

DICTIONARY OF UNTRANSLATABLES: A PHILOSOPHICAL LEXICON

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This extraordinary book, a huge dictionary of philosophical terms from many languages, is a translation of *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, originally published in 2004, the brainchild of the French philosopher Barbara Cassin. If the original project was paradoxical, then the present version is doubly so: not just a dictionary of untranslatable words, but a translation of this dictionary. Rather than despair at the self-undermining self-referentiality of the whole idea, the editors rejoice in it. Indeed, moving the word “untranslatable” to the front of the English title proudly asserts the paradox even more forcefully than the original French title does, and forms what the English-language editor Emily Apter calls “an organising principle of the entire project”.

In her preface, Apter comments (apparently without irony) that “the extent of our translation task became clear only when we realised that a straightforward conversion of the French edition into English simply would not work”. She is right, of course: translation is almost never a straightforward conversion. This is why it is such a fertile subject for philosophy. Like so much in philosophy, theorising about translation (and of course, about the related concept of meaning) lurches between two unappealing extremes. At one extreme, translation is conceived of in terms of literal identity of meaning; at the other, it is simply impossible. As Derrida put it: “In a

sense, nothing is untranslatable; but *in another sense*, everything is untranslatable ... it is easy for me always to hold firm between these two hyperboles which are fundamentally the same, and always translate each other”.

Derrida’s point that the two extremes or hyperboles are “fundamentally the same” amounts to this: the only reason for thinking that translation is impossible (the second extreme) is because it must require literal identity of meaning (the first extreme), and this is clearly impossible. One reason why the first extreme (which the editors call the “mapping or isomorphic” conception of translation) is impossible is because identity is transitive, and translation isn’t. In other words, if translation requires identity of meaning, then if A translates B and B translates C, then A and C are identical in meaning. A moment’s reflection shows this cannot be right: “castle” can be translated as *Schloss*, and “Schloss” as *château*, but the Château de Chenonceaux is not a castle in anyone’s book. Translation is not identity of meaning. So we do not show that translation is impossible by showing that there is no identity of meaning. Derrida was right.

However, it is important not to exaggerate when we reject the mapping conception of translation. Google Translate does work, and it is getting better daily through the strength of its algorithms and the sheer brute force of its data-mining. It does not provide identities of meaning, but it does give word-by-word translations and it does this mechanically. Google Translate will not get very far with translating a poem, of course, or with the untranslatables of this dictionary. An untranslatable is defined here as either “a term that is left untranslated as it is transferred from language to language”, or one that is “typically subject to mistranslation and retranslation”. By these criteria, as Rémi Brague points out in his excellent entry on “Europe”, the word “philosophy” itself is “the untranslatable *par excellence* ... ‘Philosophy’ itself remained transcribed rather than translated into languages other than Greek. Only the Dutch language coined a word *wijsbegeerte* which was a calque of the etymology of *philosophia*” (actually, Hungarian invented one too — *bölcsélet* — but the basic point remains).

Many other words in the dictionary are like this — a famous example is Heidegger’s *Dasein*, which in ordinary German simply means *existence*, but whose precise philosophical meaning is the subject of endless debate, and so is rarely translated (except by clunking

hyphenated constructions like “Being-there”). Watching a philosopher trying to outline the delicate connotations can be a bit like when a native speaker tells you that their language contains a word that is, you know, *really* untranslatable. The Danish are proud of the untranslatability of their word *hygge* — which is a word for an atmosphere of welcoming cosiness, applied to a place or social event, as when you (e.g.) spend time with friends and family, eating well in a warm room. There: I’ve told you what it means. Heidegger’s *Dasein* is like that, but it will just take a bit longer to explain.

Other philosophical words have gained their meanings through a creative process of neologism, mistranslation and retranslation. Sometimes considering this process in too much detail can give rise to spurious questions, as far as philosophy is concerned. “Consciousness” is *conscience* in French (*coscienza* in Italian, *conciencia* in Spanish), and these French, Spanish and Italian words also translate the English “conscience”. Although “consciousness” and “conscience” are etymologically related, they have for centuries expressed completely different concepts in English, and these concepts are expressed by different words in other languages (in German, for instance). Étienne Balibar’s entry on “consciousness” struggles with the conceptual and historical connections between consciousness and conscience; but for the English reader, the struggle is an unnecessary artefact of the fact that his entry was originally about the French word *conscience*.

This example illustrates that the dictionary cannot really be used as a dictionary of philosophy in the usual way — something to which you might direct students, for example, to help them get clear accounts of complex concepts. And some of its content is just inaccurate. In an entry on “Epistemology” (the theory of knowledge) Catherine Chevalley makes the odd comment that “it remains difficult in French to discuss the import of Bayesianism [a dominant contemporary probability-based theory of knowledge, deriving from the 18th century English cleric Thomas Bayes], or different interpretations of the notion of probability”. If Chevalley had consulted Jean-Pierre Cléro’s entry on “Chance/Probability”, she would have found there an extensive discussion of both Bayes *and* different interpretations of probability (written originally in French, of course). One central question in this debate is whether talk about the probability of an event is attributing a property to the event itself (e.g. the probability of a coin landing heads is 50%) or whether it is just

an expression of a degree of subjective certainty or ignorance (I am 50% sure that it will land heads). The first is probability in the objective sense, the second the subjective sense. This distinction is not a trivial one: some see it as connected to the distinction between treating the probabilistic nature of quantum mechanics (say) as an irreducible feature of reality, from treating it as an expression of our ignorance (as in the so-called 'hidden variable' theories). Cléro distinguishes between objective and subjective interpretations, calling the first "probability" and the second "chance". Unfortunately, everyone in contemporary Anglophone philosophy uses the word "chance" for objective probability, and the unqualified "probability" for both the subjective and the objective (Cléro does not refer to a single work published after 1975). Caveat lector!

The best articles — e.g. those by historians of philosophy of the calibre of Brague or Alain de Libera — tease out the complex relations of meaning and etymology across the languages of Europe. But the choice and relative size of entries is eccentric. We have "demos" but not "democracy"; the very different ideas of "description" and "depiction" get a shared entry; "idea" gets a half page, "Imagination" the same. "Event" gets a quarter page, but "Ereignis" (as used by Heidegger) gets a page and a half. "Perception" is paired with "Apperception" (Leibniz's word for self-consciousness), and the author Michel Fichant takes the history of the subject only as far as Fichte (1845). The historical material is valuable, but the entry should have been called "Perception and Apperception from Leibniz to Fichte".

If it is a dictionary, it is closer to those of Pierre Bayle (1697) or Dr Johnson (1755). In 1300 pages it presents a very specific conception of some central concepts/terms from philosophy, and their history and etymology. Many of the entries are illuminating, but what is most fascinating about the book is its partial vision of a fragment of European culture, through the dissection of its philosophical vocabulary. Brague observes that philosophising in the vernacular in Europe began with Ramon Llull writing in Catalan in the 13th century. But it still took some time for national identities to impose themselves on philosophical discourse, because of the international intellectual role of Latin, and then of French. One of the greatest German philosophers, G.W. Leibniz, wrote no philosophical works in German. Things had changed by the time Heidegger pronounced that "only our German language has a deep and creative philosophical character to compare with the Greek".

Despite the amount of attention paid to Heidegger in this book, the editors would surely demur. For this book is, more than anything, a loving celebration of philosophy as conceived by French philosophers. The editors are explicit about this: Apter says that the book is “a direct challenge to the preeminence of Anglo-analytic philosophical traditions ... the imperium of English [*sic.*] thought was strategically curtailed”. This “skewed distribution of emphasis” is described as “clearly an important part of the polemical *raison d’être* of the French original”.

Certainly English-language philosophy (not the same as “English thought”!) is conspicuously absent. The so-called “ordinary language” philosophers are here (Austin, Cavell, Ryle, Wittgenstein) but very little else. Brague’s long entry on “Europe” devotes only three sentences to English. But like it or not, “Anglo-analytic” philosophy dominates the academy in the US, the UK, Australasia and many parts of continental Europe; and like it or not, the French approach embodied in this dictionary is on the decline worldwide. One way to see the dictionary, then, is as an extended lament for the decline of French as a “preeminent language of philosophy”, in an intellectual context where English has become what Apter calls “the singular language of universal knowledge”.

Anyone familiar with how philosophy in Europe developed in the 20th century — and with 20th century history more generally — will understand something of how this came about, and also therefore why the 2004 edition of the dictionary has been described as “a surprise hit” in France. The worry is not so much that the dictionary is Franco-centric, but that its provincialism may mislead those who do not know anything about what the rest of the world thinks.

The Franco-centrism is brought to self-parodic heights, though, in Alain Badiou’s entry on “French”, a remarkable paean to the French language as a language of philosophy. Obviously as frustrated as the editors are by the linguistic imperialism of English, he remarks plaintively that “the major creative figures in philosophy in French, Descartes, Bergson, Sartre, Deleuze, and Lacan, all claimed the right to write in their native language, in sum, the right to *freedom* of language”. It’s hard to know what claiming this right consisted in, given that no-one was stopping any of these people from writing in their native language. These days, of course, there is pressure on scholars worldwide, in a huge number of academic fields, to write in English. In the natural sciences it is

simply impossible to succeed without writing in English. But this fact — regrettable or not, and not explicitly discussed by Badiou — has nothing to do with whether Bergson *et al* were claiming some sort of right to freedom of language.

But it gets worse. Badiou claims that philosophical French is “a language of women and the working class rather than of scientists”. Philosophy in French is “violently polemical... ignoring consensus ... still opposed to the academy it speaks (politically) to the public and not to colleagues”. The fact that “philosophy in French is political” is supposed to be a fact about the language itself: “the latent universalism of any use of French, from Descartes to the present, rests entirely on the belief that the *essence of language is syntax*”. The essence of language may be syntax, as Chomsky has argued, but this is not specific to French, and has nothing to do with political freedom. This bizarre association of ideas reaches its climax in Badiou’s claim that Descartes’s dedication of his *Principles of Philosophy* to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia is “is in reality a basic democratic intention that turns philosophical discourse towards discussion and seduction, towards Venus rather than Minerva, moving it as far as possible away from academic or scientific entrenchment”.

It’s a good question what happened to French philosophical prose between Voltaire and Lacan, but it is not one addressed by Badiou, nor by anyone else in this dictionary. In her preface, Apter discusses Badiou’s entry at length, perhaps with a little embarrassment. “National ontology” she says, is “strictly speaking, anathema to Badiou”. A lot must be contained in that “strictly speaking”, especially given that French is “close to being an Adamic language in Badiou’s ascription”. What can this possibly mean? Apter struggles: “it lends itself to logical formalism, axioms, maxims and universal principles. Above all, for Badiou, the French language is conducive to the politicisation of expression, unseating predicates through the play of substitutions and the art of the imperious question”.

Certainly Badiou himself is a master of the imperious question. But his remarks about the French language bring to mind Wittgenstein’s joke about the French politician who “wrote that it was a peculiarity of the French language that in its words occur in the order in which one thinks them”. In fact, this is all the more odd because Badiou himself has written a book on Wittgenstein.

So perhaps it is deliberate; could Badiou be making fun of those “Anglo-Saxons” who strive for simplicity and clarity in their philosophical prose and mock the “obscurantism” of the French? Is the joke on the Anglo-Saxons and the “imperium of English thought”? It’s hard to tell. As Barbara Cassin herself observes, “nothing is harder than to translate a witticism”.