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## ATTESTATION DE PUBLICATION

Je soussigné M. Zouhir EL BHIRI : Directeur du laboratoire interdisciplinaire des sciences sociales, que Mme. Urmila Nair, LACITO (Langues et Civilisations à Tradition Orale, UMR 7107 CNRS, Sorbonne Nouvelle, Inalco); Traductrice scientifique indépendante, dont la contribution intitulée: *On Benjamin On Translation In Translation: a comparative critique of three translations*, (pp-276 à la page 286), aux actes du colloque international : *La traduction en sciences sociales et en Littérature: Représentations et limites, 25-26 mars 2022*, est publiée dans un livre collectif par La Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines-Agadir Université IBN ZOHR–Laboratoire interdisciplinaire des sciences sociales et de la formation Doctorale « Humanités et Transformations des sociétés Contemporaines », ISBN 978-9920-615-47-1, Novembre 2022.

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## **On Benjamin On Translation *In* Translation: Strategies in Philosophical Translation**

### **Abstract**

This article considers the question of what a *good* philosophical translation is, examining it from a functionalist perspective, focused on readability. Drawing on Roman Jakobson's conception of verbal communication (1960), I describe two strategies discernible in what is, arguably, the finest English translation to date of Walter Benjamin's essay on translation, viz. Steven Rendall's "The Translator's Task" (2012). I discern the two strategies in the Rendall translation in comparison with the other canonical English translation, by Harry Zohn (1968), triangulating the two, when needed, with Maurice de Gandillac's French translation (2000). The first strategy concerns the *crafting of chains of anaphoric reference*, and may be understood with reference to Jakobson's cognitive function. The second strategy is that of harnessing repetition, associated with the poetic function, to construct *discernible patterns around ambiguous or obscure terms*, towards facilitating their interpretation. Both strategies become necessary due to the incommensurability of languages (Jakobson [1959]2000, 129).

### **5 key words**

philosophical translation; anaphoric chains; structured repetition; readability and interpretation; cognitive and poetic functions

## Introduction

Readers of philosophical oeuvres typically desire immediate access to the philosopher's thought represented therein. As one such reader, I am well acquainted with this desire, and with the twin desire, equally intense, for the translator's invisibility in case of languages I do not read (cf. Venuti [1995]2008). Nevertheless, as an academic translator, I am only too aware of the translator's task, and the craft involved in creating a translation from an original work (Eco 2000, 74-75). Given the inevitable conflict between desire and reality, what, one might ask, is a *good* translation of a philosophical text?

This article explores this question from a functionalist perspective. Instead of a Benjaminian focus on "translatability," the focus is thus on the telos of readability. Translation theorists have long adopted the lens of *skopos* to discuss translation practice, i.e. in terms of its purpose (Reiß and Vermeer 2014, 85 ff.). In case of philosophical translation, the recipients, as regular readers of such literature, are accustomed to descrying the meaning of the text through the use of interpretive techniques. The translator may assume such skills on the part of the reader, and craft her translation accordingly. Such an approach is discernible in what is, arguably, the finest English translation to date of Walter Benjamin's essay on translation, viz. Steven Rendall's "The Translator's Task" ([2000]2012). I shall discuss here two strategies of translation discernible in Rendall's translation. The first concerns the *crafting of chains of anaphoric reference*, so characteristic of philosophical writings. I describe this in reliance on Jakobson's notion of the referential or cognitive function, oriented towards the context and the referential meaning of the message. The second strategy is that of constructing *discernible patterns around ambiguous or obscure terms*, towards facilitating interpretation by the reader. I shall describe it in reliance on Jakobson's discussion of repetition, characteristic of the poetic function that marks all verbal communication (1960, 353-358, 1987, see also Jakobson [1959]2000, 129-131).

In light of the functionalist focus on readability, the methodology adopted here is that of comparison across translations. I focus on two English translations of Walter Benjamin's essay on translation: Harry Zohn's long-canonical translation (2007[1968]), and Steven Rendall's English translation (2012[2000]). I rely as well on Maurice de Gandillac's (2000) French translation, to triangulate problems encountered in relation to the English translations' readability.

Note that, towards rendering the discussion clearer, I shall henceforth omit references to Benjamin and, instead, reference the translations solely by the name of the translator together with the relevant page number, for example: "(Rendall, 78)." I shall use this reference style only for these three translations of Benjamin under discussion here.

### **Concerning the crafting of chains of anaphoric reference**

Two points regarding language and the understanding of text structure must be noted before we begin our discussion of chains of anaphoric reference in philosophical translation.

First, the reason why problems arise in the translation of chains of anaphors is the twofold incommensurability of languages. On the one hand, this incommensurability arises due to the fact that the meaning of a linguistic form is a function of combinations of diverse materialities of a language. Consider, for example, the English "it" as opposed to the range of its equivalents in French: *il, elle, lui, le la, ceci, cela*. On the phonological plane, the differences in materialities are evident across the two languages. On the grammatical plane, the French forms, marked as they are for gender, number and, potentially, position vis-à-vis the utterer, are far more forthcoming than the terse English "it." On the other hand, apart from the diverse combinations of linguistic materialities that contribute to the meaning of words and expressions,

the latter are also often shaped by social and cultural connotations<sup>1</sup>. The English “it,” used as it is for animals and inanimate objects, may thus serve as a term of insult when used for a person, something not immediately translatable by its French equivalents. The twofold incommensurability of language is one of the reasons why long chains of anaphoric reference, so characteristic of philosophical writings, are often difficult to translate.

Second, Jakobson tells us that the “verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the predominant function” (1960, 353). A philosophical text and its translation typically serve to communicate the philosopher’s ideas and arguments. Accordingly, it would be the referential or cognitive function that predominates and influences the text’s verbal structure. The cognitive function is oriented towards the referent and the context “referred to ... seizable by the addressee” (1960, 353). This, then, is the predominant function to be considered by the translator crafting anaphoric chains in philosophical translation: staying as close as possible to the original philosophical text, she must all the while consider the reader’s cognitive capacity to seize the message as structured.

Let us consider the problem through a comparison of the two English translations of Benjamin’s essay. Consider first Zohn’s version of a somewhat involved sentence:

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<sup>1</sup> The twofold incommensurability of language has been variously theorized by linguists and translation theorists, often in terms of dichotomies: what languages must convey versus what they may convey (Jakobson [1959]2012, 129); exuberance versus deficiency in original and translation (Becker 2000); the possibilities of formal versus dynamic equivalence in translation (Nida [1964]2012, 144-145); the need for instrumental versus hermeneutic approaches (Louis Kelly cited in Venuti 2012, 483), and so forth.

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 each other. (Zohn, 74; emphases added)

Zohn's attempt here is to keep two distinct anaphoric chains in play within a single sentence. The first chain is bolded, its referents being the two words, ***Brot*** and ***pain***, followed by two anaphoric references (**these words, they**). The second chain's referents are a *German* and a *Frenchman*, followed by a single anaphora (them)—found bang in the middle of the first anaphoric chain! Certainly, the passage ends up being comprehensible, but it makes for an effortful read.

Is there a better way of handling this, one that is more conducive to readability? We turn to the corresponding sentence in the Rendall translation:

In "**Brot**" and "**pain**," what is meant is the same, but the mode of meaning differs. It is because of the mode of meaning that **the two words** signify something different to a *German or a Frenchman*, that **they** are not regarded as interchangeable and in fact ultimately seek to exclude one another ... (Rendall, 78; emphases added)

Rendall does it with only one chain of anaphoric reference, viz. that pertaining to words "**Brot**" and "**pain**," followed by two anaphoric referents (**the two words, they**). The sentences are structured such that "a *German or a Frenchman*" do not require any anaphoric reference. Furthermore, Rendall creates a parallel structure through repetition here: "that the two words ... that they are not ..." This parallel structure indicates to the reader that "they" must reference "the two words." (Such parallel structures set up by repetition will be discussed

in relation to the second strategy.) Rendall’s solution is thus far more elegant, and far easier for the reader to grasp<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, one might persist in one’s defense of the Zohn: Perhaps Zohn was attempting to remain faithful to something in the original German? To consider this possibility, we turn to the corresponding sentences offered us by Gandillac in his French translation:

*Dans « Brot » et « pain », le visé est assurément le même, mais non la manière de le viser. Car en raison de ce mode de visée les deux mots signifient quelque chose de différent pour l’Allemand et le Français, ne sont pas pour eux interchangeables et même, en fin de compte, tendent à s’exclure l’un l’autre ... (Gandillac, 251; emphases added)*

Gandillac’s French thus involves two anaphoric chains of reference like the Zohn. Nevertheless, the structure is quite different: the second chain is extremely short, involving the referent of the German and Frenchman (**l’Allemand et le Français**), and the single anaphor (**eux**). Here the

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<sup>2</sup> It has to be admitted here that the corresponding Zohn translation manifests a quite exquisite metrical structure:

“... *Brot* ... a German ...  
 ... *pain* ... a Frenchman ...  
 ... these words ... them ...”

As a matter of fact, the Zohn translation is regularly far prettier than the Rendall translation. It would appear that Zohn often permitted the poetic function to trump the cognitive function, as we see here in his construction of the two anaphoric chains. The latter’s unfortunate crisscrossing, particularly at the words “these” and “them,” renders the Zohn less readable, and the Rendall far clearer and easier to interpret by comparison. In terms of readability, the Rendall would therefore remain the reader’s choice.



anaphor's reference is clear since it is the closest to its referent within the text, and is involved in a parallel construction (“... *pour* ... *pour* ...”) that precludes any other interpretation. There is, furthermore, no crisscrossing of the two anaphoric chains. Instead, the short chain is embedded within the longer one. Structurally, Gandillac's French translation is closer to the Rendall than to the Zohn. The case for Zohn's fidelity to the original would thus seem somewhat weak.

In sum, in terms of readability, Rendall's translation strategy implemented here to translate anaphoric chains seems superior to that implemented by Zohn: Rendall avoids multiple, crisscrossing chains of anaphoric reference that can be quite taxing to the English—or, indeed, any—reader, particularly in light of the fact that English anaphora tend to be sparing in the information they communicate.

### **Summary: Translation Strategy # 1**

The translation's chains of anaphoric reference must, of course, closely and accurately reflect those of the original. Nevertheless, the different grammatical requirements of the two languages have to be taken into account when constructing these chains in the target text. Furthermore, the reader's capacity to seize the referent must be considered, keeping in mind the translation's cognitive function, to use Jakobson's term. Thus, when long or multiple anaphoric chains are present in the original philosophical text, the translator's task is to carefully craft corresponding chains in translation, recasting referents and their anaphors as required.

### **Creating discernible patterns through structured repetition**

Jakobson argued that the poetic function, the orientation towards the message as such, for its own sake, characterizes all verbal communication, to varying degrees (1960, 353, 356). One of the main devices in poetics is repetition. This repetition may occur on any linguistic level, from

the level of sound (“I like Ike”) to the levels of lexicon and grammar (for example, Shakespeare’s composition of Antony’s exordium upon Caesar’s assassination involves the repetition of conjunctions, see Jakobson 1960, 375). Such structured repetitions produce various effects on recipients, inducing, for instance, a certain anticipation of the repetition when the latter occurs periodically, as in poetry. The setting up of this anticipation primes the recipient to compare the repeated forms, whether for likeness or for unlikeness (1960, 368-369). Of course, philosophical translation does not usually involve metricity. Nevertheless, the translator may actively draw on this device of repetition to structure the translation, crafting discernible patterns therein that would facilitate interpretation and readability. For instance, the translator’s repeated use of the same grammatical construction around specific terms that are ambiguous or obscure, if discerned by the reader, can prime him or her to compare those terms within their parallel constructions, searching for similarities or differences of the meanings of those terms and the concepts involved. Needless to say, the translator stays close to the original and, perforce, uses such strategies on account of languages’ incommensurability.

Consider the following example from the Rendall translation towards explicating this strategy: in his translation of a passage discussing “modes of meaning,” Rendall variously uses “mean,” “signify,” and “intend,” or variants thereof (Rendall, 78). The similarities or differences in meanings (!) of these words are far from clear in English, given that the words are fairly interchangeable and are used in myriad ways in academic literature. In case of the German *Sinn*, Rendall helpfully specifies in a footnote that he always translates it as “sense” and not “meaning” (Rendall, 83). However, quite naturally, Rendall does not include footnotes to explain his use of “mean,” “signify,” and “intend” and their variants. Nevertheless, his translation is coherent and comprehensible since his use of these words manifests discernible patterns. These patterns permit the reader, with a little interpretive effort, to draw inferences

about the relations between the different words, and thereby arrive at a coherent interpretation of the passage. Consider the Rendall passage:

This is one of the basic laws of the philosophy of language, and to understand it precisely we must distinguish the **mode of meaning** within the intention of **what is meant**. In “Brot” and “pain,” **what is meant** is the same, but the **mode of meaning** differs. It is because of the **mode of meaning** that the two words **signify** something different to a German or a Frenchman, that they are not regarded as interchangeable and in fact ultimately seek to exclude one another; however, with respect to their **intended object**, taken absolutely, they **signify** one and the same thing. Thus whereas these two words' **modes of meaning** are in conflict, they complement each other in the two languages from which they stem. And indeed in them the relation between the *mode of intention* and **what is meant** is complemented. (Rendall, 78; my emphases)

Compare it with the corresponding passage in the Zohn:

Without distinguishing the **intended object** from the **mode of intention**, no firm grasp of this basic law of a philosophy of language can be achieved. The words *Brot* and *pain* “**intend**” the same object, but the **modes of this intention** 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 each other. As to **the intended object**, however, the two words **mean** the very same thing. While the **modes of intention** in these two words are in conflict, **intention** and **object of intention** complement each other in the two languages from which they are derived; there **the object** is complementary to **the intention**. (Zohn, 74; my emphases)

Consider first the regularities of word usage in the Rendall translation: “signify” is used exclusively as a verb, none of its other forms being used; “meaning” appears exclusively in the collocation “mode of meaning”; “meant” appears exclusively in the collocation “what is meant”; and forms of “intend” appear exclusively in the use of “intention” and the collocation “intended object.” This is an instance of a *discernible pattern*: it helps the reader to relate words, and thereby the concepts they are involved in communicating, despite the fact that the words themselves are vague and very similar. A glance at the corresponding words in the Zohn, highlighted above, suffices to show us that his translation lacks such regularity of usage. Next, consider the following two sentence fragments excerpted from the Rendall passage cited above. We see here a discernible pattern involving the clear use of structured repetition:

- (a) ... because of the mode of meaning ... *the two words* **signify** *something different* to a German or a Frenchman ...
- (b) ... with respect to their intended object, taken absolutely, they [*the two words*] **signify** *one and the same thing* ... (my emphases)

Note the following three points regarding these two fragments:

- The subject is the same in both fragments (a) and (b), viz. the two words *Brot* and *pain*.
- The word “signify” is the verb used in both fragments.
- The two terms of an opposition appear within the object of the two fragments: in (a), the two words signify “something different” while in (b), they signify the “one and the same thing.”

The discernible pattern here is:

subject [*Brot, pain*] + verb [*signify*] + object [*something different/ one and the same thing*]

Discerning the pattern's repetition here would cause the attentive reader immediately to use it to interpret the text: why, he or she would ask, does the same pairing of a subject and verb have two opposite objects ("something different" versus "one and the same thing")? The reader would then be able to infer that the first sentence speaks of modes of meaning at the level of words, which entails that the words signify "something different." The second sentence, by contrast, speaks of the "intended object, taken absolutely," which must then be a different analytical level in the model. At this analytical level, which the next sentences clarify is that of languages as wholes, the words signify "the same thing." (A discussion of the arguments and concepts proposed by Benjamin in his essay on translation lies outside the scope of this article.)

Once again, a glance at the corresponding Zohn passage, cited above, shows us that such patterning is absent therein. Thus it is that a clear, coherent, discernible patterning around ambiguous or obscure words of similar meaning in the translation, through the use of structured repetition, can enable the reader to comprehend the original's message.

### **Summary: Translation Strategy # 2**

If it is necessary to use ambiguous or obscure words in the language of translation, involving those words in discernible patterns of relationships with the words of the text surrounding them, for instance, through the use of structured repetition, can prime the attentive reader. He or she can then use the patterns discerned as a guideline to interpret the meanings of those words and to infer the relationships between the larger concepts involved.

### **Conclusion**

A twofold incommensurability typically characterizes language pairs involved in translation—due to differences of linguistic materialities, and differences of sociocultural connotations of words and expressions. The philosophical translator, however much she may strive to stay close

to the original and seek to remain invisible, must, perforce, craft her translation out of the forms of the target language. Adopting a functionalist perspective focused on readability, this paper has analyzed two strategies discernible in a *good* English translation, viz. Steven Rendall's translation of Walter Benjamin's essay on translation. The first strategy concerns the crafting of chains of anaphoric reference in the translation, wherein the consideration of the cognitive function of the translated text preponderates: the chains of anaphoric reference must be kept clear and distinct for ease of readability, all the while remaining loyal to the original. The second strategy involves the mobilization of repetition, a device characterizing a verbal communication's poetic function. Such repetition can be mobilized by the translator to construct discernible patterns around ambiguous or obscure terms. The discernment of these patterns can then prime the reader to search for reasons underlying the likeness or unlikeness instantiated within the parallelisms in evidence, affording thereby an interpretation of term and text. Finally, given this need for a recasting of the original in the target language, in light of the latter's distinct materialities and their different sociocultural connotations, it has to be acknowledged that a philosophical translation represents, quite fundamentally, an interpretation by the translator (cf. Venuti 2003).

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