Philosophy of Translation

An Interdisciplinary Approach

Filosofia della traduzione

Un approccio interdisciplinare

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What do we translate when we translate?

Jorge Martínez

Aratta and Babel

It is practically impossible not to make a reference to the story of the Tower of Babel when one approaches the topic of translation. Nevertheless, this tale is preceded by a similar narration that dates approximately from the 21st century B.C., that is about 600 years before the Biblical story in Genesis. The similarities between both writings are overabounding, particularly the ethical implications in both.

This earlier narrative is a Sumerian poem of 600 verses that N.S. Kramer names *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*[1]. This historic document, engraved on a square clay tablet, is preserved in the Istanbul Museum[2]. The poem describes a golden age in which men lived in peace and prosperity. Regarding our interests, all spoke the same language and worshiped the same god, *Enlil*. However, the Sumerian god of Wisdom, *Enki*, decided to confuse the words of men. For what reason? In the poem, the motives are not explicit. However, Kramer presumes that *Enki* was envious of *Enlil*, since the latter had greater influence on men. Let us recall briefly, that this same *Enki* would have been responsible for having unleashed a Flood[3]. In such occasion, had humanity not relied on the intervention of *Enlil* to mitigate the consequences, the catastrophe would have been much worse. However, in

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[1] S.N. Kramer, *"The Babel of Tongues": A Sumerian Version*, in «Journal of the American Oriental Society», 88, 1 (1968) pp. 108-111.

[2] I follow J. Vicari, *La torre de Babel*, traducción de Felipe Garrido, FCE, México 2006, pp. 114-115.

[3] Let us recall that the first account of the Flood is also previous to the text of Genesis. This narration is found in the Songs of Gilgamesh which was written between 2.500 y el 2.000 BC.

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Enki's second attempt against men, *Enlil* did not intervene and allowed the people to continue speaking different tongues, or, more precisely, languages – that is, a verbal way of communication with characteristics common to a mother tongue, but without universal reach.

Describing the Sumerian golden age, the poem follows:

> Once upon a time there was no snake, there was no Scorpion,
> There was no hyena, there was no lion,
> There was no wild dog, nor Wolf,
> There was no fear, nor terror,
> Man had no rival.
> (…) Throughout the whole universe, people in unison praised
> Enlil in one tongue…
> Then Enki, the lord of abundance, (whose) commands are trustworthy,
> The lord of wisdom, who understands the land,
> The leader of gods,
> Endowed with wisdom, the lord of Eridu,
> Changed the speech in their mouths,
> Brought contention,
> Into the speech of man that, (until then),
> Had been one[4].

The disappearance of the unified language, as Vicari points out, «will give rise to man's use of capacities that he had not yet manifested, both beneficial and disastrous. It is necessary that history be written»[5].

In lines 501 to 504 of the poem, the Sumerian hero *Enmerkar*, founder and king of the city of *Uruk*, home of Gilgamesh, wants to communicate with the ruler of the city-state of *Aratta* (the precise location of which is unknown, although we know it was located somewhere in present-day Iran.) *Enmerkar* desired that the lord of *Aratta* become his vassal and that his subjects provide him gold, silver and semi-precious stones, so that he may build various shrines. In particular, he wanted to build a temple in *Eridu*, the city of *Enki*. But how was he to communicate with the Lord of *Aratta*, considering that there no longer was a single unified language?

Enmmerkar, therefore, invents writing. This has two consequences. The first being that he was able to communicate with the Lord of *Aratta*. Secondly, of no lesser importance, is that of leaving a mark on history. Line 525 of the poem recounts that the ruler of *Aratta* could read the writing without any difficulty. How is it possible that writing marks a return to the unique language, I mean, an exit from the confusion of languages? This becomes an obvious question to one of a western mentality because our western writing system and characters attempt to depict phonemes. This is not the case in languages that are transcribed in pictographic characters. As Vicari points out, «this is what happens in China today, where a message in Pekingese, written in ideograms several millennia ago, will be read in Cantonese without difficulty, even though the Pekingese and Cantonese do not speak the same language!»[6].

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[4] S.N. Kramer, *"The Babel of Tongues": A Sumerian Version*, cit., p. 109.

[5] J. Vicari, *La torre de Babel*, cit., p. 115.

Thus, being considerably older than the biblical account, the story of *Enmerkar* and the ruler of *Aratta* is the first testimony that we have of the confusion of languages and its immediate consequence: the invention of writing. In addition, all is within the framework of divine intervention, in which the ethical aspects are not of minor consequence. I will return later on this point.

In any case, although having *logos* – the word[7] – is what distinguishes us as a species and is characteristic of all the human beings, it is surprising that there is not a single *logos* common to all.

Writing appears as a possible redemption to this catastrophic situation because it allows to momentarily compensate for the incalculable losses derived from the appearance of the diversity of languages. Vicari says: «Who can establish the social cost of incomprehension, the economic costs that affect exchanges, the material cost of translations? And from an evolutionary perspective, who can justify the advantages of this form of biodiversity?»[8].

This apparent anthropological degradation, caused by the fact that the same species does not speak the same language, appears, at first sight, as an evolutionary disadvantage. George Steiner enquires over why *homo sapiens*, although genetically and physiologically uniform in almost all aspects and subject to similar evolutionary opportunities and similar bio-environmental restrictions, speaks thousands of mutually incomprehensible languages, sometimes even in those separated by very short distances[9].

However, from an equally evolutionary perspective, Steiner argues: «*After Babel* argues that it is the constructive powers of language to conceptualize the world which have been crucial to man's survival in the face of ineluctable biological constraints, this is to say in the face of death. It is the miraculous – I do not retract the term – capacity of grammars to generate counter-factuals, 'if' propositions and, above all, future tenses, which have empowered our species to hope, to reach far beyond the extinction of the individual. We endure, we endure creatively due to our imperative ability to say 'No' to reality, to build fictions of alterity, of dreamt or willed or awaited 'otherness' for our consciousness to inhabit (…)»[10].

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[6] *Ivi*, p. 116.

[7] Aristotle, *Polítics* 1253a 9-10.

[8] J. Vicari, *La torre de Babel*, cit., p. 117.

[9] G. Steiner, *After Babel, Aspects of Language and Translation*, Oxford University Press, New York 1998, Prologue to the 2nd edition, p. xiii.

But is the underlying question really answered? Not entirely, since this does not explain the diversity of languages. Steiner's explanation accounts for the diachronic approach but does not explain the synchrony of diversity.

Now the Bible. In *Genesis* 1:28, God commands, among other things, to «fill the world». Man is ordered to have many children and to not remain in the same territory, but rather to disperse and inhabit the whole world. This mandate remains true even after all of life has been destroyed during the flood (*Genesis* 9: 7). The descendants of Noah are numerous. All speak the same language and begin to populate the land until they find a plain in the region of *Sinar* where they decide to settle. They decide to make bricks and cook them in fire. Immediately afterwards, as the biblical story tells us (*Genesis* 11: 3-4), they decide to build a city and a tower that reaches the sky.

The motive behind why men make this decision implies a new disobedience to God. Men decide not to continue spreading around the world, and instead decide to stay put and build a city. It is worth recalling that the most important action of the first murderer, Cain, was precisely the same: that of founding a city (*Genesis* 4: 17). Whether it be coincidence or not, the foundation of Rome, according to the legend, was also preceded by a homicide: that of Romulus against his brother Remus.

In the biblical account of the tower of Babel, the foundation of the city precedes a new divine curse. ¿Is founding a city truly an offense against God? Probably not, however, there is a detail in this genesis story that we cannot overlook: the city and the tower are not built from natural materials provided directly by God but rather by humans: bricks and tar instead of stones and mortar. Clearly, there is an explicit intention to not disperse throughout the earth and instead looking to becoming famous, which, according to the biblical narrative, mutually imply each other. It is of note, that the descendants of Noah intend to «becoming famous» in the eyes of other men, not before God. This search for fame will hold them responsible for having disobeyed a divine mandate. Since men are able to do this, God foresees that they will be able to do anything. Therefore, the punishment is laid out and can be considered a second expulsion from Paradise: the expulsion from a condition in which everyone understood each other.

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[10] *Ivi*, pp. xiii-xiv.

Divine mercy is infinite. Immediately after the original sin and before the expulsion from the garden of Eden, God Himself «made clothes from the skins of animals for the man and his wife to wear» (*Genesis* 3: 21), as a mother would with a child before leaving on a long trip. When He curses Cain (*Genesis* 4: 11-12), out of fear that someone may kill him, the Lord «puts a sign [on Cain], so that whoever would find him would not kill him» (*Genesis* 4:15). And when He punishes men for their arrogance and creates languages «so that they do not understand each other» (Genesis 11: 7), when he «confused the language of all the inhabitants of the earth, and from there scattered them all over the world» (Genesis 11: 9), it is evident that He is not opposed to learning the language of others, thus leaving open the possibility for translation. Above all, however, this topographical dispersion will be opposed by spiritual re-unification in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As we already know, this new manifestation of divine mercy is the gift of tongues to the Apostles. This is, therefore, a dynamic of punishment-forgiveness, in which redemption is gifted in the same elements that caused the initial wrath of God. The Lord provides clothes to Adam and Eve who were naked, protects Cain from a violent death at the hands of others and, in this case that interests us, grants the gift of tongues to the Apostles on Pentecost. The spiritual reunification of humanity is made less painful.

In summary, both the Sumerian-Akkadian mythographers, as well as the Hebrew authors of Genesis, were convinced that «there was a time when all men spoke the same tongue»[11].

However, as Kramer emphasizes, there is a difference between the two writings regarding the origin of the confusion of languages. In the biblical account, the appearance of languages is God's punishment to men for their arrogance and disobedience. In the Sumerian poem, on the other hand, the rivalry and dispute is between gods, not between gods and men. However, there is no doubt that the ethical motive is the main cause of the linguistic Big Bang, setting aside who is responsible for this punishment.

I think it would be of great interest to investigate whether the Hebrew author was inspired by the Sumerian account of the appearance of languages. This would permit to empty it of the eminently moral spirit with which the Hebrews relate with Yahweh. As Paul Johnson sustains, the god with whom the Jews speak and agree with has been, is and always will be an ethical god.

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[11] S.N. Kramer, *"The Babel of Tongues": A Sumerian Version*, cit., p. 111.

Problematic Translations

Translating has always been a headache. It seems that the same problems seem to repeat themselves over and over again. St. Jeremy, for example, says it very clearly in his famous Epistle 57 to Pammachius, *On the Best Method of Translating*. This letter was sent, apparently in 396, by Pope Epiphanius to Bishop John of Jerusalem, in which the former criticizes the latter for certain opinions and invites him to do penance. The style of the letter is exemplary and became famous due to its depth and elegance. Eusebius of Cremona, who lived in Jeremy's monastery, asked him to translate the letter into Latin, because his knowledge of Greek was limited. Jeremy translated the letter and added many annotations to it, some relating to the person of Bishop John, or his opinions. Jeremy asked Eusebius that the letter be for his personal use only and that he not publish it. However, the letter was sent to Jerusalem after being stolen from the cupboards of Eusebius by a false monk – a new Judas, according to Jeremy. Jeremy's translation was widespread among his enemies, who accused him of misrepresenting the original letter of Pope Epiphanius, particularly for not having translated it word for word. Now, Jeremy's letter 57 to Pammachius only refers briefly to the circumstances of the theft and the subsequent distribution of this private translation. Most of the letter provides guidelines to the art of translation. Jeremy insists particularly on the clumsiness that results from literal word-for-word translation:

> For I myself not only admit but freely proclaim that in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the holy scriptures where even the order of the words is a mystery) I render sense for sense and not word for word[12].

The importance and relevance of translation in religious-theological matters is undeniable. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, realizes this and expresses it in his Opusculum *Contra errores graecorum*, which he writes in response to an order of Pope Urban IV, and was to be expounded by Thomas Aquinas at the Council of Lyon in 1274. As is known, Thomas Aquinas died shortly before beginning the Council. The central theme to be discussed with the Greek theologians is, nothing more and nothing less, than that of Trinitarian consubstantiality.

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[12] Jerome: *The Principal Works of St. Jerome by St. Jerome*, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.html, p. 214. We also read, p. 215: «If any one imagines that translation does not impair the charm of style, let him render Homer word for word into Latin, nay I will go farther still and say, let him render it into Latin prose, and the result will be that the order of the words will seem ridiculous and the most eloquent of poets scarcely articulate».

In the year 325, the first Council of Nicaea had debated the terms *homoousios* and *homoiousios*. The word *homoousios* means «the same substance», while the word *homoiousios* means «similar substance». The Council affirmed that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are *homoousios* (of the same substance). This is the source of the English expression «differs not by one *iota*». Note that the words *homoousios* and *homoiousios* differ only by one letter 'i' (the Greek letter *iota*). Thus, to say that two things differ not by one iota, is to say that they are practically the same substance.

The question then, was whether the three divine persons were of the same substance or of a similar substance. It is understandable how difficult and important it is to find an appropriate translation for these concepts, and that is what Aquinas means.

Certainly, this is not the place to enter the detail of this theological discussion. I only refer to it, to the extent that it helps us to understand the importance that Aquinas attributes to translation in a relevant matter such as this, where the Eastern schism is at stake. It may seem exaggerated, but perhaps the wars of religion originate in bad translations. As someone once said, the Eastern schism originates in an *iota* (*homoousios* vs. *homoiousios*) In this particular case regarding the Eastern schism, the problem originates in the Latin misuse of certain Greek terms. How to express the same truths of faith in different languages? The Greeks, writes St. Thomas, say correctly and in a Catholic way (*recte et catholice*), that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three hypostases. Now, even though the greek word *hypostasis* among the Greeks means the same as *substantia* among the Latins, it would be un-precise and lacking the rigor that the case deserves for someone among the Latins to say that there are three substances (*substantiae*) in the Trinity. In fact, in Latin, *substantia* more commonly means *essentia*, which, like the Greeks, we refer to as single among the divine persons. Therefore, according to Thomas Aquinas, we say three persons in the same way that the Greeks say three hypostases. From all this, follows the duty of a good translator:

> It is, therefore, the task of the good translator, when translating material dealing with the Catholic faith, to preserve the meaning, but to adapt the mode of expression so that it is in harmony with the idiom of the language into which he is translating. For obviously, when anything spoken in a literary fashion in Latin is explained in common parlance, the explanation will be inept if it is simply word for word. All the more so, when anything expressed in one language is translated

> merely word for word into another, it will be no surprise if perplexity concerning the meaning of the original sometimes occurs[13].

This is the age-old problem already warned by Boethius, who recalls the relative philosophical poverty of the Latin language compared to that of the Greeks. And this is only regarding the term "person":

> (…) the Greeks *far more clearly* (*longe vero illi*…) called the individual subsistence of a rational nature by the name *hypóstasis*, while we *through want of appropriate words* (*nos vero per inopiam significantium vocum translaticiam*) have kept the name handed down to us, calling that *persona* which they call *hypóstasis*; but Greece *with its richer vocabulary* (*sed peritior Graecia sermonum*) gives the name *hypóstasis* to the individual subsistence[14].

These are only a few lines, yet each of them shows their discontent for the philosophical poverty of Latin!

A little closer to us in time, we have the figure of Martin Luther and his Open Letter on Translation, dated September 15, 1530. We return to same old serious problem of unprecise translations and the consequences they may have. In this letter, Luther addresses nothing less than the problem of salvation: how much does our work matter and how much does faith matter? Can works justify us, or is this a matter of faith alone?

Let us examine a few lines of Luther:

> To the Honorable and Worthy N., my favorite lord and friend.
>
> Grace and peace in Christ, honorable, worthy and dear Lord and friend! I received your letter with the two questions or inquires requesting my response. In the first place, you ask why in translating the words of Paul in the 3rd chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, *Arbitramur hominem iustificari ex fide absque operibus*[15], I rendered them 'We hold that a man is justified without the works of the law, by faith alone', and you also tell me that the papists are causing a great fuss because Paul's text does not contain the word *sola* (alone) (weil im Text Pauli nicht stehet das Wort *Sola*), and that my addition to the words of God is not to be tolerated[16].

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[13] Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, *Contra Errores Graecorum*, Pars 1, Prooemium: http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/oce.html; https://dhspriory.org/thomas/ContraErrGraecorum.htm#0.

[14] Boethius, *Tractates, De consolatione philosophiae*, translated by H.F. Stewart, E.K. Rand and S.J. Tester, Harvard University Press-William Heinemann Ltd., Cambridge (MA)-London 1978, p. 87.

[15] *Rom.* 3: 28.

[16] M. Luther, *An open Letter on Translating*: http://www.bible-researcher.com/luther01.html.

Let's say that this is unconvincing and very problematic. To respond that, if the papists want a justification, we should say:

> If your papist wishes to make a great fuss about the word *sola* (alone), say this to him: 'Dr. Martin Luther will have it so, and he says that a papist and a donkey are the same thing'. Sic volo, sic iubeo, sit pro ratione voluntas (I will it, I command it, my Will is reason enough[17]). For we are not going to be students and disciples of the papists. Rather, we will become their teachers and judges. For once, we also are going to be proud and brag, with these blockheads; and just as Paul brags against his mad raving saints, I will brag against these donkeys of mine![18].

Things are far from peaceful when Dr. Luther continues:

> Let this be the answer to your first question. Please do not give these donkeys any other answer to their useless braying about that word *sola* than simply this: 'Luther will have it so, and he says that he is a doctor above all the doctors of the pope' (…). And there are brazen idiots among them who have never even learned their own art of sophistry (…). Truly a donkey does not have to sing much, because he is already known by his ears[19].

The word "alone" is introduced in the expression "faith alone", even though the Latin text does not use it, because in the German language, when a phrase is composed of two members, one affirmative and one negative, the word "solum" is used together with "no" or "nothing". Take for example the following phrase: «the peasant brings only wheat and not money», or «I have only eaten, I have not drunk yet». In these expressions, contrary to Latin and Greek, German resorts to the word "only" so that "no" or "nothing" is more complete and clearer, says Luther. It is more evident that the farmer brings wheat and not money when it is formulated that he brings "only" wheat and not money. It is not from the Latin letters that one should expect to learn to speak German, «as these donkeys do» (*sic*), rather, it is better to ask the mother in the house, the children on the streets, or the ordinary man at the market. Only after doing this, is it possible to translate, according Luther.

Obviously, this is not a simple stylistic issue, but rather results in a major theological consequence, since nothing less than free will is at stake. Even though he claims to merely present an adaptation to the genius of the language, in fact Luther´s translation has divided Christianity since.

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[17] This is quotation of Juvenal's sixth satire, which Luther often used to characterize the arbitrary power of the Pope.

[18] Cfr. M. Luther, *An open Letter on Translating*, cit.

[19] Cfr. *ivi*.

Previously it was an *iota*, now it is an adjective. Bad translations have formidable destructive power[20].

What do we translate when we translate?

Is it even possible to translate? What do we translate when we translate? The sweet theologian (so called by Ortega y Gasset) Friedrich Schleiermacher had noticed that in the business world, for example, when dealing with objects that are almost always at hand, or that are very specific, negotiations somehow acquire an arithmetical or geometric character, and thus, the differences that arise are insignificant. But in the arts and sciences, things change dramatically. The problem is that each word of a language does not correspond exactly to one word in another; thus, not expressing the same concept with the exact same scope. Languages do not differ only in sounds. If this were the case, translation would be a mechanical task[21]. However, the language in which we are born has its boundaries, so that «the configuration of our concepts, the way and the limits of the possibilities of combining them are previously traced by the language in which we are born and have been educated; our understanding and our fantasy are bound by it»[22].

That is why Ortega y Gasset is correct in commenting:

> Therefore, 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. Since languages are formed in different landscapes through different experiences, their incongruity is natural. 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*[23].

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[20] I overlook other issues that Luther deals with, for example, that of angelic salutation to Mary, which he understands as a simple colloquial greeting. *Ave Maria gratia plena*, means to him a courteous way of greeting and not the proof of a special grace of God and much less that Mary was free from sin.

[21] F. Schleiermacher, *Sobre los diferentes métodos de traducir/Über die Verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens*, edición bilingüe alemán/español, traducción y comentarios de Valentín García Yebra, Gredos, Madrid 2000, p. 31 (the original was published in 1813).

[22] *Ivi*, p. 35.

[23] J. Ortega y Gasset, *Miseria y esplendor de la traducción*, in «Textos y Texturas», 19 (2012), https://www.jstor.org/stable/24391669 (originally published as columns in the newspaper «La Nación» of Buenos Aires, May-June 1937), p. 10. For English versión, see: *Miseria y Esplendor de la Traducción. Traduções Sinóticas*, in «Scientia Traductionis», 13 (2013) pp. 5-50. English translation by Elizabeth Gambler Miller: *The Misery and the Splendor of Translation*, http://dx.doi.org/10.5007/1980-4237.2013n13p5.

How is it possible to translate, for example, a text in a Bantu language into Spanish? Spanish divides names into masculine, feminine and neuter, while in some Bantu languages, there are twenty-four classifiers. In the Arabic language, there are five thousand seven hundred and fourteen names to designate the camel. How could a Glasgow merchant agree with a nomad of Arabia[24]? This problem somehow underlies Schleiermacher's opinion about the greater ease of translation in commercial matters. In the Ewe language, for example, spoken by some three million people in Ghana, Togo and Benin, continues Ortega, there are thirty-three words to express the human action "to walk" and the verb "go" (to go). Truly, languages separate us and make it impossible to communicate. How would it be possible to translate? Again, what do we translate when we translate? What criteria should we use when translating?

> Once we renounce the idea that translation implies a kind of operation, whereby what is said in one language magically appears in another language as a perfect equivalent, we can open ourselves to Schleiermacher's advice. According to him, there are only two ways of approaching the translation of a text. Either «the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and brings in the reader to meet him; or leaves the reader as alone and brings in the writer to meet him»[25].

Of these two criteria or methods, the most rigorous and fruitful is the first; leave the author alone and have the reader go through the trouble of meeting him. That is a true translation. Note, that it is a somewhat different criterion that both that of St. Thomas and Luther, for example, who insist on expressing in continuity with the original author «according to the genius of the language of destiny». The translator should strive to replace with his work, the knowledge of the original language of which the reader lacks. It would not make sense to have a Latin author, for example, speak as if he were an author of the target language. The latter, Ortega reminds us, commenting on Schleiermacher's text, would be a simple paraphrase of the original text[26]. Therefore, a good translation is one in which the translator invites the reader to immerse himself in the original language and not in a translated text that is "adapted" to the genius of the target language. This is why translation cannot be a work but a way to work:

> What is imperative is that, in translating, we try to leave our language and go to the other – and not the reverse, which is what is usually done. Sometimes, espe-

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[24] Cfr. J. Ortega y Gasset, *Miseria y esplendor de la traducción*, cit., p. 19.

[25] F. Schleiermacher, *Sobre los diferentes métodos de traducir…*, cit., p. 47.

[26] J. Ortega y Gasset, *Miseria y esplendor de la traducción*, cit., p. 21.

cially in treating contemporary authors, it will be possible for the version to have, besides its virtues as translation, a certain aesthetic value[27].

This way seems more noble than that defended by the classic authors mentioned at the beginning of this lecture (perhaps except for Boethius). That is, to take to the extreme the possibilities of one's own language to find a common ground with the translated language, a field that should be as close as possible to the translated author. This implies an effort on the part of the translator and strenuous work on the part of the reader. But it has its advantage. If the translation is done well, the reader leaves his own world and is permitted to live, feel and think as if he were in another culture, not necessarily contemporary[28].

Finally, a reflection on translation is also a reflection on language. Speaking, just like writing, Ortega recalls, is an act in which it is necessary to decide what will be said. If it is necessary to decide, it is because there are many things that will not be said or written. A language is real when it not only says, but also when it is silent, and when it silences. For this to be proven, let's remember what happens when we speak a language which is not ours: we must silent the four-fifths of what occurs to us because those four-fifths of our thoughts cannot be said well in a language which is not ours. In this matter, speech is composed mostly of silences, writes Ortega. It is impossible to say everything. Therefore, it is necessary to choose what to say and what to keep silent, and each culture makes its decision. It is then that the true mission of translation appears, that is, to reveal mutual secrets that peoples and the epochs hide, secrets that contribute so much to their dispersion and hostility. In opposition to this dispersion and hostility stands the translation.

Translation, which appeared then as a useless and impossible task, suddenly appears to us now as a bold integration of humanity. And, as Goethe says: «Only between all men can that which is human be fully lived»[29].

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[27] *Ivi*, p. 23.

[28] *Ivi*, p. 24: «The German versions of my books are a good example of this. In just a few years, there have been more than fifteen editions. This would be inconceivable if one did not attribute fourfifths of the credit to the success of the translation. And it is successful because my translator has forced the grammatical tolerance of the German language to its limits in order to carry over precisely what is not German in my way of speaking. In this way, the reader effortlessly makes mental turns that are Spanish. He relaxes a bit and for a while is amused at being another».

[29] Quoted in J. Ortega y Gasset, *Miseria y esplendor de la traducción*, cit., p. 17.

Abstract

This paper deals with the problem of translation from various perspectives. The first of them refers to a possible theological origin of the need for translation. Translation became necessary because languages were confused by the gods, according to a tradition older than the Biblical account. Behind the religious accounts there are also ethical problems related to coexistence between men. A second perspective relates to the art of translation itself. Some representative theories are examined in this regard, from St. Jeremy to Luther. Finally I try to answer the question "what do we translate when we translate"? For that, my main reference is the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. Is it true that translation is ultimately impossible, strictly speaking? I end with a nuanced response to Ortega's challenge.

Keywords: Translation; Babel; St Jeremy; Aquinas; Luther; Ortega y Gasset.

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A critical reflection about the relevance of translation and its many variations seems to be a priority in contemporary philosophic research. This issue of «Teoria» features the talks held at *Homo translator. Traditions in translation*, a meeting organised at the Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan, and other selected papers, which broaden the horizon of the survey to the spheres of literature, technology, psychoanalysis and politics.

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