

Discuss Benjamin's idea of language and, in particular, of "pure language" in his essays "On Language in General..." and "The Task of the Translator." Questions to consider are: how one is to understand "pure language"? What is at stake in it? How does it differ from a 'bourgeois' understanding of language? Why is it – if it is – a necessary element in his thought on language? How do the two essays complement one another?

Benjamin's idea of "pure language" is the language of man prior to the fall from the Garden of Eden. It is a language of immediate knowledge and pure name, that is to say, a language where there exists no distinction in the name between the intended object and *mode* in which the object is intended.¹ "Pure language" is the hypothetical language that existed prior to the Babelian deconstruction of language into multiplicity and self-differentiation. Here in this fallen state there always exists a difference in each language between intended meaning (*das Gemeinte*) and the mode of intended meaning (*Art des Meinens*).

The words *Brot* and *pain* "intend" the same object, but the modes of intention (*Art des Meinens*) are not the same. It is owing to these modes that the word *Brot* means something different to a German than the word *pain* to a Frenchman, that these words are not interchangeable for them, that, in fact they strive to exclude one another.²

¹ Benjamin, following Husserl and Bentano, borrows this distinction from medieval scholastics. See J. Derrida "Des tours de Babel" in *Psyché* (Paris, Galilée, 1989) p. 299.

² W. Benjamin „The Task of the Translator“ in *Illuminations* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Book) p. 74. (Hereafter TOT).

In stepping outside the purer language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part any rate, a *mere* sign; and this later results in the plurality of languages.³

What is surprising is that for Benjamin this pre-Babelian “pure language” is not the original language – even if it is the original language *of man*. Benjamin acknowledges that things too possess a mute, aphonic language which in fact precedes the phonic language of names. In paradise man names things in response to the prior appeal of things to him. Naming is effectively the first translation. Through naming the aphonic becomes phonic, and the unknown becomes known. The things of nature possess a language, “a mute magic”, by virtue of the fact that they are the creations of a divine and creative Word. The Word is, at it were, *in* them. Man’s language, on the other hand, is cognizing rather than creative. It responds to the communicative appeal of things. Through the communicative appeal of things, man’s language is grounded the creative Word of God, while it also “completes” this Word by adding man’s cognitive power.

The translation of the language of things into that of man is the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one, and cannot but add something to it, namely knowledge...God’s creation is completed when things receive their names from man. (LAS, pp. 325)

The significance of Benjamin’s notion of the “pure language” is primarily it seems the

³ W. Benjamin „On Language as such and the Language of Man” in Reflections trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York Schocken Books) p. 328. (Hereafter LAS)

structuring role that it plays in his celebrated theory of translation. Translation is understood here not in the "original" sense of responding through naming to the communicative appeal of things, but in the "secondary" or conventional sense of translation from one language into another. That there is a task for the translator in this sense in itself testifies to the absence of a supreme or "pure language", and yet, according to Benjamin, the relation of translation to this "pure language" is not simply negative. To the extent that translation has the purpose of making languages grow and develop in relation to one another, translation intimates or anticipates the reconciliation between languages as such. The sphere of this reconciliation is the "pure language" as the place where the modes of intended meaning proper to each language complement one another and harmonize. Only through translation is it possible in any way to accede to this "pure language", because the languages by themselves are each limited to the mode of intention that is proper to them.

Instead of reassembling the meaning of the original, a translation must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of intention, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (TOT, p. 78)

Certainly, the interest of Benjamin's theory of translation is at least in part due to the fact that it rejects the idea of translation as the transfer of a communicable content from one language to another. Translation for Benjamin is not fundamentally a technical or utilitarian operation. (Indeed, language conceived as the communication of a communicable content - a content which would distinguish itself rigorously from the linguistic act - is condemned by Benjamin as "bourgeois". "There is", he writes, "no content of language" (LAS, p. 318).)

Translation has, on the contrary, a messianic dimension. Given the existence of *many* languages in the post-Babelian condition, the messianic promise of translation is to express their "central reciprocal relationship." As a promise, no single translation can express this "central reciprocal relationship" as such, but at most only in an "embryonic or intensive" form. That there exists such a relationship between languages derives from the fact that all languages ultimately share the same intention - or essence. The reconciliation of languages therefore is not grounded in any historical or genetic kinship between them, but in the nature of language as such. The "pure language" as the *pre*-Babelian language of pure name and pure cognition and/or the messianic sphere where the multiplicity of languages are reconciled, designates for Benjamin the nature of language as such, or, if you like, the being language of language. (I will come back to this.)

Beyond designating the horizon - the promised but forbidden limit - of the task of the translator, the notion of the "pure language" has the further effect of guaranteeing in each case the distinction between the original and the translation. According to Benjamin, the translation distinguishes itself from the original to the extent that the translation is not translated:

[T]he relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation. While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. For it signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien [...] [T]ranslation, ironically, transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm since it can no longer

be displaced by a secondary rendering. (TOT p. 75)

In Benjamin's schema the translation is lodged between the original and the pure language. To the extent that the translation signifies a more exalted language than its own it distinguishes itself from the original, from which it is nonetheless also necessarily derived. If, however, this more exalted "pure language", where the intention and the various modes of intention proper to each language are presumed to coincide, were not, as Benjamin says, "the language of truth" (*Sprache der Wahrheit*) but a *fiction* (in the Nietzschean sense), then the distinction between the original and the translation could not be *a priori* sustained. Benjamin's appeal to the "pure language" forecloses consideration of anything that might contest the border between the original and the translation, as well as anything that might contest the presumed self-identity or integrity of the original.

In his reading of Benjamin's essay, Derrida makes the point that what Benjamin says about the relationship between original and translation can also be found at the opening of juridical treaties which address the positive law of translations. Citing from various legal sources, Derrida argues that Benjamin's axiom resonates in the principles that underlie the legal statutes, whether it concerns the difference between original and translation (one being derived from the other) or the question of translations of translations:

The translation of a translation is said to be "derived" from the original and not the first translation....By maintaining at all costs this distinction as the original given of all translation contracts (in the quasi-transcendental sense that we spoke of above), Benjamin repeats the foundation of law. In so doing, he exhibits the possibility of

the law of the work and of the author, on whose very possibility positive law rests.⁴

Now one of the questions one should be able to ask is whether and to what extent it is possible to dispense with the notion of the “pure language” as “the language of truth”. And what would remain of Benjamin’s theory of translation if one did so? For one might be reluctant to commit oneself to the presumption of a shared intention underlying all languages; or else, to the presumption that the original text is in each case written in one single language (consider Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*), as well as to foreclose whatever in literary history and practice makes the distinction between an original text and its translation problematic.⁵

And yet, despite the problematic character of the notion of a “pure language”, it is not implausible to think of translation as having the power to promise reconciliation between

⁴ J Derrida „Des tours de Babel in *Psyché* op. cit. p. 306 (translation mine, pb).

⁵ Consider, for example, certain texts by Samuel Beckett, which he translated himself, and in translating changed with a license that in certain places far exceeds any conventional (and legally assigned) limits. Beckett’s “translations” have presented a genuine problem for scholars inasmuch as they are translations as well as being “second originals”. One might add that when the “original texts” were written in French, they also often contain imperfections, “a light English accent”, which results from linguistic interference, and which speaks against them being originally written in simply one language. For more on this fascinating issue, see *Beckett translating/translating Beckett*, edited Allan Warren Friedman, Charles Rossman, Dina Sherzer (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987) and Linda Collinge *Beckett traduit Beckett : de Malone meurt à Malone dies : l’imaginaire en traduction* (Genève, Liv. Droz, 2000).

languages (even – and perhaps especially - between those languages without any genetic similarity). At stake in such reconciliation is, moreover, necessarily more than “language”. (One may recall that for Benjamin language doesn’t refer to itself, but is originally a response to the prior address of things to man). Can one imagine reconciliation between languages without envisaging a “pure language” in which the totality of intentions proper to each language complement one another and harmonize? Presuming that one can, there must, it seems, be some concept of the nature of language in order to be able to speak of “languages” at all. The exigency of such a concept would remain, even if one doesn’t wish to commit oneself to Benjamin’s scholastic distinction between intention and mode of intention. And yet, such a concept *in all purity* may in fact be impossible.

In a somewhat heretical or pious gesture, one might attempt to “save” Benjamin’s notion of the “pure language” by translating it as *differance*. Derrida himself suggests this translation in a certain way, when he reads the “pure language” as “language itself as a babelian event (*la langue même comme événement babélien*), a language which is not the universal language in the Leibnizian sense”:

[The pure language] is the being language of language, language as such (*la langue ou le langage en tant que tels*, this unity without any self-identity, thanks to which there are several languages (*qui fait qu’il y a des langues*) and there are several languages (*qui fait qu’il y a des langues*).⁶

⁶ J. Derrida *Des tours de babel* in *Psyché* op. cit. p. 308. In the notion of a « unity without any self-identity” Derrida is obviously making reference here to a Heideggerian understanding of the concept of being.

What would be happily lost in such a translation is any promise of a language of pure name and pure cognition – where the incompleteness of every “name” may one day be reconciled in a language of truth. But, on the other hand, what this translation promises to retain is something like an ethic. For Benjamin, translation is necessary not because people need to communicate with one another, but because the languages cannot attain separately the co-employment of their complementary intentional aims. It is this sensitivity to incompleteness and the need for the other – beyond or irregardless of the aim of communicating “content” or signified meaning – that is most compelling. Moreover, the displacement of the concept of translation from the aims of human subjects to those of the languages themselves is also significant: “What language communicates first is its communicability.” (LAS, p. 320)

Translation inasmuch as it crosses borders – and experiences the *differance* between languages, has a privileged and unique proximity to the moving essence or *essencing* of “language” – precisely in the place where there no “language” appears, only languages. If the Promised Land is “language” (which does not suppress but preserves and maintains difference), then it is necessary to travel to reach this Promised Land. Such is the task of the translator, who is subservient firstly to this purpose of reconciliation of languages as *differance*, which he or she cannot manifest as such, but only “represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form” (TOT, p. 72).

In a final remark, one can note that the concept of translation has an evocative force and pertinence well beyond the strict and narrow definition that Benjamin works with in his famous essay. The task of understanding can be rendered as translation as indeed can thought itself. In response to the subjectivism of Jauss’ aesthetics of reception, Paul de Man, for example, writes:

By invoking “translation” rather than reception or even the reading of a work as the proper analogon of its understanding, the negativity inherent in the process is being recognized: we all know that translations can never succeed and that the task (Aufgabe) of the translator also means, as in the parlance of competitive sports, his having to give up, his defeat, “by default”. But translation also directs, by implication, the attention to language, rather than perception, as the possible locus for this negative moment.⁷

For Heidegger, on the other hand, the most decisive historical events take place as translations. Consequently, many of his readings (notably of the Pre-Socratics) consist in the movement of arriving at a new – which is to say, more original, adequate and fateful - translation.⁸

⁷ P. de Man “Reading and History” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press) pp. 61-61.

⁸ See, for example, the readings compiled in *Early Greek Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975)