or so books on bilingualism have tended to state that it leads to divergent thinking (see, e.g., Peal & Lambert, 1962; Hamers & Blanc, 1989; Jessner, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Feyerabend also contested Popperian accounts of knowledge and truth in the 1960s, but disagreed with Kuhn’s arguments about convergence, suggesting instead that knowledge “is not a process that converges toward an ideal view; it is an ever increasing ocean of alternatives, each of them forcing the others into greater articulation, all of them contributing, via this process of competition, to the development of our faculties” (1965/1981, p. 107). More pithily, and again unlike Kuhn, Feyerabend (2000) notoriously insisted that the only principle that can be defended in scientific research is that “anything goes” (p. 12).

Yet if translation does not necessarily involve truth, it almost certainly involves *fictions*. Contrary to Popper (and Chesterman), the German philosopher Hans Vaihinger, in *Philosophie des Als Ob* (*The Philosophy of 'As If'*, started in 1877, published in 1911; English translation 1924), described fictive thinking – it's *as if* this were so – as being as fundamental to human thinking as deductive and inductive thought. Humans elaborate fictional constructs that are *useful*, and thereby *justifiable*, and not *verifiable* like hypotheses. (Fictions that *cannot* be proved to be useful and necessary are eliminated, just like hypotheses that cannot be verified.)

Fictionalism is not the same as pragmatism, because pragmatists tend to hold on to the notion of truth, although they redefine it. For example, early last century William James stated that truth is “what it is better for us to believe” (1907/1975a, p. 42) or “what I feel like saying” (1909/1975b, p. 48), while more recently, Richard Rorty (1979) asserted that truth is “what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying” (p. 176). As Vaihinger (1924, p. viii) puts it, the principle of pragmatism is that “An idea which is found to be useful in practice proves thereby that it is also true in theory, and the fruitful is thus always true,” while the principle (or outcome) of fictionalism, on the contrary, is that “An idea whose theoretical untruth or incorrectness, and therewith its falsity, is admitted, is not for that practically valueless and useless; for such an idea, in spite of its theoretical nullity may have great practical importance.”

Today it is more common to talk about using metaphors and analogies and models and computer simulations than fictions, but we still behave *as if* the world matches our models and metaphors. As Arthur Fine (1993) puts it, “If you want to see what treating something ‘as if’ it were something else amounts to, just look at most of what any scientist does in any hour of any working day” (p. 16).

Examples of useful, expedient, “as if” fictions from Vaihinger (1924, pp. 15-84) – covering all the faculties in most universities – include many philosophical ones, such as Platonic ideas and Kantian ethics, as well as the subject/object distinction, and the Kantian *noumenon* or *Ding-an-sich*. Mathematical fictions include negative, irrational and imaginary numbers, infinity, differential calculus, and most of Euclidian geometry, such as lines made up of points, curves regarded as straight lines (like the circle seen as a polygon made up of an infinite number of straight lines), points without extension, lines without breadth or depth, surfaces without depth, and spaces without content. Fictions employed by scientists include Ptolemaic astronomy,<sup>7</sup> matter, force, motion and space, electromagnetic waves, the ‘plum pudding’ and ‘planetary’ models of the atom,<sup>8</sup> and nearly all (artificial) analogical categories and classifications, including the Linnaean taxonomy of organisms, and geological periods. In economics, Adam Smith’s assumption that all human actions are dictated by egoism is a fiction, while legal fictions include laws that are deemed to cater for individual cases. Vaihinger also lists prayer and oaths (I swear by almighty God...), and salvation, divine judgement, immortality, and so on.

I would suggest that the process of translation also depends on (very fruitful) fictional constructs, largely psycholinguistic ones, including (perhaps) translatability itself, which

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<sup>7</sup> Kuhn (1977, p. 323) stresses that the Ptolemaic model made predictions that were just as accurate as those of Copernicus (until the latter’s system was drastically revised by Kepler), and was therefore clearly useful.

<sup>8</sup> These two examples are mine; Vaihinger (1924) rather oddly insists that the concept of the atom is a fiction *tout court*.

necessarily presupposes a high degree of conceptual and lexical equivalence between languages; the translator as a coordinative bilingual (or multilingual) with different conceptual systems and lexicons for each language, as opposed to a compound bilingual with a single undifferentiated conceptual system; and the implied reader, who is envisaged as having the requisite cognitive environment to understand all the translator's choices (in terms of lexis, implicit and explicit information, and so on).

Chesterman (1997), who uses Dawkins' (1976, p. 206) fanciful (or rather, fictitious) concept of *memes* – ideas or practices which supposedly spread and self-replicate without any conscious or intentional human involvement, and influence the behaviour of their hosts – isolates five “supermemes” of translation, but dismisses two of them as falsehoods to be eliminated (rather than useful fictions to be employed). He dismisses equivalence as a vacuous term, because translations are obviously different from their originals, but also rejects the notion of untranslatability, as this is predicated on the notion of perfect equivalence; *something* gets “carried across” in translation, even though it changes *en route*, not unlike the small child carried across the water in the St. Christopher legend.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Translation equivalents

Many people have argued that both translatability and lexical or conceptual equivalence are fictions. Words in different languages and cultures do not refer to the same ‘real-world’ objects, or at least not in the same way. Saussure's (1974) argument that the ‘value’ (for which read ‘meaning’) of any word in any language depends on the relations it has with the other elements of the system is well known. More recently, in the work that gave rise to what is now usually known as the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,” Sapir (1949) argued that “‘the real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group” (p. 69), while Whorf (1956/2012) insisted that

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. (p. 213)

Conversely, in “The task of the translator,” Walter Benjamin (1923/2000) famously argued that

it is necessary to distinguish, within intention, the intended object from the mode of its intention. In ‘*Brot*’ and ‘*pain*’ [bread] the intended object is the same, but the mode of intention differs.<sup>10</sup> It is because of their modes of intention that the two words signify something different to a German or a Frenchman, that they are not regarded as interchangeable, and in fact ultimately seek to exclude one another; however, with respect to their intended object, taken absolutely, they signify one and the same thing. (p. 18)

In a talk about Benjamin's essay, Paul de Man (1986) said that for him *Brot* necessarily evokes Hölderlin's poem *Brot und Wein*, which in French becomes *pain et vin*, which come included

<sup>9</sup> This analogy (mine, not Chesterman's) should perhaps be restricted to translations that seem ‘heavier’ (not more divine!) than their originals, such as those which preserve formal devices or grammatical features that are not usually marked in the target language. Chesterman (1997, pp. 7-14) also problematizes the other three ‘supermemes’: source-target, free-vs-literal, and all-writing-is-translating.

<sup>10</sup> De Man (1986, p. 86) proposed better translations for Benjamin's *das Gemeinte* and *die Art des meinens* than “intended object” and “mode of its intention,” namely “what is meant” and “the way in which language means.”

in the price of the meal in a cheap restaurant, which leads to *bâtard*, another word for the *baguette* or French loaf, and de Man finds ‘bastard’ to be a long way from Hölderlin, and Christian connotations of bread and wine. For de Man (p. 101), this is an example of the way “language does things which are so radically out of our control that they cannot be assimilated to the human at all, against which one fights constantly,” or in short, an example of the “inhumanity” of language. Yet this does *not* appear to be an ineluctable conclusion; one might also argue that *Brot* and *pain* are prime examples of the way different cultural practices lead speech communities to endow ‘equivalent’ words in different languages with different connotations.<sup>11</sup>

In another well-known essay, “The misery and the splendor of translation,” José Ortega y Gasset (1937/2000) made an analogous argument to that of Benjamin:

it is utopian to believe that two words belonging to different languages, and which the dictionary gives us as translations of each other, refer to exactly the same objects. [...] It is false, for example, to suppose that the thing the Spaniard calls a *bosque* [forest] the German calls a *Wald*, yet the dictionary tells us that *Wald* means *bosque*. [...] an enormous difference exists between the two realities. (p. 51)

Yet Ortega y Gasset (1937/2000) would have us believe that when a Spaniard and a German use *scientific terminology*, such problems do not arise. Indeed, science books “are easier to translate from one language to another. Actually, in every country these are written almost entirely in the same language” (p. 51). This is because in these books, “the author himself has begun by translating from the authentic tongue in which he ‘lives, moves and has his being’<sup>12</sup> into a pseudolanguage formed by technical terms, linguistically artificial words which he himself must define in his book” (p. 50). However, Ortega y Gasset was a philosopher and not a scientific translator, and the idea that science is not authentic language but a mere (and readily translatable) terminology is a falsehood (as opposed to a useful fiction). As Scott Montgomery, a geologist by training, writes in *Science in translation* (2000),

One can hardly resist the urge, for example, to contemplate replacing Benjamin’s *Brot* and *pain* with words like *Sauerstoff* and *oxygène* or *Trägheit* and *inertie*. Are we here in the presence of precise equivalents? Do these terms, which surely signify the same basic phenomena, do so in exactly the same way, with the same exact mixture of denotative and connotative significance, the same sensibility of linguistic presence, in all cases of writing, in all situations of expression? It may be common to maintain that they do; but this requires that all of these questions, so pressing and valued in language study today, be altogether ignored or disavowed in the case of science only. (p. 286)

Montgomery (2000) suggests that there are, on the contrary, “certain dependencies upon localized linguistic phenomena” (p. 254) and that scientific discourse does indeed undergo a few changes across linguistic boundaries. Yet – in periods of “normal” science – most scientific terms *do* have readily translatable denotative meanings; *oxygen* is *oxygène* is *Sauerstoff*, etc., and connotative differences are usually of minor importance.<sup>13</sup> When translation becomes

<sup>11</sup> One might also ask, if language is inhuman, why are humans so much better at translating than machines?

<sup>12</sup> From Acts 17:28.

<sup>13</sup> Established scientific terms are often more readily translatable than the more abstract concepts of philosophy. See Cassin *et al.* (2014), who show how about 400 philosophical terms have been translated across European languages, and how many of the supposed translation equivalents are partially inadequate, and don’t overlap. E.g. *Geist* is not the same as *mind* which is not the same as *esprit*, etc.

difficult or impossible is in periods of revolutionary science – but here the difficulty is first *intralingual* rather than *interlingual*.

What happens in such periods is that different scientists “are presented with different data by the same stimuli” (Kuhn, 1977, p. 309), and begin to use old words with new meanings. Words (or their English translations) that have radically changed their meanings in the history of science include *motion, force, star, planet, gravity, matter, mixture, compound, electron, particle* and *wave*. For example, an English physicist, Joseph John Thomson, is generally credited with discovering and identifying the electron as a subatomic particle, for which he was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1906. A generation later his son, George Paget Thomson, demonstrated that electrons are (or can be described as) waves, for which he too got the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1937. When they used the term *electron*, the Thomsons were talking about *different things*, or applying the term to nature differently.

In such situations, communication can only be partial, as there is no neutral language that scientists can use the same way in which to state their new theories. But as most of the rest of their scientific world view and their everyday vocabulary are shared, scientists are able to isolate and try to understand the terms that are the cause of incomprehension. In his 1969 Postscript to *The structure of scientific revolutions*, Kuhn (1962/2012) urges that “men who hold incommensurable viewpoints be thought of as members of different language communities and that their communication problems be analyzed as problems of translation” (p. 175).<sup>14</sup> But translation only goes so far: a new theory will only prosper if a majority of scientists “find that at some point in the language learning process they have ceased to translate and begun instead to speak the language like a native” (Kuhn, 1977, p. 339).

Adequate intralingual ‘translation’ of new concepts and theories into old language may be impossible, just as the supposed ‘equivalents’ in interlingual translations may fail to render language-specific connotations (as with Benjamin’s *Brot* and *pain*, Ortega y Gasset’s *bosque* and *Wald*, etc.). Scientists who come to understand and use new terms (even if these are old words) for new concepts are in the same position as bilinguals who have conceptual representations that combine meanings from words in more than one language, meanings which cannot be expressed in all the speaker’s languages in a way that monolinguals would understand.

As Kuhn (2000) puts it,

anything which can be said in one language can, with imagination and effort, be *understood* by a speaker of another. What is prerequisite to such understanding, however, is not translation but language learning [...] If [the language learner] succeeds, which I think no principle bars, he will become bilingual. But that does not ensure that he or anyone else will be able to translate from his newly acquired language to the one with which he was raised. Though learnability could in principle imply translatability, the thesis that it does so needs to be argued. (p. 61)

For Kuhn (2000), “Language learning and translation are [...] very different processes: the outcome of the former is bilingualism, and bilinguals repeatedly report that there are things they can express in one language that they cannot express in the other” (p. 238). Thus Ortega y Gasset (1937/2000) appears to have been mistaken in describing science as a “linguistically

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<sup>14</sup> Kuhn (2000) invariably uses the word *men* to refer to scientists. He does, very infrequently, mention female philosophers, e.g. the splendidly named Margaret Masterman, though in her case he also states that he’d been forewarned that “she was a madwoman” (p. 299).



artificial” terminology or a simplified “pseudolanguage”: scientific terminology is complex, and is regularly required to express new meanings. New theories can produce synchronic, intralingual problems of comprehension, before one even arrives at the difficulties of translation proper. As Kuhn (2000) says,

the problems of translating a scientific text, whether into a foreign tongue or into a later version of the language in which it was written are far more like those of translating literature than has generally been supposed. In both cases the translator repeatedly encounters sentences that can be rendered in several alternative ways, none of which captures them completely. Difficult decisions must then be made about which aspects of the original it is most important to preserve. (p. 62)

## 5. Compound bilinguals and implied readers

This brings us to another important distinction in linguistic and translation theory, one which may well be a fiction – that between coordinative and compound bilinguals. In *Languages in contact*, Uriel Weinreich (1953, pp. 9-10) posited the existence of *coordinative bilinguals*, who learned their languages in two distinct environments, and consequently have two conceptual systems: two sets of conceptual representations associated with two sets of form representations (words), one for each language. Weinreich suggested that *compound bilinguals*, on the contrary, having learned both their languages in the same context, have a single fused or undifferentiated conceptual system linked to the two lexicons, so that L1 and L2 forms are connected at the meaning level. Weinreich also posited a third category, *subordinative bilinguals*, largely lower level language learners, who transfer the conceptual representations of L1 words onto the corresponding L2 words.

It is a common refrain among translators (or at least my colleagues) that “bilinguals make lousy translators.” Clearly the people who say this reserve the term ‘bilingual’ for Weinreich’s compound bilinguals, and do not share Grosjean’s (2010) broad definition of bilinguals as all those “who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives” (p. 4). Given Weinreich’s categories, they would describe themselves as coordinative bilinguals. The psycholinguistic evidence would suggest, however, that most proficient, bicultural bilinguals (including translators) who regularly use and think in two or more languages – even if they learned them sequentially, in different environments – are more likely to become compound bilinguals with a single conceptual system, in which mental concepts (at least for frequently encountered words) contain all the information and connotations connected with the corresponding words in the different languages.<sup>15</sup> This is to say that the notion that highly proficient translators, fluent in more than one language, are coordinative bilinguals with wholly separate conceptual systems is probably a theoretical untruth, otherwise known as a fiction. It is also clear, as argued in the previous section, that supposed translation equivalents rarely convey exactly the same meaning. Rather, in addition to shared aspects of meaning, each word in a translation pair will generally also have aspects of meaning specific to the language to which it belongs. The conceptual representations of many words are asymmetrically ‘distributed’ or spread out over a range of more elementary conceptual units, only some of which are shared in an L1 and L2 (and L3, etc.); see De Groot’s (1993) “Distributed Conceptual Feature Model.” The conceptual representations of both concrete

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<sup>15</sup> Hence with highly proficient L2-speaking translators, the L1-L2 asymmetries of less proficient learners outlined in much of the experimental literature – e.g. Kroll’s (1993) “Revised Hierarchical Model,” and Dong *et al.*’s (2005) “Shared Distributed Asymmetrical Model” – do not apply.

words and cognates (words with similar orthographical and phonological forms across languages) share more elements across translation pairs or ‘equivalents’ than those of abstract and non-cognate words (see Van Hell and De Groot, 1998).

Aneta Pavlenko (2009) takes this further in her “Modified Hierarchical Model,” which posits the existence of conceptual representations that are completely language specific, and hence not lexicalized in other languages, requiring translation by circumlocution. For example, Pavlenko (p. 138) insists that *privacy* is untranslatable into Russian, even though it figures in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.<sup>16</sup> This goes beyond Cassin *et al.*’s so-called *Dictionary of untranslatables* (mentioned in note 13, above), which merely shows the limited amount of conceptual overlap among philosophical ‘translation equivalents’ in European languages.

Yet leaving aside infrequent wholly language-specific conceptual representations, compound bilinguals (including translators) with a partly or wholly merged or undifferentiated conceptual system are likely to use words in either their L1 or an L2 intending to communicate nuances (component parts of combined conceptual representations) which are incommunicable (or merely sound odd) to monolinguals who do not share the bilingual’s language combination. This leads to what might be called a semantic accent – using words differently from monolingual speakers of *either* the L1 or the L2 (independently of any *overt* bilingual behaviour such as borrowing or code-switching).

Some linguists, understandably, warn against this. For example, the term “semantic accent” comes from John Lucy (2000), who uses it to describe L1 habits of thought that become entrenched over time, and are erroneously transferred to foreign languages. Pavlenko (2009) stresses the necessity for proficient foreign language learners to internalize new concepts along with new words, and hence undergo a conceptual restructuring:

Eventually L2 learners will need to adjust the boundaries of their linguistic categories, either expanding or narrowing them in accordance with L2 constraints. Failure to readjust the boundaries appropriately would lead to instances of L1 conceptual transfer. [...] In the case of successful restructuring, the boundaries of the L2 category are modified without changing the boundaries of the corresponding L1 category. As a result, speakers perform in accordance with the constraints of each language. (p. 136)

However genuine compound bilinguals (including translators) are just as likely to transfer L2 concepts to the L1. Other theorists are unconcerned about this, and indeed describe it as an unavoidable outcome of bilingualism. For example François Grosjean (2010) has long insisted on what he calls

the bilingual or holistic view of bilingualism, which proposes that the bilingual is an integrated whole who cannot easily be decomposed into two separate parts. [...] The coexistence and constant interaction of the languages in the bilingual have produced a different but complete language system. (p. 75)

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<sup>16</sup> The official Russian translation of the English string of nouns “privacy, family, home” is the adjectival *личную и семейную жизнь* – private (or personal) and family life. Wierzbicka (2006, p. 142) gives further examples of ‘untranslatable’ words, and claims that a large group of English words are rooted in a particular rationalist cultural heritage, among them *fairness*, which is “a uniquely Anglo concept, without an equivalent in any other language.” The most challenging language-specific words are abstract ones, as words for material entities (*realia*) often spread as loans (*Ayatollah, Bolshevik, concierge, dervish, espresso, fjord, geisha*, etc.).

Vivian Cook (1991, p. 112) makes a more radical argument, describing “the compound state of a mind with two grammars” as “multicompetence,” in which the two languages are integrated and not just coexisting. Consequently, a multicompetent speaker’s knowledge of an L2 is typically not identical to that of a native speaker, while the L2 will also have an effect on the multicompetent speaker’s L1, which will thus differ from that of a monolingual. Herdina and Jessner (2002) go further:

we would rather see the two languages as two liquids, which, when mixed, acquire properties (such as explosiveness in the case of nitroglycerine) that neither of the liquids had. So these new properties constitute a complete metamorphosis of the substances involved and not merely an overlap between two systems. (p. 27)

They call this “crosslinguistic interaction,” and propose a “Dynamic Model of Multilingualism.” Thus words are likely to mean *more* to multilingual (and multicultural) speakers, whose concepts are richer than those of monolinguals. To return to the examples given above, it appears likely that the conceptual representations of *bread* and/or *Brot* and/or *pain*, of *wood* and/or *Wald* and/or *bosque*, of *oxygen* and/or *Sauerstoff* and/or *oxygène* in the multilingual translator’s mental encyclopedia contain all the meanings and connotations known to speakers of the two or three or more languages, although these won’t all be relevant in any particular translation, or available to a translation’s monolingual readers. The translator may *intend* to convey some elements of a combined conceptual representation that will inevitably not be communicated to the reader. Unless you translate, e.g., the German *Brot* into another language using *Brot* as a loanword – and, of course, even if you do – you inevitably lose some connotations en route.

The majority of bi- or multilingual individuals have little reason to worry about the potential difficulties of translation or the effects of crosslinguistic interaction. As Mary-Louise Pratt (2002) puts it,

The multilingual person is not someone who translates constantly from one language or cultural system into another, though translation is something multilingual subjects are able to do if needed. To be multilingual is above all to live in more than one language, to be one for whom translation is unnecessary. (p. 35)

Translators, on the contrary, *are* obviously concerned with crosslinguistic interaction, and try hard to counteract it. As Mounin (1963) put it, half a century ago:

La traduction, bien qu’étant une situation non contestable de contact de langues, en serait décrite comme le cas-limite : celui, statistiquement très rare, où la résistance aux conséquences habituelles du bilinguisme est la plus consciente et la plus organisée ; le cas où le locuteur bilingue lutte consciemment contre toute déviation de la norme linguistique, contre toute interférence. (p. 5)

But Mounin (1963) also describes the “comportements linguistiques très marquées chez les traducteurs” (p. 4), and their taste for using foreign neologisms, loanwords and calques, and their habit of leaving untranslated words, expressions and quotations. There is ample evidence of professional bilingual and bicultural translators failing to separate their languages completely, including the EU translators (at the top end of their profession) whose English includes words such as *actual* (for current), *adequate* (for appropriate), *assist at* (for attend), *controls* (for checks), *delay* (for time limit), *dispose of* (for have or possess), *elaborate* (for draw up or prepare), *eventual* (for possible), *evolution* (for development or trend), *externalise* (for outsource or contract out), *formulate* (for draft or draw up), *hierarchical superior* (for line

manager), *homogenize* (for standardise), *important* (for large), *normally* (for supposed to or expected to), *opportunity* (for advisability), *to precise* (for to specify), *precision* (for detail or clarification), *planification* (for planning), *punctual* (for occasional or ad hoc), and so on (Gardner, 2013). It seems unlikely that someone unaware of manifest crosslinguistic transfers such as these is continually attentive to minute differences of meaning in supposed ‘translation equivalents,’ and the risk of using L1 words differently from monolinguals.<sup>17</sup>

This suggests that another key term in translation theory, the *implied reader*, is a fiction.<sup>18</sup> Many translators have in mind an ideal or implied reader, with a particular mental encyclopaedia or cognitive environment, for whom they produce their target text, adapting and explicating as necessary, as well as retaining implicatures and source culture references, and so on. But given that (in the majority of cases) this imagined reader of a translation is assumed not to know the source language (which is why they are reading the translation), they will not share the translator’s combined or blended concepts. A monolingual target language reader will necessarily understand words differently from a ‘multicompetent’ or bilingual translator with a partly or wholly integrated mental lexicon, and indeed have a conceptual system that is unimaginable (indeed unimaginably impoverished) for such a translator. A monolingual reader will probably (or at least potentially) understand many of the translator’s words slightly differently than someone who shares the translator’s language combination. But this is unavoidable, and indeed the conventional concept of translation is that it transfers the meaning of a text in one language into another, and not that it communicates all the possible conceptual representations in a multilingual’s head. But translators often need to have a reader in mind when translating, however fictional a construct this is, so it may be wise to *try* to imagine a monolingual one, even if the translator him or herself has never actually been such a thing.

Thus to use a distinction current in American Intelligence circles (Treverton, 2007), I would suggest that the translation of what Ortega y Gasset (1937/2000) calls the authentic tongue – or often *tongues* – in which we live, move and have our being is a *mystery* rather than a *puzzle*. Puzzles are temporarily *impossible* to solve, because at least one vital piece of information is missing. Mysteries (in this account) are merely *hard* to resolve, because an intelligence organization – or a multilingual translator – has *too much* information, and needs to decide which of it is actually important.<sup>19</sup> But translators (unlike some puzzled spies and most scientists most of the time) are generally not in search of a missing element. On the contrary, given their combined conceptual representations they have *too much* linguistic information, a lot of which is inaccessible to readers with different – or monolingual – language systems. Hence just as a lot of intelligence data turns out to be superfluous, unnecessary, unimportant *noise*, much of a translator’s knowledge of aspects of meaning specific to the source language is not important in the process of translation. The translator may well *intend* to reach into a combined mental lexicon and communicate what are in fact language-specific nuances, but be unable to do so, at least for monolingual readers, much like a “post-revolutionary” scientist

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<sup>17</sup> It is of course possible, though I think unlikely, that all the EU translators in question are simultaneous early bilinguals and thus part of the infamous “lousy translator” category.

<sup>18</sup> The term “implied reader” is often associated with Iser (1974), although it is not an exact translation of his initial (1972) German term *implizite Leser*; it was foreshadowed by Booth’s (1961) “postulated reader.”

<sup>19</sup> This is, of course, something of a redefinition of *mystery*; the theological definition would have it that mysteries are unknowable, or can only be understood by way of divine revelation.

who cannot explain the revised use of terms to scientists obdurately stuck in the old paradigm, because coming to terms with a new paradigm is like learning a new language.

Yet although conceptual representations will ineluctably be lost in translation alongside formal ones, other things will be gained. As Lawrence Venuti (2013) points out, “the translator has chosen every single word in the translation, whether or not a source-language word lies behind it” (p. 111). Thus “the source language is the first thing to go, the very sound and order of the words, and along with them all the resonance and allusiveness that they carry for the reader with source-language proficiency who is immersed in the source culture” (p. 110). Yet merely by choosing words from the translating language (quite apart from knowingly or unknowingly offering an idiosyncratic or motivated interpretation of the text), “the translator adds an entirely new set of resonances and allusions” (p. 110). Even if a translator is a bicultural compound bilingual with an undifferentiated conceptual system, for most readers, most of the words in the target language text will not bear all the conceptual information stored in the translator’s brain. Conversely, they might easily add conceptual elements (or allusions) that were not intended (or possible) in the source language.

Consequently additional meanings “inhere in every choice the translator makes, even when the translation sticks closely to the words in the source text and conforms to their current dictionary definitions” (Venuti, 2013, p. 110). Meanings that work only in the translating language are unavoidably released in the process of translation, and what most translators do is to “attempt to compensate for an irreparable loss by controlling an exorbitant gain” (p. 110) (after which, of course, the text is further processed by readers and made to bear yet more meanings according to their particular interests).

## 6. Conclusion

Despite most translators’ awareness of the partial nature of so-called lexical and conceptual equivalence, the improbability of a multicompetent language user having entirely language-specific conceptual representations, the impossibility of rendering (in the translating language) the meanings present in the source text and nothing else, and the ineluctable unreality of the implied reader, it still seems useful to cling to notions such as these, which are clearly fictions in Vaihinger’s (1924) sense of the term. Countenancing such fictions is probably more fruitful than setting out to translate while convinced of the truth of the notions of untranslatability, incommensurability, irreparable loss, and so forth. Thus it seems unhelpful to dip into Popper’s superannuated philosophy of science and describe translation in terms of objective scientific knowledge, inspired by the ideal goal of truth. The fictions shared by many translators more adequately explain and guide their practice.

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