Translatability, interpretation, and construals of experience

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Abstract

Languages differ greatly, both morphosyntactically and lexically, which almost inevitably leads to minor losses or changes of meaning in translation. Following Herder and Schleiermacher, foreignizing translators attempt to understand an author's word-usages by an empathetic psychological reading, and when they find an unfamiliar source language concept they 'bend' the nearest available target language word. In this article, I question the efficacy of such procedures, and suggest, following Gadamer, that meaning is always partly determined by the interpreter's historical situation, so that the best a translator or reader can hope for is a fusion of horizons with the author. Yet experimental cognitive linguistics shows that even at the same time and place, there are considerable differences in the ways people construe and verbalize events and texts. So it seems likely that there are more meanings and effects that are intended by the author *and* carried across by the translator which readers either fail to notice or re-interpret, than there are traces of meaning and poetic effects that have not been (and cannot be) translated.

Keywords

Translatability, word-usages, interpretation, fusion of horizons, construals of experience

1. Introduction

Lance Hewson, the honorand of this festschrift, clearly has an optimistic streak that even many years serving as Dean of the Faculty did not extinguish, because he likes to insist to colleagues and students alike that there is *always* a translation 'solution.' One way or another, *nothing* is untranslatable, provided, of course, that we extend our definition of translation to include adaptation, and perhaps allow the frowned-upon fall-back of translators' notes. This outlook certainly has the advantage of fostering feelings of possibility, communicability and understanding, rather than a negative cloud of impossibility, incommunicability and incommensurability. In this unashamedly theoretical article I will contend, however, that the answer to the question as to whether *everything* can be translated is actually "no." But I will then suggest that this doesn't really matter because, as Gadamer (1960/2004, p. 296) put it pithily, "we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*," and because, as Croft (2010, pp. 11-12) tries to show, "there is a fundamental indeterminacy in the construal of a scene and its interpretation in a communicative act." Even if a translation (which is already an interpretation) were miraculously to carry across a text's entire semantic content, and all its poetic effects, no reader would understand it exactly the same way as either the author or translator, because we all interpret texts – and construe the rest of our experience – somewhat differently.

2. Different languages

The elemental difficulty of translation is evident: different languages have lexicons that divide up reality, and the things we say about it, very differently, and different ways of relating words to one another in sentences. Tim Parks (2014, p. 217) describes this as "a paradox at the heart of translation" – the text we are translating "is also the greatest obstacle to expression. Our own language prompts us in one direction, but the text we are trying to respect says something else, or the same thing in a way that feels different." Dostoevsky's wretched Man from Underground complains that "throughout my life, the laws of nature have offended me constantly and more than anything else" (1864/2004, p. 17); translators sometimes feel that way about the grammatical constructions, words, and semantic fields of source languages!

Quite apart from semantic faithfulness, a further level of difficulty appears if a translator tries to reproduce or imitate the musical form of the source text, in the hope of communicating nuances of feeling or sensation. Sound patterns – rhyme, rhythm, meter, alliterative and assonant word combinations, and so forth – notoriously get "lost in translation," which is evidently problematic if one believes that form and semantic content are strictly inseparable in any kind of poetic writing.

The fact that languages differ extensively in both their grammatical systems and lexicons was obviously noticed long ago. It has also long been argued that languages might reflect profound differences in modes of thinking and conceptualizing, and feeling and perceiving, especially between different cultures and historical periods.[1] Grammatical similarities and differences were extensively documented in the early 19th century, especially by the German

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[1] Fishman (1982, p. 12, note 1) states that versions of what is today known as the linguistic relativity hypothesis (or the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis") – and also of the stronger notion of linguistic determinism – "occur several times throughout two-and-a-half thousand years of Euro-Mediterranean language-related speculation […] and are probably of at least similar vintage in India, China, and perhaps even elsewhere."

neogrammarians.[2] Today the idea that the lexicogrammatical structure of a person's language can influence the general character of their perceptual sensations, thoughts and concepts, and indeed the way they construct reality, is largely associated with Herder, F. Schlegel and W. Humboldt in Germany, and Boas, Sapir and Whorf in the USA. The underlying notion is summed up in Humboldt's (1836) title, *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaus und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*.[3]

Although Humboldt, and Boas's successors Sapir and Whorf, are more talked about today, Forster (2010), in hagiographic mode,[4] stresses their debt to Herder. He asserts that Herder, beginning in the 1760s – and in opposition to the orthodox Enlightenment belief in the universality of human nature[5] – saw more clearly than anyone before him that there can exist radical differences between concepts, beliefs, values, sensations, etc. in different cultures, and also that a culture can change its concepts and beliefs over time.[6] Such differences are of a different order to the minor differences in connotation and nuance among cognate words and supposed 'translation equivalents' in neighbouring languages. Herder also saw that similar, if less dramatic, variations occur among individuals at a single time and place, and that an author may have concepts that differ significantly from those of his speech community, making interpretation and translation an extremely difficult task.

It is broadly accepted today that words do not simply 'represent' pre-given entities that are independent of language. To reverse Plato's metaphor (*Phaedrus* 265e), nature does *not* come to us pre-divided, carved at the joints, waiting to be named. So different languages conceptualize and divide up experience in different ways, and as Saussure put it, meaning arises through a system of linguistic oppositions, so the meaning of a word depends on the meanings of all the other words in a given semantic field: "in language there are only

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[2] Fortunately, however, we have moved beyond Friedrich Schlegel's (1808) twofold distinction between "organic" or highly inflected languages, and "mechanical" or uninflected languages, and left behind his claim that inflected languages are superior instruments of thought, because they have a privileged connection with awareness [*Besonnenheit*] or rationality. August Wilhelm Schlegel (1818) developed his brother's binary opposition into a threefold distinction: inflective vs. affixive (or agglutinative) vs. grammarless languages, and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836) later replaced the unhappy term "grammarless" with "isolating" languages (see Forster, 2011, Chapter 4).

[3] Until the 1999 English edition, called *On language: on the diversity of human language construction and its influence on the mental development of the human species*, Humboldt's *…die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* was generally translated as "the spiritual development of mankind," but humankind has developed!

[4] Forster very plausibly describes Herder as the founder of nothing less than modern philosophy of language, hermeneutics, and translation theory.

[5] This belief can be summed up by Hume's claim (1748, Section 8, Part 1) that "Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature."

[6] Herder also suggests that allegorical interpretations often arise from the fact that a people's beliefs and values have changed over historical time, so that their traditional texts make claims that are incompatible with their current beliefs and values; not wishing to jettison their traditional texts, people give them allegorical readings. See Forster (2010, pp. 48-49).

differences *without positive terms*" (1922/2011, p. 120).[7] The exact meanings of words and concepts depend on (or are determined by) their complex systematic interrelationships with other words and concepts, and differ significantly from language to language. Hence meanings or concepts should *not* simply be equated with non-linguistic referents that they designate (or, come to that, with Platonic forms or subjective mental ideas that are prior to and autonomous of language, à la Locke or Hume). Neither are they to be sought in etymologies, as deconstructionists sometimes pretend to believe, but in *word-usage*, or the 'rules' for the uses of words at any given time (even though these rules might well be unformulated). This argument is often associated with the later Wittgenstein – e.g. "For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word 'meaning' – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (*Philosophical investigations*, #43) – but as Forster (2010, *passim*) shows, it is already to be found in Herder's *Fragments on recent German literature* of 1767-1768.[8]

This being the case, interpretation involves pinning down a speaker or writer's word-usages, and hence his or her meanings, while translation involves faithfully reproducing the original word-usages in a different language. Yet the *exact* reproduction of word-usages in translation would seem to be a doomed enterprise if we accept Schleiermacher's (c.1819/1986, p. 50) holistic argument that "The technical meaning of a term is to be derived from the unity of the word-sphere and from the rules governing the presupposition of this unity," by which he means that there is a (presupposed?) single meaning underlying all of a word's different senses (the ones that are separately defined in a good dictionary), as well as the senses of cognate word groups. Hence any alteration in a combined pattern of usages brings about a modification (however minor and subtle) to each of them.[9] This does not apply to obviously polysemous words with unrelated etymologies (*bank*, *lie*, *mole*, *seal*), but to words with associated senses. Thus according to Schleiermacher's argument, all the related meanings of the French adjective (and concept) *doux/douce* are semantically interdependent, even though in English they would need to be translated by many different words including *gentle*, *sweet*, *pleasant*, *tender*, *kind*, *soft*, *pale*, *light*, *mild*, etc. depending on whether one was talking about people, fabrics, sounds, colours, food, wine, the weather, etc.[10] On this account, there can be very few true 'translation equivalents.'

A further difficulty of translation, as Herder, Schleiermacher and Humboldt all argued, is that a language's grammatical system contributes to the nature of the concepts that can be expressed. An example here is evidentials: obligatory inflexions or expressions in many languages that express a speaker's attitude towards the truthfulness of a proposition – whether something has been directly observed, inferred, assumed, reported by someone else, etc. As Kay (1996, p. 110) points out, there are difficulties with translating an English text into

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[7] While Saussure is generally credited with having introduced this idea to linguistics, the underlying logic goes back to Spinoza, who argued in a letter in 1674 that the identity of everything in the universe depends on, or is determined by, its relations to other things, or to what it is not; in short, "determination is negation" (see Melamed, 2012, pp. 175-176).

[8] There does not seem to be a complete English translation of this work. See also Taylor's (1985, 2016) account of the expressive (rather than designative) uses of words, and how language is partly constitutive of our way of life, making possible new purposes, behaviour, and meanings. Taylor states that he is following on from the "HHH tradition," for Hamman, Herder, and Humboldt.

[9] See also Schleiermacher (1838/1998, pp. 33-37, 233-234).

[10] Kuhn (2000) uses *doux/douce* as an example of the difficulties (or impossibilities) of translation.

a language with a rich system of obligatory evidentials (e.g. Turkish and several neighbouring languages, and various Amerindian and Tibeto-Burmese languages). Conversely, translating all evidential markers *into* English (lexically) would imbue these details with undue importance.[11] Another example is gender marking on nouns in many inflected languages, which can be a meaningful resource for speakers, writers and translators. For example, Ariane Mnouchkine (2014) has translated and staged a deliberately feminized version of *Macbeth*, choosing hundreds of feminine nouns where, for example, the *Pléiade* translation by Jean-Michel Déprats (2002) has masculine nouns (or nouns with invariable masculine and feminine forms).[12] It is assumed that audiences notice the preponderance of these noun choices, at least subconsciously. Such effects of meaning cannot readily be achieved in English.

Where the concepts underlying word-usages do not exist in the target language, as might well be the case where historical or cultural distance is involved, Herder argues that the source language meaning can be expressed (or at least approximated) if the translator modifies or 'bends' the closest existing word-usages in the target language. This argument also had its 20th century proponents. For example, in a much-quoted article, Jakobson (1959/2004, p. 140) insisted that grammar should not cause problems for translation, because "If some grammatical category is absent in a given language, its meaning may be translated into this language by lexical means," and that "Whenever there is deficiency, terminology may be qualified and amplified by loan-words or loan-translations, neologisms or semantic shifts, and finally, by circumlocutions." However, using loan-words is not actually *translating*, and it is hard for an individual translator to impose either a neologism or a semantic shift on a language. Schleiermacher, who expanded on Herder's 'bending' approach in his famous essay "On the different methods of translating" in 1813, argued that it can only work if the target language is sufficiently flexible, and if there exist educated readers who are interested in and knowledgeable about foreign cultures and languages, and accustomed to such translation strategies. Furthermore, readers will require many examples of the 'bending' of a particular word-meaning, in a wide range of contexts, to be able to intuit or identify the revised rule for usage that is being followed. To this end, translators must consistently use the same 'bent' word to convey an unfamiliar concept or word-usage in the source language – though Schleiermacher recognizes that translating a single word consistently in a poetic work may run counter to the desire to replicate the sounds, metre and rhyme scheme of the source text.

In other words, if readers are to have much chance of seizing the concepts that translators intend to convey by 'bending' words, there needs to be an established practice (and a large volume) of what today is known as "foreignizing" translation, in which, as Schleiermacher (1813/2004, p. 49) put it, "the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him," bending the lexis and syntax of the target language, and creating a deliberate foreignness or strangeness, in the attempt to reproduce the meaning of

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[11] Heine and Kuteva (2005, p. 37), however, report on Yavapai and Paiute speakers in Arizona using evidentials in English, for example ending sentences with "they say," and describe this as "an enrichment of the English language" and "a new dimension of grammatical expression." Dixon (1997, p. 120) suggests that obligatory specification of evidence in English would make detectives' jobs much easier and politicians more honest!

[12] A notable example: in Act 4, Scene 1, when Macbeth recoils at the third apparition in the witches' cavern – "a child crowned" – and asks "What is this / That rises like the issue of a king," where Déprats has [le] *descendant d'un roi*, Mnouchkine has the feminine (and inventive, if rather bizarre) *la saillie d'un roi* (from the verb *saillir*, to mate with or cover). I owe the example of Mnouchkine to Aloise (2018).

the source text.[13] (The contrary method, of course, is what now usually goes by the name of "domesticating" translation, in which the translator "leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him.") Schleiermacher's opposition was not in fact a new one, and as Forster (2010) is quick to point out, Herder (1768/1985, p. 648) had similarly distinguished between an "accommodating" or adaptive [*anpassende*] approach to translation, in which the language and thought of the target text are made to accommodate to, or conform to, the source text, and a "lax" approach, in which they are allowed to diverge quite freely from those of the source text.

Herder and Schleiermacher argue that accommodating or foreignizing translation can potentially enrich the conceptual range and expressive potential of the target language – with the built-in safeguard that "the assimilating process of the language will cast out everything that was taken up only to fulfil a temporary need and is not truly in accordance with its nature" (Schleiermacher 1813/2004, p. 62). Yet there is no guarantee that foreignizing translation will succeed in its aim, and indeed at the end of the Fragments, Herder complains that critics of the work of an accommodating translator tend to "take everything daring in him to be a linguistic error, and approach the attempts of an artist like a pupil's exercises of apprenticeship."[14] Moreover, the idea that new concepts can be successfully introduced into a language – at least in the short term – by 'bending' words in translations, seems to involve a certain naiveté on the part of translators.

As I have argued elsewhere (MacKenzie, 2014, 2018), it is not at all certain that what Weinreich (1953) called "coordinative bilinguals" – people who supposedly have two conceptual systems, i.e. two sets of conceptual representations associated with two sets of words, one for each language – actually exist. Most translators with a profound knowledge of the source and target languages, however competent they are, are likely to be "compound bilinguals," with a partially fused or undifferentiated conceptual system linked to the two (or more) lexicons, containing all the information and connotations connected with the corresponding words in the different languages. As Cook (2002, pp. 6-7) puts it, because of the partial mental integration of languages, an L2 speaker's "knowledge of the second language" (after a certain threshold has been reached) "is typically not identical to that of a native speaker," while their "knowledge of their first language is in some respects not the same as that of a monolingual" either (see also Cook and Wei, 2016). Consequently, even when they are not consciously attempting to 'bend' a word's meaning, bilinguals might well use words in either their L1 or an L2 intending to communicate nuances (connotations or parts of combined conceptual representations) that simply sound odd to monolinguals who do not share their language combination. And when they 'bend' a word, or borrow one from another language, they might not be aware of the extent to which their usage, and their understanding of the source language concept, is unfamiliar to monolingual speakers of the target language. Herder and Schleiermacher, producing foreignized translations from the 'dead' languages of antiquity, did not share this modern understanding of the multi-competent or compound bilingual mind.

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[13] Thus Schleiermacher's (and Herder's) rationale is *not* that of Venuti's (2008, p. 16) more recent version of foreignization, which seeks to "restrain the ethnocentric violence of translation" in "the hegemonic English-language nations," and resist "racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism"; they are merely concerned with reproducing the meaning of the source text.

[14] Quoted (and translated) in Forster (2010, p. 396). Proponents of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and linguistic "multi-competence" make much the same complaint about the attitude of orthodox language teaching theorists to the daring usages of L2 speakers (see MacKenzie, 2018, Chapter 2).

For example, I might decide (using what seems to be a fairly undifferentiated plurilingual concept in my head) to translate the German word *Bildung* in English by *formation* (not unlike the French *formation* or the Spanish *formación*), or perhaps *self-formation*. *Formation* is *not* generally used in English to mean education or a process of becoming or self-cultivation or personal transformation or development or maturation. The *OED* defines it as "The action or process of forming; a putting or coming into form; creation, production," and gives illustrative historical usages referring to the formation of monasteries, tenses, barnacles, governments, and chemical salts. We also talk about rock, cloud and troop formations. But if I translated *Bildung* by *formation* often enough, perhaps in inverted commas that signalled a 'bending,' in an English translation of a text concerning *Bildung* by Goethe or Humboldt or Nietzsche, wouldn't the context show that I was using the word to mean some kind of self-cultivation, and wouldn't the word's root (*form*) somehow indicate the German sense of creation, image, or shape? I suspect that the answer to this is "no," unless the reader also knew French or Spanish.

There is a difference, however, between trying to 'bend' a target language word to accommodate a concept one understands perfectly in a source language – because one is *gebildet*! – and coming to understand wholly unfamiliar concepts, perhaps from an earlier historical period. Moreover, conceptual discrepancies arising from cultural and historical distance can be of two kinds: there are those that are or were part of a shared language, and those that result from an author's own conceptual innovations. Schleiermacher (1813) suggests that individual conceptual innovations and modifications are a constitutive part of great literature and philosophy, the kind of writing that *should* endure and be read at other times and places, and that the linguistic and conceptual changes that occur over time are all innovations that originate with individuals and get taken up in the culture as a whole.

In his *Hermeneutics* (again drawing on Herder), [15] Schleiermacher argues that a twofold interpretive process is necessary to come to an understanding of an author's conceptual innovations. Firstly, there is grammatical interpretation, which involves the standard, shared uses of words. The interpreter needs a systematic knowledge of the language used by the author and his original audience, and must determine the meanings of words according to their immediate context (Schleiermacher 1838/1998, pp. 30, 44). But to this must be added psychological (or technical) interpretation, used for what seem to be individual and idiosyncratic uses of words and concepts, and for cases of ambiguity. Here, the interpreter needs to put himself in the position of the author, and try to intuit authorial intentions, by making tentative hypotheses based on the text in question and on other texts by the author. As Schleiermacher puts it, in note form, "Grammatical. The person with their activity disappears and appears only as the organ of the language. Technical. The language with its determining power disappears and appears only as the organ of the person, in the service of their individuality" (p. 94). Psychological interpretation involves a divinatory method – in the sense of the French *deviner* (to guess) rather than the Latin *divinus* (divine) or *divinare* (to foresee or foretell) – "in which one, so to speak, transforms oneself into the other person and tries to understand the individual element directly" (p. 92). Of course this doesn't guarantee

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[15] Forster (2010, p. 334) states that Schleiermacher's theory of interpretation (especially the need to supplement grammatical with psychological interpretation, and the divinatory method of the latter) "for the most part merely draws together and systematizes ideas that already lay scattered throughout a number of Herder's works." Various of Schleiermacher's arguments were also anticipated by Ernesti (1761), F. Schlegel (1797; 1800), and Ast (1808); see Forster (2011, Chapter 2).

the success or truth of the interpreter's conjectures: as Rajan (1990) has pointed out, the logic of psychological explication actually licenses even the most implausible interpretations – unless you are in the "death of the author" camp, all you need to do is claim (while trying to keep a straight face) that your reading comes from an empathetic insight into the author's psyche (see MacKenzie, 2002, Chapter 3).

The translator is also faced with the difficulty of enabling the reader to distinguish an author's conceptual innovations from other unfamiliar concepts that were widely shared in the source culture. Schleiermacher suggests using relatively older words from the target language to translate words that were conceptually conventional for the author (even if the concepts are unfamiliar to the reader of the translation), and relative neologisms in the target language for an author's conceptually innovative usages. But he is well aware that this might compromise the logic of using – and bending – the best available word in the target language to convey an unfamiliar concept.

For all of these reasons – the "unity of the word-sphere," the distinctive resources of a source language grammar, the vagaries of psychological interpretation, the difficulty of distinguishing what is conceptually innovative in an author from what is conventional for his time and place, the difficulty of successfully modifying or bending meanings and usages in the target language, etc. – translations often seem to fall short of communicating the full semantic content of difficult texts from other times and places. But as Venuti (2013, p. 110) suggests, translation always involves both losses and gains. There is indeed "an irreparable loss" – of the sound and order of the words in the source text, and all the resonances, connotations, allusions and intertextual echoes these words carry for the reader in the source culture – but translators "attempt to compensate for this […] by controlling an exorbitant gain." Every word in a translation also has its own resonances and connotations and allusions, and its musicality, giving additional meanings which "inhere in every choice the translator makes" (p. 110). And of course – and this needs to be said more often – "the translator has chosen every single word in the translation" (p. 111). So translation is necessarily transformative: "any translation will at once fall short of and exceed whatever correspondence a translator hopes to establish by supporting different meanings, values, and functions for its receptors" (p. 193).

Of course very few translators today earn their living by translating challenging poetic or philosophical texts from antiquity, and indeed Schleiermacher wouldn't even accord most of today's translators that title. He sought (1813/2004, pp. 44-45) to distinguish between true translation, required in "the areas of science and art," and the mundane kinds of translation required in business transactions, journalism, travel literature, etc. For Schleiermacher, a translation of the second kind merely "transmits a previously described sequence of events into another tongue," using phrases that are "determined in advance either by law or by usage and mutually agreed-upon conventions," and the intermediaries involved in such domains are mere interpreters rather than translators proper. But few people today accept this dubious distinction; the mood of the times is closer to Steiner's (1998) somewhat hyperbolic claims that "a human being performs an act of translation, in the full sense of the word, when receiving a speech-message from any other human being" (p. 48), and "The mystery of meaningful transfer is, in essence, the same when we translate the next bill of lading or the *Paradiso*" (p. 265).

3. Different horizons

Steiner's claim that receiving a speech-message (and, by extension, reading a text), even in a monolingual situation, amounts to an act of translation implies that "the mystery of meaningful transfer" is involved in *all* understanding, whether of utterances, source texts or translations. In fact, it seems likely that meaning is rarely transferred unchanged but is instead to some degree reinterpreted. Everyday life throws up endless examples, even without the obstacles of historical or cultural distance. Some of us experience this when reading vexing reviews of our articles and books: everybody seems to interpret every text differently, and to put forward very different summaries or paraphrases. In everyday life, everybody regularly experiences differing interpretations or construals of events in verbal interactions with family and friends, however much empathy is involved. One also quickly discovers in a translation class that virtually all the linguistic constructions in any given text – whether words, expressions, or general syntactic patterns – can be, and are, translated in many different ways, with extremely rare one-to-one mappings across languages. One can also analyse the mystery of meaningful transfer in dozens of published English translations of the *Paradiso* (though there are even more translations of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*).

Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, draws on Heidegger's (1927/1962, pp. 191-192) argument that "An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us," but instead is necessarily "founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception," to argue that "all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice" (1960/2004, p. 272). In Gadamer's (translated) words, everyone interprets on the basis of "prejudices and fore-meanings" that "are not at his free disposal" (p. 295). Everyone has a point of view (a term originating in Leibniz's work on optics),[16] or in Gadamer's terminology, a horizon – "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (p. 301), "beyond which it is impossible to see" (p. 305). Indeed, "*the prejudices of the individual […] constitute the historical reality of his being*" (p. 278). Certainly, an interpreter who *wants* to understand a text or discourse will try to be on guard against "the tyranny of hidden prejudices" (p. 272) and "the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought" (p. 269). He or she will attempt to focus "on the things themselves" (p. 269), so that inappropriate fore-conceptions are replaced by more suitable ones, and "the text can present itself in all its otherness" (pp. 271-272). In fact, "Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation" (p. 350). But even so, we will never perceive a text's original meaning, because of the particular, historically specific form of our "pre-understandings." For Gadamer, "understanding is always interpretation" (p. 306), and "we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*" (p. 296). Meaning "is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter" (p. 296), and the best we can hope for is to effect a "fusion of horizons" – our own, and that of "the other," a partner in conversation or the author of a text. In short, Gadamer rejects the possibility of the kind of empathetic reading that Herder called *Einfühlung* (literally "feeling one's way into"), Schleiermacher called psychological or technical interpretation, and Dilthey (1900/1972) later called *Nacherleben* ("reliving") – a transposition into the author's linguistic context, plus an intuitive historical re-experiencing or duplication of his or her mental and emotional state.

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[16] One might also relate Leibniz's (1715-1716/1989) *principle of the identity of indiscernibles* to translation: two indiscernible objects are in fact identical, one and the same object, sharing all their attributes, with no difference between them. This is clearly never the case with a source text and a translation – not even Pierre Menard's *Don Quixote* (Borges 1939).

Clearly, not everybody accepts Gadamer's position. Forster (2011) for example, is very hostile, describing it as "misguided and indeed baneful" (p. 310), and insisting that however much interpretations change over time, an interpreter's task is to recapture a text's original meaning. He believes that this *can* be done by Herderian empathy – feeling one's way into, but not necessarily *sharing*, an interpreted subject's sensations (thereby circumventing the "mystery" of the transfer of meaning). Forster makes a prima facie distinction between understanding a text and explicating it, applying it to a current situation, translating it, and so forth, and says we should resist the temptation to assimilate a text's meaning to our own (or to other more familiar) meanings and thoughts. And he may well be right – perhaps we *should* at least *try* to understand authors on their own terms; but to what extent is this possible?

There is no reason to doubt that there are countless word-usages and underlying concepts in other languages that could only be explained with difficulty in English, and which would cause perplexity if used as loanwords or if a translator tried to 'bend' existing English usages to express them. But even in cases where one understands every word in a verbal exchange or a text, it can be hard to fully comprehend other people's beliefs, however much one tries to feel one's way into their standpoints.

To take a famous example, Galileo probably had difficulty understanding Cardinal Bellarmine's refusal to look through his telescope to see the moons orbiting Jupiter for himself. Achieving "an imaginative reproduction" of the cardinal's "perceptual and affective sensations" – which Forster (2002, p. xvii) describes as a key aspect of Herder's *Einfühlung* – might not have worked, because Bellarmine was refusing to avail himself of the perceptual sensations offered by the telescope, on the grounds that the Bible was a better source of evidence about the nature of the heavens. Rorty (1980, p. 330) argues that Bellarmine and Galileo were operating with fundamentally different "grids" or epistemic systems, while Kuhn (1962/2012) would say that like scientists before and after a revolutionary paradigm change, they lived in "different worlds." But as Boghossian (2006, p. 123) insists, this is "indefensible rhetorical excess": Galileo and Bellarmine certainly had differing concepts of astronomy, planets, moons, orbits, telescopy, demonstration, evidence, proof, Holy Writ, etc., but they were talking to each other in the same room, sharing a huge number of other perceptions and beliefs.

If Galileo and Bellarmine found it difficult to understand each other in the same room, it is more difficult for readers today to feel their way into the heads of writers with a pre-Copernican, Newtonian, Darwinian, Nietzschean, Freudian, Einsteinian (add the thinkers of your choice) mindset. The Copernican model of the universe may have diminished belief in the necessary truth of Holy Writ over the past 400 years, but Kant was by no means the last person who "had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" (1787/1998, p. 117), and people with a scientific outlook can easily find themselves drawn up short by religious arguments today. In cases such as these, and many others, it does indeed seem that "a fusion of horizons" is the best that can be hoped for.

4. Shared horizons but differing construals and interpretations

Gadamer (1960/2004, p. 296) argues that "The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience," but also depends on "the historical situation of the interpreter." But at any given moment in history, or at any time and place, how much of an interpreter's "horizon" is shared with others and how much is individual and possibly idiosyncratic? Despite the widespread use of terms like "speech communities," it is a truism among linguists of all persuasions that no two

individuals use language in exactly the same way. Experimental cognitive linguistics seems to show that even people who might be thought to share a horizon (and who understand each other effortlessly) actually construe experience and verbalize the same or similar experiences differently.

For example, Croft (2010) argues that because of their differing prior exposures to language, speaker and hearers in any speech situation use words and constructions differently. Furthermore, people construe events differently, so that "The hearer of an utterance […] cannot be certain of the precise construal intended by the speaker" (p. 11). More importantly, given that no two situations are ever identical, "any choice of words and constructions will not precisely characterize the construal of the experience being communicated anyway. Thus there is a fundamental indeterminacy in the construal of a scene and its interpretation in a communicative act" (pp. 11-12). This bold claim goes against the orthodox view in cognitive and functional linguistics and variationist sociolinguistics, and indeed in literary and translation theory, that the slightest difference in linguistic form necessarily corresponds to a difference in meaning.

Because no two real-life situations that speakers could describe are identical, Croft (2009, 2010) demonstrates his case by analysing alternative verbalizations in a controlled situation – 20 English retellings of Chafe's (1980) "Pear story," a short, wordless film showing a set of events that can easily be narrated as a single story. Croft divides the oral narratives recorded by Chafe into fifty chunks and demonstrates the massive amount of morphosyntactic variation in the ways the events are described.[17]

The divergent verbalizations might seem to reflect very different conceptualizations or construals of the different scenes, but Croft downplays the significance of the variation. He argues that differences of verbalization are inevitable, and result from people's unique histories of prior uses of all linguistic forms, and minor mismatches among conceptualizations of an event. Moreover, such differences are insignificant: "different verbalizations of the same experience are communicatively more or less equivalent, or at least not a priori distinguishable" (2010, p. 42). There is still enough common ground to make successful communication possible: "absolute precision is not necessary for success in the function of language in the real world. As a consequence, there is a high degree of variation in verbalization of similar situations in a single speech community (and even by a single speaker)" (2009, p. 418). Even though meaning has to be described in terms of word-usages, it seems that people use different words to express very similar meanings, and the same speakers use different words in similar circumstances on different occasions.

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[17] Chafe and his collaborators also analysed retellings of the story by speakers of nine other languages, allowing comparison of different ways of construing events. Berman and Slobin (1994) later analysed children's retellings of a picture book (*Frog, Where are You?*). Slobin (1996) shows how speakers of different languages tend to verbalize events and situations differently, picking out the characteristics of an event that are readily encodable in the obligatory grammatical categories of their language (particularly aspectual ones). Slobin suggests that "in acquiring a native language, the child learns particular ways of thinking for speaking" (p. 76), a clear form of linguistic relativity. Slobin (2005) shows how translations of narratives tend to add or remove nuances in accordance with the characteristics of a given target language.

5. Conclusion

This detour into cognitive linguistics suggests that our opening question – Can *everything* be translated? – should be considered in a new light. It seems safe to say that there are infinitely many things that cannot be translated with exactitude from one language to another – possibly entire concepts (who knows? usually not the reader of the translation), as well as innumerable nuances of meaning created by a language's semantic webs and grammatical constructions, and musical effects that depend on the sound-patterns specific to a language. But what if all these nuances and effects *were* to be carried across? No reader would understand them exactly the same way as either the author or translator, because we all interpret texts somewhat differently. Everyone who actually tries to feel their way into an author's (or speaker's) sensations and perceptions does so from a somewhat different perspective or horizon. And there is a fundamental indeterminacy in communication and language use in general. So yes, things invariably get lost in translation, and good translators fret about losing shades of meaning and the frequent lack of *le mot juste*. But it seems likely that there are more meanings and effects that are intended by the author *and* carried across by the translator which readers either fail to notice or re-interpret, than there are traces of meaning and poetic effects that have not been (and cannot be) translated. Because we understand in a different way, if we understand at all.

6. References

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