

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN



JOURNAL OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH VOLUME XIV 2015

Published by the Graduate Students' Union
of the University of Dublin, Trinity College.

This issue represents submissions
from the 2014-2015 academic year.

Printed in Ireland by Westside Print
Front cover illustration by Shane Finan

Typeset in Palatino and CG Omega using Adobe InDesign

ISSN: 2009-4787

This issue of the TCD Journal of Postgraduate Research may be cited as: (2015)
Journal of Postgraduate Research, Volume XIV

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Varieties of Untranslatability

Exploring a potential system of classification for the discussion of untranslatability in literary texts

by

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Abstract

This paper outlines a new theoretical framework for the discussion of untranslatability in translation theory and practice. It reacts to the observation that the concept of untranslatability within Translation Studies has largely been treated as a homogenous idea, applicable without modification to any text. It builds upon the work of Emily Apter, Barbara Cassin, Susan Bassnett, David Bellos and others to show that the discussion of 'untranslatables' may in fact benefit from the recognition of multiple 'untranslatabilities' on various textual and non-textual levels. Five such strands of untranslatability are presented. The first encompasses sound patterns, syntax and linguistic humour, drawing from Bellos' *Is that a fish in your Ear?* (2012) to argue for a specifically linguistic strand of untranslatability. The second highlights meaning transmission in the context of culture, examining the unique translation challenges posed by culturally-embedded texts like Cassin's philosophical untranslatables and Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wesele* (1901). Strand three concerns what Walter Benjamin calls 'the unfathomable' element in translation, theorising that the loss of this mysterious element may result specifically from the many minor adjustments that inevitably occur during translation. Section four uses Carli Coetzee's analysis of translation practice in South Africa to argue that social and cultural power relations can render a text untranslatable from the outside. The fifth section argues for the recognition of 'absolute untranslatability', drawing on Jean-Jacques Lecercle's discussion of nonsense literature. Finally, the conclusion recognises both the malleability of the proposed framework and the dynamism of untranslatability as a concept in itself.

Keywords

Translation Studies, Untranslatability, Theoretical Framework.

Introduction

As it is a relatively young academic discipline, many of the fundamental questions of Translation Studies are still provoking vigorous debate and very little global consensus. First among these questions is the nature and resulting legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of translation itself.¹ While multiple

¹ For some of the key debates about the nature of translation, see the following articles in Lawrence

attempts at defining translation as a process, concept and philosophy have achieved varying levels of success over past decades, each has had to compete with the growing number of voices claiming that translation is ‘another name for the impossible.’² Emily Apter’s recent work on ‘the politics of untranslatability’ argues against a perceived ‘translatability assumption’ (the assumption that all texts are subject to translation), which is at play in the contemporary study and consumption of world literature, while Barbara Cassin condemns all translation to ‘necessary and absolute’ failure due to the unachievable nature of the task.³ At the other extreme, support for an understanding of all translation as fully possible has been gaining momentum. David Bellos questions theories of ineffability with the simple assertion that ‘if something is in a language [...] it can be translated.’ This consolidates Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s view that ‘in the end, nothing is untranslatable’, and that the question is one of approach and resources rather than of conceptual impossibility.⁴ Thus, based as it is on the unstable assumption that translation of any kind is possible, an exploration of different varieties of untranslatability in literary writing may seem to be jumping the gun. The fact remains, however, that the study and practice of literary translation continues to be a part of modern life, heedless of whether its fruits are ultimately seen as infinite success or total failure. With the acknowledgement, then, that the debate surrounding the possibility of translation remains very much alive, this essay will use the tenuous presumption of its possibility, at least in part, to facilitate the presentation of a potential classification system for refining discussion and practice around untranslatability.

The topic stems from observation that the ideas of ‘untranslatability’ and

Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader* (New York/London: Routledge, 2004 (first published 2000)): Friedrich Schlegel, *On the Different Methods of Translating*, 43-63, Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Beaudelaire’s Tableaux Parisiens*, Harry Zohn (trans.), 75-83, Gideon Toury, *The Nature and Role of Norms in Translation*, 205-218, and Jacques Derrida, *What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?*, Lawrence Venuti (trans.), 423-446

2 Jacques Derrida, Patrick Mensah (trans.), *Monolingualism of the Other* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 56.

3 Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London/New York: Verso, 2013), 3, and Barbara Cassin (ed.), Steven Rendall, Christian Hubert, Jeffrey Mehlman, Nathanael Stein, Michael Syrotinski (trans.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), xiv.

4 David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything* (London: Particular Books, 2011), 156, and Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Translate It, Translate It Not*, in *Translation Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1(2008), 96.

‘the untranslatable’ are commonly used in the literature of Translation Theory. At best, they are accompanied by a remarkably heterogeneous array of definitions, and at worst they come with very little explanation at all. Furthermore, the term ‘untranslatability’ in particular is often used as if it were a homogeneous concept or ‘cover-all’, and the possibility of a range of ‘untranslatabilities’ is not explored. The ideas of a ‘gradient of translatability’ and the possibility of partial success of a translation have, however, seen some notable discussion, and the classification system presented here is intended to build upon this chain of thought.⁵

This paper explores five categories that could be included in such a system. The first two, linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability, pick up on the established debate surrounding word-for-word and sense-for-sense translations, which Apter calls ‘those archaic Cain-and-Abel brothers of the translational pantheon.’⁶ The third, which I have called ‘cumulative’ untranslatability, focuses mainly on poetry, as it examines the mysterious ‘element’ that often seems to disappear in the translation process, seemingly independent of a translation’s linguistic and semantic success or failure. The fourth section takes a different approach, exploring conditions under which a text, while approachable in terms of language and content, may in practice become untranslatable due to external forces. Finally, the fifth section discusses the case of texts to which the term ‘absolute untranslatability’ could be considered appropriate and the idea of a gradient of translatability does not apply. It should be noted that while the categories here are delineated as much as possible for ease of analysis, in practice it is more logical to consider them in combination than in isolation.

Discussion

Linguistic Untranslatability

When considering issues of linguistic untranslatability, it is legitimate to adopt what Nicholas Harrison calls a ‘down-to-earth’ definition of translation; converting a text ‘from one language (in the usual sense of

⁵ See, for example, Juri Lotman, *On the Semiosphere*, in *Sign Systems Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2005), and Donald Davidson, *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*, in *Inquiries Into truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 190-1.

⁶ In Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, xi.

language: French, for instance) into another language.⁷ Here the focus is on (im)possibilities of translation regarding the structural ‘building blocks’ of language, and the concept of words and texts as vessels of meaning takes a secondary position. One linguistic feature of literary writing which has long been touted as untranslatable is the sound patterns created by the phonemes, words and phrases of a text in its original language. While the exchange of one sound pattern for another in inter-lingual translation is unavoidable if the target audience is to derive meaning from the translated text, David Damrosch nonetheless laments that ‘whatever meaning a new language can convey is irretrievably sundered from the verbal music of the original.’⁸ In certain cases, the loss incurred in sacrificing the sound pattern of the original is so significant that the text may be considered no longer worth translating. Benedetto Croce, for example, cites Plato and Montaigne among others as ‘untranslatable, because no other language can convey the colour and harmony, sound and rhythm of their [native] tongues.’⁹ When a translation is undertaken from one language system to another, the inevitable loss of the original collection of sounds has a knock-on effect of increasing the overall distance between original and translation. This is because, as Bellos notes, ‘the relationship between [meaning and sound] must perforce be other in the translation than in the original.’¹⁰ This facet of untranslatability must be considered when approaching literary translation within any language combination. However, it is notably more difficult to accommodate when translation is undertaken between two very different language systems, as the option to ‘compensate’ for the loss by using sound patterns inspired by the original in the translation is sometimes greatly restricted.

A similar translation challenge is presented by the issue of syntax. While syntax structures, unlike sound patterns, may be broadly equivalent between languages (at least in terms of the primary categories of verb, subject and object), in practice the range of possible differences in word placement, parts of speech and their usage, structures of negation and

7 Nicholas Harrison, *World Literature: What Gets Lost in Translation?*, in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 49 (2014), 412.

8 David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 288-9.

9 Quoted in M. L. Alekseeva, *Svoeobrazie traktovki kontseptsii “neperevidimosti” v ital’ yanskoi traditsii 1900-1930 gg.* (B. Croce, L. Pirandello, G. Gentile), (*Voprosi Filosofii*, http://vphil.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=917&Itemid=526, uploaded 14/03/14, accessed 28/12/14), 147 (my translation).

10 Bellos, *Is That a Fish in your Ear?*, 150.

interrogation, and other dynamic features of language in use make it almost impossible for two texts in different languages to share an entirely congruent syntax pattern. The method of exact replication of a source text's syntax has been posited as one possible way to create a 'transparent' translation that retains as many of the source language's characteristics within the target language as possible.¹¹ Once again, however, an entirely accurate translation of syntax becomes impossible as soon as a text is intended to convey meaning, with 'a literal rendering of...syntax' posing 'a direct threat to comprehensibility' due to its potential to obscure the semantic relations between words in the target language.¹²

In terms of untranslatability created by different 'building blocks' of language in combination, linguistic humour (as a subset of humour in general) has been repeatedly identified as 'the dark corner of language where translation becomes a paradoxical, impossible challenge.'¹³ This can be attributed to the dependence of linguistic humour on specific language systems, the grammatical elements of which are very rarely directly interchangeable.¹⁴ Qian Han gives a stark example of the impossibility of directly translating English word play into Chinese, using the following joke:

Man – I just met a fellow with a wooden leg named Smith
Shopkeeper – Really? What was his other leg called?¹⁵

The difficulty here lies in the fact that English grammar allows for the name 'Smith' to refer either to the man or his leg, while Chinese grammar eliminates this ambiguity. Bellos provides a similar but more detailed example of the difficulties presented by plays on sound and spelling:

11 Walter Benjamin, Harry Zorn (trans.), *Illuminations*, (London: Pimlico, 1999 (first published 1969)), 79.

12 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 78.

13 Bellos, *Is That a Fish in your Ear?* , 287.

14 For a wider discussion on the translation challenges presented by humour generally, see, for example: Delia Chiaro, *Comic Takeover or Comic Makeover? Notes on Humour-Translating, Translation and (Un)Translatability*, in Dynel, Marta (ed. and introd.), *The Pragmatics of Humour across Discourse Domains* (Amsterdam:Benjamins, 2011), Galia Hirsch, *Explicitations and Other Types of Shifts in the Translation of Irony and Humor*, in *International Journal on Translation Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2011, and Qian Suoqiao, *Translating 'Humor' into Chinese Culture*, in *International Journal of Humor Research*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2007

15 Qian Han, *On Untranslatability of English Linguistic Humor* , in *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2011, 149.

A Brooklyn baker becomes increasingly irritated by an old lady who queues up to buy bagels in his shop every Tuesday, despite the sign clearly visible in the window saying bagels are not available on Tuesdays. One morning, after she has queued up for the fifth time, he decides to he has to get the message through to her.

'Lady', he says, 'tell me, do you know how to spell 'cat', as in 'catechism'?'

'Sure I do', the old lady says, 'that's C-A-T.

'Sure is', the baker replies, 'now tell me, how do you spell 'dog' – as in 'dogmatic'?'

'Why, that's D-O-G.'

'Right! So how do you spell 'fuck' as in 'bagels'?'

'But there ain't no 'fuck' in 'bagels!' the little old lady exclaims.

'That's what I've been trying to tell you!' cries the baker.¹⁶

Here the humour turns on the fact that the old lady's final phrase is homophonous, though not semantically identical, to the one the baker has presumably been uttering. There is also the added contextual difficulty of the pair's Brooklyn accents, which the joke prompts the listener to imagine in order to make the homophony more complete. Anyone translating into a language which cannot accommodate the exact combination of meaning and homophonic word play presented in this joke may well consider a direct translation impossible. Bellos suggests that this apparent untranslatability can be circumvented by performing a 'swap' of the crucial elements of the English joke for different elements with the same relationship to each other in the target language: 'a structural match in any other language would [...] have to turn on a phonetically and grammatically different feature that may [...] allow the same point – making someone stupid say what they don't want to understand by diverting their attention from the issue through an intentionally deceptive spelling game.'¹⁷ While this swap does indeed present a workable solution for translating linguistic jokes, it is context dependent: if either the context or structure is essential to the joke, or its wider textual context, the swap can at best be only partially carried out. Ultimately, the untranslatability of linguistic jokes of this nature rests on the fact that 'metalinguistic expressions [...] carry meanings that are by definition internal to the language in which they are couched.'¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., 286.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 287.

Cultural Untranslatability

While the linguistic aspects of untranslatability present formidable difficulties to the would-be translator of literature, these difficulties tend to increase exponentially when untranslatabilities of meaning are considered. Unfortunately for the literary translator, 'text' is almost entirely synonymous with 'meaning' in literature, making this arguably the type of untranslatability that one encounters most frequently. In Wilhelm von Humboldt's poetic nineteenth-century terminology, 'a word is so little the sign of a concept that without it the concept cannot even be born, still less stabilized; the indeterminate action of the power of thought comes together in a word as a faint cluster of clouds gathers in a clear sky.'¹⁹ While 'meaning' itself is among the broadest of philosophical terms, the examination here approaches meaning in literary texts as a communication of the source culture(s), based on the idea that society plays a 'determining role [...] in the emergence, evolution and consolidation of language.'²⁰ Thus the translation of meaning centres on the transmission of cultural differences between groups which may be separated by significant 'physical [...] cultural, intellectual, spiritual, mental, emotional and experiential' distance.²¹ A clear example of how untranslatability may arise when dealing with such differences is described by linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf. In the 1930's, Whorf compared Western metaphysics and conceptions of space and time with those of the Hopi tribe of north eastern Arizona, concluding that the Hopi language 'contained no words, grammatical forms, constructions or expressions that referred directly to time as the West conceives of it with distinctions made between past, present and future.'²² The challenges of translating a temporally located text into the Hopi language from English are both obvious and immense. As with linguistic humour, however, an indirect translation strategy does exist: a translation for which the target culture is lacking some facet of knowledge or understanding that is essential to the text in the source culture could, for example, be made more accessible by amending the translated text

19 Wilhelm von Humboldt (trans.), *Aeschylus Agamemnon* (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1816), xii.

20 Pilar Ordóñez-López, *The Misery and Splendour of Translation: A Classic in Translation Studies*, in *SKASE Journal of Translation and Interpretation*, Vol. 4 (2009), 56.

21 Teresa Batuk-Ulewiczowa, *Beyond Cognizance: fields of absolute untranslatability* (Gdansk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2000), 173.

22 Benjamin Lee Whorf, John B. Carroll (ed.), *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Cambridge, Ma: the MIT Press, 1956), in Susan Bassnett, *Translation* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 46.

to include the necessary contextual information. This could be done in-text, or in a footnote or addendum. However, as well as raising multiple issues of style, this solution may become unfeasible if the gap in cultural understanding is too great to be filled by attaching additional information to the text. Thus the detailed translation of foundational concepts such as space, time, being, consciousness etc. may become practically impossible within a language pair separated by considerable cultural difference.

The difficulty of bridging conceptual differences between cultures in translation reaches its ultimate form in the translation of philosophical terminology and texts. In the introduction to the *Dictionary of Untranslatables: a Philosophical Lexicon*, Cassin describes the difficulty of translating the language of philosophy even when the frames of understanding appear to match: ‘...from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed. Does one understand the same thing by ‘mind’ as by *Geist* or *esprit*, is *pravda* ‘justice’ or ‘truth’, and what happens when we render ‘mimesis’ as ‘representation’ rather than ‘interpretation’?’²³ Apter locates the source of this difficulty in ‘the differential weight assigned by cultures to common cognates.’²⁴ The issue here is that while the meaning of two words can overlap significantly on the denotative, connotative, semantic and pragmatic levels, each may carry concepts of such significance for their respective cultures, and have been influenced so profoundly by the histories and thought systems of those cultures, that it becomes inappropriate to translate one as the other in any context where the full range of meaning is desired. In her article *Le Mot ‘Monde’ est un Intraduisible* (2012), Apter describes the difference between ‘world’ and *Welt* as one such case, noting that due to its deep significance in German philosophical discourse from Kant to Heidegger, ‘*Welt* takes on such depth that German seems in effect to be the language in which the philosophical conception of the ‘world’ is most completely understood.’²⁵ Ultimately, philosophical terminology (and conceptual language generally) provides an example of how a text can be so heavily loaded with meaning and deeply embedded in cultural context that it effectively becomes untranslatable.

²³ Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, xvii.

²⁴ Apter, *Against World Literature*, 35.

²⁵ Apter, *Le Mot ‘Monde’ est un Intraduisible*, in *Revue Electronique de Littérature Française*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (2012), 102 (my translation).

Alongside the challenges posed by extreme depth of meaning are those that arise when translating a text of great cultural breadth. In her analysis of Noel Clark's 2008 translation of Stanisław Wyspiański's play *Wesele* from Polish to English, Teresa Batuk-Ulewiczowa argues that the work is of such canonical importance to the Polish people that its full comprehension requires 'the application of extra-textual subjective information [and] extra-textual emotional experience which is inaccessible to the recipients of the target language for the translation.'²⁶ She lists the points of potential incomprehensibility for a non-Polish audience as cultural symbols, religious references, references to Polish history and legend, Polish social stratification, the Polish relationship with Jews, Ukrainians and other ethnic and minority groups, and 'a specifically Polish metaphor system for the presentation of some of the major themes in the play.'²⁷ She maintains that even if a foreign audience were willing to educate themselves on the developments of Polish history, society and culture to the point that they logically understood the play's references, they would still ultimately experience it as 'intrinsically 'exotic', relating to the emotional experiences of a foreign group or society.'²⁸ She contrasts this with a Polish audience's perception of the play. Having been immersed in the symbols and rituals of Polish culture since birth, this audience would experience it as 'intrinsically 'native' [...] relating to its own subjective group experience', and ultimately as a reflection of its own familiar world.²⁹ Batuk-Ulewiczowa's view contains unappealing overtones of national particularism, and recalls the theoretical suggestion by Lecercle that 'it takes a lifetime of uttering the right 'th' sounds, and a lifetime of nursery rhymes, Wesleyan hymns [...] of listening to the Archers' to appreciate literary nonsense, a 'quintessentially English' invention.'³⁰ Nonetheless, her central point remains valid: no matter how informed a foreign audience may be, any translation which retains the Polish trappings of Wyspiański's play will fail to provoke the same sentiments of familiarity as the original will for a domestic audience. As with philosophical terminology, the text's breadth of meaning touches on so many levels of experience in its source culture as to make its entirety untranslatable.

26 Teresa Batuk-Ulewiczowa, *Beyond Cognizance*, 173.

27 *Ibid.*, 175-6.

28 *Ibid.*, 175.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Lecercle, *Translate It, Translate It Not*, 92.

Cumulative Untranslatability

While the source(s) of untranslatability in the linguistic and cultural spheres can generally be pinpointed, there is another facet to the untranslatable which tends to elude any attempts at definition. Benjamin describes it as ‘the unfathomable, the mysterious, the poetic [...] the element that does not lend itself to translation.’³¹ Indeed, this ‘element’ is often discussed with reference to poetry, a relationship encapsulated by Robert Frost’s oft-quoted phrase that poetry is ‘what gets lost in translation.’³² Harrison suggests that the disappearance of this element may result from the many minor losses inevitably occurring during translation of poetry, due to the multiplicity of constraints the process places on the translator.³³ Mona Baker gives a comprehensive overview of these restraints in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*:

‘Poetry represents writing at its most compact, condensed and heightened form, in which the language is predominantly connotational rather than denotational and in which content and form are inseparably linked. Poetry is also informed by a ‘musical mode’ [...] or inner rhythm, regardless of whether there is any formal metre or rhyming pattern, which is one of the most elusive yet essential characteristics of the work that the translator is called upon to translate.’³⁴

Given its elusive nature, few ways to avoid the loss of this element in translation have been suggested. Robert Browning asserts that in order to capture it, a translation must be ‘absolutely literal, with exact rendering of words’ so as to give the target audience the greatest possible insight into the original text.³⁵ Once again, however, this method is overshadowed by the threat of ‘incomprehensibility’ and considerable potential loss of meaning. Bellos casts doubt on the element’s very existence, asserting that ‘claiming that something called ‘poetry’ has been lost is like telling an airline [which has lost your luggage] it has mislaid an item that has

31 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 71 and 76.

32 Despite the above being regularly quoted, Frost’s exact words were actually as follows: ‘I could define poetry this way: it is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation.’ Robert Frost, *Conversations on the Craft of Poetry*, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (eds.) (New York: Holt, 1961), quoted in *Lofty Dogmas: Poets on Poetics*, Deborah Brown, Annie Finch and Maxine Kumin (eds.), (Arkansas: The University of Arkansas Press, 2005), 200.

33 Harrison, *World Literature*, 416.

34 David Connolly, *Poetry Translation*, in Mona Baker (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), 171.

35 In Paul Selver, *The Art of Translating Poetry* (London: Jon Baker, 1966), 26

no identifiable characteristics at all.³⁶ While the element may defy description, however, the fact of its untranslatability and consequent loss has not. Baker mourns the disappearance of 'intrinsic poetic value' from poems in translation, and Vladimir Nabokov, while declaring a rhyming translation of *Eugene Onegin* to be a 'mathematical impossibility', in the same breath laments that once translated into prose 'the poem loses its bloom.'³⁷ The 'unfathomable, mysterious, and poetic', then, creates just as big a challenge for the literary translator as linguistic or cultural issues, but offers far fewer solutions for circumventing its untranslatability.

External Untranslatability

In the field of Translation Studies, untranslatability is usually considered to pertain either to textual factors or contextual influences which impede the translation process itself. There is another variety of untranslatability, however, which renders a text 'untranslatable' regardless of its linguistic or semantic content. It comes into play when the 'asymmetries, inequities, relations of domination and dependence [that] exist in every act of translating' are stacked against the translation of a particular text.³⁸ In its soft form, this 'imposed untranslatability' may occur through the influence of societal norms on a translator's actions. Gideon Toury describes the 'social role' of the translator as 'fulfil[ing] a function specified by the community...in a way that is considered appropriate in that community.'³⁹ A translator may thus consider a text untranslatable in practice due to its contravention of the norms and values of her language community. A general example of this might be a translator from a culture which condemns smoking choosing not to translate a text that glorifies tobacco consumption, in order to avoid creating social conflict. Similarly, Cassin notes the possibility that a translator may deem a text untranslatable based on their personal feelings towards it. She describes, for example, the 'private anguish' translators experience when 'confronted with material that [they] don't *want* to translate or see translated', whether out of personal fondness

³⁶ Bellos, *Is That a Fish in your Ear?*, 149.

³⁷ Baker, *Routledge Encyclopedia*, 171, and Vladimir Nabokov, *Eugene Onegin, a Novel in Verse by Alexander Pushkin, Translation from the Russian with a Commentary by V. Nabokov* (London: Princeton University Press, 1975), I, ix.

³⁸ Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), 4.

³⁹ Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1993), 22.

for the original text, a conviction that the translation will be inadequate, individual values, or other reasons.⁴⁰

In its hard form, untranslatability created by unequal power relations can have a much more powerful effect. Bassnett describes how uni-directional translation flows within colonial regimes have facilitated the silencing of colonised groups: 'translation was effectively used in the past as an instrument of colonial domination, a means of depriving the colonized people of a voice. For in the colonial model, one culture dominated and the others were subservient, hence translation reinforced that power hierarchy.'⁴¹ Venuti notes that '[translation] occasions revelations that question the authority of dominant culture values and institutions', underlining the importance for colonial powers of maintaining hegemony in translation.⁴² One of the many examples of untranslatability in this context is provided by Carli Coetzee in her analysis of the translation culture in contemporary South Africa. She maintains that the translation flows are post-colonial, and that 'much of the translation work done in South Africa serves to extend and confirm monolingual privilege': political, administrative, legal and literary texts tend to transition from the Republic's various African languages into English, for the benefit of the monolingual English-speaking community.⁴³ Translation of texts from English into the African languages, while possible on an individual level, becomes impossible on a societal level as flows of political and cultural power (and money) move only towards discourse in the English-speaking sphere. Coetzee's response to this imposed untranslatability is to suggest that a 'reverse-flow' of untranslatability be established and 'a refusal to translate out of African languages into English' be promoted in order to destabilise English-language hegemony.⁴⁴

While it does not necessarily stem from power relations, the 'untranslatable' status of many sacred texts is nonetheless a form of imposed untranslatability, which Apter calls 'theological untranslatability.'⁴⁵ A considerable amount of literature has been written about the taboo surrounding translations of

40 Cassin et al., *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, xiv.

41 Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.

42 Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*, 1.

43 Carli Coetzee, *To Refuse Containment, To Resist Translation*, in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2013), 384.

44 *Ibid.*, 387.

45 Apter, *Against World Literature*, 14.

the Qur'ān. According to Wail S. Hassan, translator of Abdelfattah Kilito's *Thou Shalt not Speak my Language* into English, the Muslim holy text is 'from the perspective of the faithful, untranslatable, because it is considered the literal word of God; human beings are incapable of exhausting its meaning, let alone transposing it into other languages.'⁴⁶ Thus it is the provenance of the text, its 'quintessentially divine nature' rather than any of its concrete textual features, which defines its untranslatability for Muslims.⁴⁷ Similar restrictions have been applied to other sacred texts in the past; the furore that greeted Martin Luther's German translation of the Holy Bible is possibly the most famous, but certainly not the most violent, example of what has happened when the theological untranslatability of sacred texts has been challenged in Christian history.⁴⁸

Absolute Untranslatability

While this essay has focused up to now on various aspects of untranslatability which may appear alone or together in a text that is otherwise largely translatable, it is also the case that a text may occasionally appear to defy translation of any kind. Lecerclé provides a coherent example in his argument for the absolute untranslatability of what he calls 'pure nonsense' in literature. This is nonsense language which is not 'watered down [...] mixed with intelligible language', but created as independently of extant linguistic systems as possible, reaching 'the outer edge of intelligibility in language.'⁴⁹ Lecerclé's thesis rests on the argument that such a text, created almost entirely free of meaning, is untranslatable because the original is already understandable in every possible language. He employs the example of Christian Morgenstern's 1905 poem *Fisches Nachtgesang*, calling it 'the true Esperanto of nonsense.'⁵⁰ Lecerclé's work shows that 'absolutely untranslatable' texts do exist, though they tend to push the definitions of 'text' and 'translation' to their furthest extremes.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Abdelfattah Kilito, Wail S. Hassan (trans.), *Thou Shalt not Speak my Language* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008), xix.

⁴⁷ Hassan Mustapha, in Baker, *Routledge Encyclopedia*, 201.

⁴⁸ See, for example David Norton, *Review: The Bible in English. Its History and Influence*, in *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (2004).

⁴⁹ Lecerclé, *Translate It, Translate It Not*, 91, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, D.F. Pears and B. F. Mc Guinness (trans.), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1997), 16.

⁵⁰ Lecerclé, *Translate It, Translate It Not*, 93. *Fisches Nachtgesang* has been reproduced in the appendix.

⁵¹ The concept of absolute *translatability* has not been explored here, since the arguments against its existence are very convincing. They can be summed up neatly by Bassnett's assertion that 'what can be said in one language can never be reproduced in an identical form in another, not only because

Conclusion

The discussion outlined above is intended to present a potential classification system for acknowledging and discussing distinct aspects of untranslatability in literary texts. It is in response to a perceived lack of precision in existing Translation Theory discourses surrounding untranslatability as a concept. The ideas and examples discussed within each section act as suggestions for how such a classification system could be filled. The discussion here draws from the areas of linguistics, semantics, poetics, theories of power and colonial theory as well as directly from literature, in order to display the wide range of texts that untranslatability affects. The five categories presented here are, in turn, a template for the many more categories (and sub-categories) of untranslatability which could doubtless be identified. The ultimate aim of such a system is to facilitate a clearer understanding of untranslatability both as a theory and as a practical translation challenge. It is intended to aid both the scholarly discussion of untranslatability - such as is currently being undertaken by Apter, Bellos and others - and the development of practical strategies for translators tackling 'untranslatable' texts in daily practice. It should finally be added that untranslatability is recognised here as a dynamic concept. As such, any discussion using the outlined system as a basis would have to accommodate the possibility of current areas of untranslatability potentially being resolved (or further complicated) in the future, whether due to linguistic and cultural rapprochement or distancing between social groups, the homogenising effects of globalisation or radical changes in the current norms of Translation Theory. Whatever developments may occur, however, it remains likely that the concept of untranslatability and the discourses related to it will remain vital into the future. As Bellos concludes, the fact that 'we are all different: we speak different tongues, and see the world in ways that are deeply influenced by the particular features of the tongue that we speak' means that untranslatability will remain a significant barrier to inter-lingual translation, while the knowledge that 'we are all the same...we can share the same broad and narrow kinds of feelings, information, [and] understandings' will ensure that the effort to break down that barrier continues.⁵²

languages are different, but also because cultures are different.' Bassnett, *Translation*, 170.
52 Bellos, *Is That a Fish in your Ear?*, 338.

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