

# On indeterminacy in translation. A survey of Western theories

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Abstract: Perhaps the most dynamic twentieth-century paradigm in Translation Studies has been indeterminism, which would generally stress that observations of textual meaning are uncertain and thus that any translation of meaning is fundamentally unstable. The underlying principle of uncertainty can be seen as framing at least two approaches to translation. On the one hand, traditional claims to the impossibility of translating great texts give the paradox of a determinist theory of expression underlying an indeterminist theory of translation. On the other, we find theories that would seem to be epistemologically indeterminist across the board. The general problem with both these variants remains, however, their inability to explain the common illusions by which translators and the users of translations still believe in fundamentally determinist concepts such as equivalence. How can that practical reality become compatible with the idea of indeterminism? Even with full awareness of indeterminism, how should translators translate? Partial answers can be found in the corners of Western thought: in Augustinian inspiration, in Lockean dialogue, in constructivism and in game theory, all of which offer frames where the criteria of practice might come to live with indeterminism.

“How do you translate a signature?”, asked Derrida, famously (1985: 248). The question points to the limits of translatability, or to the moment of impossibility invested in all translation. After all, to what could a translated signature possibly be equivalent? It is one of those questions now used to position translation beyond an affair of languages, in a wider space of interpersonal and intercultural exchange, increasingly in the dynamic vagaries of “cultural translation”. The signature, you see, rather like the “voice” sought in the early Derrida (1967), does not concern separate languages in the narrow sense; it is a problem of all writing, of all utterance, always in relation to the anterior other.

The question thus announces one of the main current problems in Translation Studies: Are we to restrict ourselves to “translations” in the narrow sense (pairs of texts in separate languages, linked in some way) or do we jump into the greater adventures of all communication, all cultures, all shifting meanings and dynamic hybridities as our object and state?

Our own answer to that disciplinary question is clear enough: We prefer a Translation Studies that focuses on translations in a narrow sense, related to a set of socially operative professions, albeit within a wider Intercultural Studies ideally able to

address the general issues of cross-cultural communication (see Pym 2008). At the same time, without paradox, we accept the basic idea of indeterminism. We are thus seeking ways in which the indeterminist paradigm might be made compatible with the discourses of professional practice.

As for the professionals, their answer to Derrida's question is also fairly clear: Sworn translators in the European tradition are trained to write "[signature illegible]", no matter how clear the signature. They thus mark out the limits of their social contract as translators. But does that mean they should leave the rest to the philosophers?

### **Quine's principle of the indeterminacy of translation**

In the late 1950s the American analytical philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine set out to find to what extent indeterminacy could affect language and meaning. To do this, he proposed a thought experiment involving translation. Here is a summary:

Imagine a "jungle linguist" who arrives in a village where people speak a completely unknown language. The linguist sets out to describe the language. They witness an event: a rabbit runs past, a native points to the rabbit and exclaims, "Gavagai!". The linguist writes down "gavagai = rabbit". An equivalent translation is thus produced.

Now, asks Quine, how can we be sure that *gavagai* really means "rabbit"? It could mean, "Look there, a rabbit!", or perhaps, "A rabbit with long legs", or even, "There is a flea on the rabbit's left ear", and so on. Quine argues that numerous interpretations are possible, and that no amount of questioning will ever produce absolute certainty that *gavagai* means "rabbit". Even if the linguist spends years with the tribe learning their language, there will always remain the possibility that each speaker's use of the word carries unseen individual values.

Quine actually argues that there are degrees of certainty for different kinds of propositions. As far as translation is concerned, however, the message seems to be that indeterminacy will never completely go away. Quine posits that the one source (*gavagai*) can give rise to many different renditions ("rabbit", "flea on rabbit", etc.), all of which may be legitimate and yet they "stand to each other in no plausible sort of equivalence relation however loose" (1960: 27). Whatever relation there may be between the translations, it is not certain, and that certainty was what Quine associated with "equivalence". But if not equivalence, what then is the relation?

In a later formulation of this indeterminacy principle (1969), Quine claims that different translators will produce different translations, all of which could be correct, and none of the translators will agree with the others' renditions. If the example of the jungle linguist seemed abstract or far-fetched (after all, there are no untouched villages left in the world, and linguists have far more subtle modes of conducting fieldwork), the claim that different translators translate differently sounds familiar enough. And the claim that translators disagree with each others' translations seems uncomfortably close to home, especially when there is an element of authority or prestige at stake.

Indeterminacy accounts for those differences and disagreements (albeit without naming them); the concept of equivalence does not. That is one good reason for incorporating indeterminacy into a theory of translation. Indeterminacy, however, is not a term used in many translation theories, at least not beyond Quine and the tradition of analytical philosophy. For the most part, its nagging doubts have worked their way into Western translation theory through a variety of intermediary disciplines and movements. Here we shall sketch just a few of those connections.

### **Indeterminacy in theories of language**

The basic idea of indeterminacy might be considered obvious. The American linguist Noam Chomsky regarded Quine's thesis as simply saying that "theories are underdetermined by evidence", in the sense that a phenomenon can be accounted for by more than one theory (a theory is like an observation, or like a translation). This, says, Chomsky, is "true and uninteresting" (1980: 14-16; see also 1976: 182ff.). That is, so what? In Chomsky's own field there can be little doubt that several different grammars can be written to describe the same language, and all of them will be adequate to some degree. In literary theory, texts are accounted for by a succession of paradigms (philology, New Criticism, structuralism, Marxism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, etc.), none of which can be said to be wrong. In all the sciences, both natural and human, the twentieth century saw a general divergence between the production of theories and the gathering of evidence; in all fields of enquiry, one can come up with a new theory on the basis of old facts. The study of translation has no reason to be different in this respect.

Of course, indeterminacy might be seen in all communication, across the board. Although its workings are clearer when illustrated between languages (which is why

Quine referred to translation), it also applies *within* languages. Whatever we say will be only one of many possible variations on what we think we mean, and what others make of our words will be only one of many possible interpretations. Here, our words operate like theories, or translations. Indeterminacy says we cannot be sure of communicating anything, at least not in any exact sense. We cannot assume there is a meaning that is encoded on one side and then decoded on the other. The opposite of indeterminacy might then be a theory that assumes “codes”, or “transmission”, or “meaning transfer” (all these terms have been used), somehow able to guarantee equivalence. The general idea of indeterminacy can be used to divide all translation theories into those that assume the possibility of exact communication of some kind (determinist: what X means is what Y understands) and those that do not (indeterminist: we can never be sure that the two sides share the same meaning). All students in the humanities should spend at least a few sleepless nights worrying that they will never be fully understood, and a few more nights concerned that they will never fully understand anyone else; then some five minutes accepting that they don’t understand themselves either. Students of translation should probably invest some supplementary afternoons in existential preoccupation, since indeterminacy is even more of a problem when different languages and cultures are involved.

As we shall soon see, most indeterminist theories of translation simplify the division between themselves and the determinist theories. They make it seem that there are just two camps, us and them, and a revolutionary battle to be fought, dethroning the illusions of equivalence. The problem, however, is that the indeterminist troops are actually far from united. More specifically, there are many quite determinist theories of language that become indeterminist when applied to translation. It is worth considering a few classical examples, since the problem has been with us for a very long time.

### **Determinist linguistics, indeterminist translation?**

In Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus*, Hermogenes argues that words are just arbitrary labels for things (i.e. encodings). Cratylus tries to argue that each thing has its proper word (i.e. the shape of the word fits the thing, as in onomatopoeia):

Cratylus says that everything has a right name of its own, which comes by nature, and that a name is not whatever people call a thing by agreement, just as a piece of their own voice applied to the



there must be some degree of social convention in the names for things. Language is thus, to some extent, arbitrary.

If we look at these two theories, which one would be the less deterministic? Hermogenes' position is actually saying that the assigning of words to things or concepts is arbitrary, and thus undetermined by anything except convention. That theory makes translation easy (we just encode and decode, changing conventions wherever necessary). In fact, it makes equivalence quite possible. This means that an *indeterminist* theory of naming can produce an *equivalence*-based theory of translation. Think about it.

On the other hand, Cratylus's theory, which is highly deterministic (the nature of the thing determines the correct name), would make equivalence virtually impossible, and perhaps translation as well. How could we translate *aletheia* as *truth* if the Greek term at the same time means "divine wandering"? This deterministic view says that Greek can only properly be understood in terms of Greek. So no full equivalence is possible beyond that language. Welcome to the paradoxes of theory.

### **Cratylistic indeterminacy in translation**

We offer apologies for having spent so many words on an ancient dialogue. *Cratylus* is not even a theory of translation. What it says nevertheless illustrates a paradox to be found in many contemporary theories of translation. Indeed, the paradox of a determinist theory of expression underlying an indeterminist theory of translation is so widespread that we might label all these theories "Cratylistic". Here are a few examples.

As all the textbooks say, Wilhelm von Humboldt saw different languages as building different views of the world, an idea that was further developed by the American linguists Sapir and Whorf. The idea can be found in a number of approaches. For example, the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (1959) claimed that Germans see death as a man (*der Tot*, masculine gender) whereas the Russians see it as a woman (?????, feminine gender) because the languages attribute those genders. Similarly, says Jakobson, "the Russian painter Repin was baffled as to why Sin had been depicted as a woman by German artists: he did not realize that "sin" is feminine in German (*die Sünde*), but masculine in Russian (????)" (1959: 237). So our languages would shape the way we perceive the world. The masculine sins of Russian cannot really be a full equivalent of the feminine sins of German.

The “world view” theory would be a modern version of Cratylistic determinism. For Cratylus, the nature of the thing determines its correct name; for linguistic relativism, the nature of the language system determines perception of the thing. Either way, there is a strong deterministic link between expression and referent (or concept). Indeed, “world view” linguistics would be deterministic in an even stronger sense, since they would have each piece of knowledge be determined by the entire language system, not just by a few creative name-givers. In its extreme form, this systemic determinism means that knowledge cannot really be conveyed beyond the language it is formulated in. Translation could at best give us an idea of what we are missing.

Modernist aesthetics have followed similar paths, at least since Rimbaud’s attribution of colors to French syllables (in the poem “Voyelles”, 1871). In the work of art, we are told, form and content are inseparable. Each set of words, or of sounds, has meaning precisely because of what they are and the way they have been put together: “that which is to be communicated is the poem itself”, said the similarly Modernist T. S. Eliot (1933: 80), meaning that there was no “meaning” prior to the text’s existence as a poem. Not surprisingly, this whole tradition has been traced back to the *Cratylus* by Gérard Genette (1976). For most of the thinkers concerned, translation cannot be governed by equivalence, at least not on any aesthetic level.

The clearest formulation of that tradition is perhaps to be found in the Italian aesthetician Benedetto Croce (1902: 73) when he describes

...the *relative* possibility of translations; not as reproductions of the same original expressions (which it would be vain to attempt) but as productions of *similar* expressions more or less nearly resembling the originals. The translation called good is an approximation which has original value as work of art and can stand by itself.

Croce significantly describes this “similarity” or “approximation” (distinguished from the impossible identity we call “equivalence”) as a “family likeness”. The metaphor was to become rather better known through Wittgenstein (e.g. 1958: 32), who talked about “family likenesses” (Anscombe translated it as “family resemblances”) to describe the relations between the elements of semantic sets. From there, the metaphor has been used within the descriptivist paradigm to portray the way translations are different yet belong to a common set (cf. Toury 1980; Halverson 1998), as well as the way translations and their sources are at once similar and different (cf. Chesterman 1996, 1998, 2005;

Stecconi 2004). Note, however, that the Modernist belief that form cannot be separated from content made the sense of “family likeness” more radically negative: a likeness was the best that translation *should* hope to achieve, since there could be no absolute equivalence. Our contemporary translation theorists tend to use the same metaphor in a more positive way: similarity is not ideal, but it might be good enough. Either way, these are the paths along with determinist theories of language (or of expression in general) have generally sought to retain the possibility of translation, to varying degrees. There are other paths as well.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger used Cratylistic method as a way of developing thought. For example, he saw the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, as configuring *Unverborgenheit* (“unhiddenness”, “disclosedness”) (1927: 33. 219, and in several other places), based on its particles *a-* (absence of) and *-lethe* (deception). This is quite unlike the “divine wandering” that Cratylus found by analyzing the word as *aletheia*. Heidegger generally postulates that words convey knowledge within their own language. He nevertheless exploits the differences between languages in order to develop that knowledge, and this is where we find his reflections on translation. To take one of his more elaborate divagations, the Latin philosophical term *ratio* would have as its normal equivalent the German term *Grund* (ground/reason/cause). That equivalent, however, suppresses many other possible interpretations. *Ratio* could also be rendered as *Vernunft* (reason), or indeed as *Ursache* (cause). In Latin, we are told, *ratio* also means “reckoning”, “calculation”, and it works as a translation of the Greek term *logos*. “*Grund* is the translation of *ratio*,” says Heidegger,

but this statement is a commonplace [*Gemeinplatz*], and will remain as such for as long as we do not think about what translation actually means in this and similar cases. Translation is one thing with respect to a business letter, and something different with respect to a poem. The letter is translatable; the poem is not. (1957: 163; our translation, here and throughout)

Given his implicit disdain of anything as banal as a business letter--just as Schleiermacher (1813/1963: 62) had disdained the act of *Dolmetschen*, where “the object is present”--Heidegger’s attention is devoted to precisely what is “not translatable”, the remainders, the non-equivalents that are somehow covered over by the “commonplaces” of official equivalence. Rather than valuing family likenesses (similarities are supposed to be nice, as are families), Heidegger values the productive conflict of differences.

Heidegger's use of translation in this example cannot really be attributed to indeterminism in Quine's sense; there is no epistemic doubt about the intentions of any speaker. The differences have more to do with history, with a mode of historical knowledge that is stronger than any individual:

A word will have multiple references, therefore, not primarily because in talking and writing we mean different things by it at different times. The multiplicity of referents is historical in a more fundamental sense: it stems from the fact that in the speaking of language we ourselves, in accordance with the destiny of all beings' Being, are at different times differently "meant" or "spoken". (1957: 161)

Thus, "it is the language that speaks, not the people" (ibid.). Heidegger thus insists that a translation (*Übersetzung*) is not just an interpretation of a previous text but also a handing-down, a question of legacy from the past (*Überlieferung*) (1957: 164-165). From this perspective, the past seems to be accorded more value than the present, and the task of translation—like that of philosophy itself—would be to recuperate those suppressed values.

A similar placing of value in the past can be found in the German Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin. His essay on "The Task of the Translator" (1923/1977) takes from Kabbalistic tradition the millennial idea of the "perfect" language, the one that named things with their secret names. This would be like Cratylus finding the "correct" names in Greek (as indeed Heidegger tends to intimate), or Rimbaud attributing colors as the meanings of French vowels, except that in Benjamin the perfection is placed in a rather more distant past, never named as Hebraic (in this, we might see the myth of Babel). All current languages, says Benjamin, are imperfect parts of the perfect language, "fragments of a broken vessel". Translating would thus be the piecing together of those fragments, a constant search for the lost true language. If there is a "family likeness", as Croce would have it, it is not because the source text is the parent. For Benjamin, both the source and the target texts would be children of an even more distant ancestor. What that means for actual translating is far from clear. Within this tradition of ideas, particularly as it dates from von Humboldt and German Romanticism (see Berman 1984), Benjamin would be seeking translations that are very close to their source texts, such that the reader is made aware of the differences between the two. Benjamin's text was written as a preface to his renditions from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, the

study of which might entertain a bilingual reader and could possibly suggest the gaps awaiting a fuller language, but does little to indicate a perfect translation (cf. Rose 1997: 41-49).

All these theories, like the *Cratylus*, posit a strong relation between expression and meaning. They thus do away with the idea of encoding something in one language and then decoding it in the other. As we have seen, some of these theories would deny the possibility of translation in any strong sense; others restrict its possibility to the level of banal communication (the “business letter” cited by Heidegger), and still others accept translation a mode of transformation, or similarity, or knowledge, beyond the boundaries of equivalence.

### **Living with indeterminacy**

Those theories of indeterminacy are not really of the kind where we can just say “so what?”, as Chomsky would seem to have said to Quine. The theories question the possibility of translation. And yet the fact of translation as a social practice, its mere existence as something that people use and trust, would suggest that the theories are overstating the case.

Is it possible to accept indeterminism and still recognize the viability of translation? Let us suggest a few historical theories of language that do seem to propose some kind of compatibility.

### *Illumination*

The first theory comes from the fourth/fifth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo (Aurelius Augustinus). In *De catechizandis rudibus* (2.3. 1-6) Augustine offers an intriguing analogy that would explain why translations can be different and yet talk about the same thing. Here the process of communication goes from ideas to “traces” or “vestiges” (*uestigia*), and only then to language. Augustine argues that language conveys thought very imperfectly:

[...] the idea erupts in my mind like a rapid illumination, whereas my speech is long and delayed and not at all like the idea, and while I speak, the thought has hidden in its secret place. The idea has left no more than a few vestiges imprinted in my memory, and these vestiges linger

throughout the slowness of my words. From those vestiges we construe sounds, and we speak Latin, or Greek, or Hebrew, or any other language. But the vestiges are not Latin, nor Greek, nor Hebrew, nor of any other community. They are formed in the mind, just as a facial expression is formed in the body. (c.400; our translation)

What is happening here? The indeterminacy of language is clear enough. Ideas come as light, and language is like no more than a weak trace of that light, as when you close your eyes immediately after seeing a bright object. Yet Augustine does not abandon communication altogether. What is communicated is here anterior to language, and thus potentially available to all. Our words will have sense for someone who has experienced the same light. Thus our texts do not communicate messages as such; they help receivers to recall the illuminations that they have previously found for themselves.

Parts of this theory live on in the translation of religious texts. The legend of the Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew bible into Greek, says that 72 translators worked in isolated cells and all produced identical translations, in clear defiance of anything like Quine's problem with *gavagai*. How was it possible for them to overcome linguistic indeterminacy so miraculously? Presumably because they were not just any old translators: they were rabbis, with faith, and divine spirit thus oriented their words. Others have also seen faith as some kind of guarantor against indeterminacy. Luther stated that "a false Christian or a person with a sectarian spirit cannot faithfully translate the Scriptures" (in Nida 1964: 16, 152), and in the preface to most versions of the Bible you will find some passage saying that the translators were "united in their faith". In effect, these translators all claim to be able to overcome indeterminacy through a shared experience that is somehow prior to language. Revelation, or faith, would be the pre-linguistic experience of which words need be no more than vestiges.

Augustine's general idea need not be restricted to religious messages. As we shall soon see, contemporary theories of education stress that we learn through experience, by actually doing things and discovering knowledge for ourselves. Further, contemporary theories of reading see the text's schemata as interacting with the reader's schemata, such that meaning is actively created from what readers bring to the text. Or again, relevance theory of the kind Gutt (1991) applies to translation can accept that language is hugely indeterminate (the meaning of implicatures is created by breaking maxims) but that the analyst has some kind of mystic access to intention, as a pre-linguistic experience of the communicative situation. All these ideas could be seen as handling

indeterminacy in a rather Augustinian way. The real communication lies in shared experience, and this may overcome the indeterminacy of language.

### *Consensus*

A second way of living with indeterminacy emphasizes the role of dialogue and consensus, without prior illumination. The seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke certainly had a transmissionist model of communication, based on encoding and decoding:

When a Man speaks to another, it is, that he may be understood; and the end of Speech is, that those Sounds, as Marks, may make known his Ideas to the Hearer. (1690: 3.2)

That formulation is so fundamental that the corresponding view of language is sometimes called “Lockean”. However, if we read Locke’s text we find examples like the following:

I was at meeting of very learned and ingenious Physicians, where by chance there arose a Question, whether any Liquor passed through the Filaments of the Nerves. The Debate having been managed a good while, by a variety of arguments on both sides, I (who had been used to suspect, that the greatest part of Disputes were more about the signification of words, than a real difference in the Conception of Things) desired, That before they went any farther on this dispute, they would first examine, and establish amongst them, what the word Liquor signified. [...] They were pleased to comply with my Motion, and upon Examination found, that the signification of that Word, was not so settled and certain, as they had all imagined; but that each of them made it a sign of a different complex Idea. This made them perceive, that the Main of their Dispute was about the signification of that Term; and that they differed very little in their Opinions, concerning some fluid and subtle Matter, passing through the Conduits of the Nerves; though it was not so easy to agree whether it be called Liquor, or no, a thing which when each considered, he thought it not worth the contending about. (1690, 3.9.16: “On the imperfection of words”)

Here we find a case where language is not fully determined by its referent, nor by concepts (the word “Liquor” only produces confusion). However, that indeterminacy is overcome through dialogue and consensus. The point of indeterminacy is ultimately avoided or considered “not the worth”. A similar argument was formulated by the linguistic philosopher Katz (1978: 234) with respect to Quine, arguing that if two

different translations are both correct, then their differences must be insignificant and not worth bothering about. In the end, does it really matter if we use “Liquor” or some other word? The important point is that language enables us to keep talking about language (Locke’s anecdote has probably justified some three centuries of philology), and it is through those exchanges that understanding is reached.

Understood in this sense, a Lockean theory need not exclude initial indeterminacy. It might even teach us how to live with it. Keep the dialogues going, and consensus should ensue. But does that solution really help translators? Few intermediaries are allowed time to conduct long dialogues about language. Some, however, might seriously benefit from seeing their work within that frame.

We now move to some of the theories that have been applied to translation in our own age.

### *Constructivism*

The fundamental idea of constructivism is that our knowledge of the world is not simply given or passively perceived. Long-standing experiments in the psychology of perception show that we actively construct what we know of the world. The learning process is thus a constant interaction between both the objective (the world beyond the learner) and the subjective (the learner’s own mental schemata). These basic tenets are highly compatible with the general principle of indeterminism. Constructivism could be seen as a general epistemology, and it has indeed informed areas of psychology, sociology and philosophy. Yet constructivism has built its fiefdom within the psychology of education, particularly in the American tradition, and it is from there that it mostly reaches translation theory.

What does constructivism have to do with translation? The American translation theorist Donald Kiraly (2000) argues that constructivism should be opposed to the entire transmissionist paradigm of encoding and decoding. According to the latter, knowledge would be something that can be moved from one passive receptacle to another, like water being dished out into buckets. Some knowledge would go into one text and is then transmitted to another (others talk about the “conduit” metaphor, where meaning flows through some kind of tube from one language to another). Translation would be nothing but one kind of such transmission. Indeed, one of the Latin verbs for translation is *verto*, to pour, which gives the idea of equivalence as the same amount of water

occupying vessels of different shapes. For Kiraly, the same transmissionism is at the base of the way many translators are trained. A teacher, like a source text, possesses knowledge that can then be poured into the minds of passive students, who are lined up like so many empty vessels. Constructivism says that knowledge simply does not work that way. Translators actively construct the text they produce, just as students actively participate in their learning process. Kiraly's main concern is with the consequences of constructivism for translator training. His ideas connect with a string of movements like learner-centered education, autonomous learning, and action research. What is interesting for us here is that his ideas are compatible with indeterminism, and they incorporate a view of translation based on that principle.

We note that Kiraly's position does not exclude the possibility of stable knowledge reached through practical experience, discussion and consensual understanding. His classroom methodology is explicitly based on practice, on students finding their own illumination, and on group work, on students getting together to talk about what they are doing. In this, Kiraly correctly identifies his approach as "social constructivism". We might also see it as having elements of Augustine and Locke, in the senses described above. Here there is no drastic uncertainty that would destroy all attempts at communication. Social constructivism might teach us to live with indeterminacy. Could it also help us to translate?

### *Game theory*

Let us now try to model indeterminacy in terms of someone actually translating. A source text (ST) can be rendered as any of several target texts (TT), giving TT1, TT2... TTn. From the perspective of indeterminacy, there can be no absolute rule for deciding between those various TTs. Someone might claim that "the translation has to have exactly the same cultural function as the source", but that is not universally true. Not only are there many cases in which translations are more determined by the form of the source (think of lip synchronization in film dubbing), but different people will see the source "function" as being different things. So translators will decide, and their decisions are only partly determined by the source text.

One result of this situation is that most of the translator's decisions cannot be called wholly "right" or wholly "wrong". When confronted with something like the German *Der Preis ist heiss* ("The Price is Hot") as a translation of *The Price is Right*,

we might say “Yes, but...” and then add a question of personal taste or source-text fidelity (“hot” does not mean “right”, however loose). Alternatively, we might say the translation is “Wrong, but...”, to be followed by further examples of personal appreciation. For us (Pym 1992), this is the form of the problems that concern translation rather than something else (like referents or authoritative terminology). Translation, by its very nature, is indeterminate. As translators proceed, they are confronted by numerous points where their rendition could be TT1, TT2, TT3 or so on, and the decision to opt for one or the other of those possibilities depends on much more than what is in the source.

Imagine that a text being translated comprises a set of such points requiring major decisions. Because the text is a text, all those points presumably have something to do with each other. A translatorial decision made at one point may have consequences for decisions made at all other points. The Czech translation theorist Jiri Levý (1967) explained this using the example of the Brecht play *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*. The title of the play is usually rendered as *The Good Woman of Sezuan*, since the main character is indeed a woman. But the German word *Mensch* means “man”, or “person”, or even “creature” (in the sense of us all being “creatures before God”), and much more. This ambiguity becomes functional in the play, since the main character pretends to be a man. According to Levý, the way the translator chooses to render *Mensch* in the title will have repercussions for the way that and similar terms are rendered throughout the text. One decision becomes a determinant for others. The result is that translating is determined not just by the source text, but by the patterns of the translator’s own decisions. Levý thus saw translating as being akin to playing a game with finite information (chess, for example). His aim was to apply game theory to the translator’s decision-making process.

The concept of indeterminism should probably take us further than Levý’s example. Is translating a text really like playing chess? On the chessboard, every piece probably does have some consequence for all the others. In translating, however, no more than a handful of textual items are usually strung together in this way. More important, if we take Quine’s theory seriously, the translator will never have anything like complete information about the game they are playing. They might be playing the stock market rather than chess. For example, we can picture the translator calculating risks and taking chances without really being aware of how the elements will actually fit together in the mind of the end receiver. Indeterminacy means that the translator has no

certainty that all the possible options have been seen, nor that all future decisions will be entirely determined by the previous ones.

### *Theories of semiosis*

What happens if we accept, along with Heidegger and quite a few others, that we do not have access to any intention behind an utterance? Let us say, we have the word *gavagai* and we want to know what it means. We are really asking what the word “stands for”; we are treating it as a sign. However, we can only produce interpretations of whatever it stands for, and those interpretations will be further signs, which will then be subject to further interpretations. At no point can we be sure our intention corresponds to anything that was there before the sign was produced (the speaker’s idea, for example). Our renditions constantly move meaning onwards, rather than back to anything in the past (despite the backward-looking positions adopted by thinkers like Heidegger or Benjamin). In terms of the nineteenth-century philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, what we are involved in here could be called “semiosis”:

By semiosis I mean an action, an influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into pairs. (Peirce, cit. Eco 1977: 15)

That is abstruse, but the concept could be of importance for translation within semiotics (the study of signs) (see Gorlée 1994). If we follow Umberto Eco’s reading of Peirce (Eco 1977), the “interpretant” is a sign that acts as the interpretation of a previous sign. Semiosis is the process by which signs “grow”, as Peirce puts it, potentially in an unlimited way. For example, if we look up a word in the dictionary, we will find that the “meaning” is a set of different words. We could then look up the meanings of those words, and so on *ad infinitum*, until the dictionary is exhausted, the language itself would have changed, and we would have to start again.

Eco describes the interpretant as assuming different forms (1977: 70):

An equivalent sign in another semiotic system (a drawing of a dog corresponds to the word *dog*)

An index directed to a single object (smoke signifies the existence of a fire).

A definition in the same system (*salt* signifies *sodium chloride*).

“An emotive association which acquires the value of an established connotation” (*dog* signifies “fidelity”)

A “translation into another language”, or substitution by a synonym.

All these forms could be regarded as translations of one kind or another, even though Eco only uses the term “translation” for one of the possibilities. Further, the existence of all these different forms must mean that none of them could be regarded as definitive. Each kind of interpretant could render all other kinds. The very nature of semiosis makes the processes keep going. And that is what translation, in a very wide sense, would be doing in the world.

The Russian linguist Roman Jakobson was paraphrasing Peirce’s concept of semiosis when he wrote that “the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign” (1959: 232 / 2000: 114). This effectively reverses most traditional translation problems: rather than represent a previous meaning, translation is the active creation of meaning, and this would hold for all kinds of meanings. Jakobson, like Eco, uses Peirce to recognize three kinds of translation (*ibid.*):

Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.

Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.

Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.

Note how Jakobson announces a theory of translation in the widest of possible senses (the creation of meaning itself) and then reduces it to just one kind of “translation proper”, concerning interpretations across languages. We find the same reduction to “translation proper” in Eco (2001), as opposed to the many other kinds of “rewriting”. Neither Jakobson nor Eco would want to lose the specific sense of translation, the sense that remains in touch with fairly traditional concepts. For Jakobson, “equivalence in difference is the cardinal problem of language and the pivotal concern of linguistics” (1959: 233); for Eco, each text has its own “intention”, which is what should be translated (cf. Eco et al. 1992, Eco 2001). From the very beginning, the idea of semiosis was present within the discourse of those (including Peirce, Jakobson and Quine) whose prime search was for certainty, for a sure grounding of thought. The principle of

semiosis was regarded as dissipation rather than liberation. Yet there were other voices prepared to grant semiosis a far more positive press.

### **Deconstruction as radical indeterminism?**

Many of the theories dealt with above feed into what is generally called “deconstruction”, a set of critical ideas based on the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (see Davis 2001). Deconstruction sets out to undo illusions of stable meaning of any kind; it would thus be a more radical version of the indeterminism. For example, Derrida (1985) criticizes Jakobson’s use of “translation proper” as just one kind of “translation”, as if the meaning of the term were stable in one place (what is “proper”, usually defined by something like equivalence) and not in another (the rest). The use of terms like “translation proper” is seen as “essentialism”, as the false assumption that words have their true meanings somehow embedded in them. In criticizing all forms of essentialism, deconstruction necessarily sees translation as a form of transformation rather than meaning transfer. Like Heidegger in this regard (and continuing the same philosophical tradition), Derrida seeks out the “remainder”, the potential significations that are omitted in the process of translation.

We see this critique at work when the early Derrida analyzes translations of Plato. Derrida (1968) observes that the Greek term *pharmakon* could be rendered in French as either *remède* (cure) or *poison* (poison), but not both terms at the same time (an ambiguity perhaps approximated by our term “drugs”, which can be good or bad for the body). This is seen as a problem not just for the translations into French, but for the movement from Greek everyday language to Greek philosophical discourse.

Derrida’s main use of translation is in order to investigate the plurality of the source (here in a sense of “semantic richness” rather than our own term “instability”). His oft-cited phrase “plus d’une langue” expresses this plurality. It could be translated as “more than one language” or as “let us have no more of one language”, and both readings are in the source. This, however, is rather like the Cratylus problem of having *aletheia* mean “truth” and “divine wandering” at the same time. The problem is one of translating the unique coincidence of meanings, tending towards the extreme uniqueness of the signature.

It seems to us that Derrida, in his practice of deconstruction, never sought to remove the special status of the source text, especially in the case of the great texts of

literature and philosophy. In this he remained close to the determinist side of Cratylus, albeit in the spirit of play and productivity rather than of essence. In a 1992 interview we find him wondering how it is possible that a work like *Romeo and Juliet* could make sense—any kind of sense—well beyond its original historical and cultural setting. This apparent mode of translatability is called “iterability”, attributed not to any fixed semantics but to the literary institutionalization of certain meaning effects (see Davis 2001: 30-35). The (great) source text is nevertheless adequate to its institutionalization; it remains productive; it can thus be seen not as a set of obligatory orders (as it would in a theory of equivalence, for example) but as a phantom, a spirit, an image that organizes without determining the range of translational variants. It returns, like the ghost of King Hamlet (Derrida 1993: 42-43), attaining translatability through the very plurality of retranslations. This kind of source-target relationship has been explored by the American theorist Douglas Robinson (2001), who relates it back to mystical theories of “spirit channelling”. It fits in well with the later Derrida, who sold himself to the United States as a reader of Shakespeare, as a client of literary institutions, and as a less-than-radical indeterminist. Derrida nevertheless took care to distinguish his metaphors from any claim to absolute translatability, which would assume the possibility of sameness, and thus essentialism.

The Brazilian theorist Rosemary Arrojo has perhaps been the most consistent in her applications of deconstruction to translation theory. We find her enlisting deconstruction (along with concepts from psychoanalysis and postmodernity) not just against all assumptions of meaning transfer (Arrojo 1993) but also against many feminist approaches to translation (1994), against ideal symmetrical relations (1997) and indeed against all forms of linguistic essentialism (1998). As in Derrida, Arrojo sees deconstruction not as a set theory but as a practice, a way of using language, and thus as a way of using language to translate. For example, Arrojo (1992) employs the Brazilian term *oficina de tradução* to translate the American term *translation workshop* (the practice class where students work together on literary translations, perhaps with a writer or two present). The translation is then shown to come under the category of “right, but...”. The Brazilian *oficina* is the standard equivalent of *workshop*, but the word also has the values of “place of work”, “place for the exercise of a profession (*ofício*)”. Arrojo (1992: 7-8) says *oficina* can also mean “laboratory”, “place for the machinery or instruments of a factory”, and “place where cars are repaired” (*workshop*, indeed). If we translate *workshop* as *oficina*, we are thus bringing slightly different

meanings, different images, new questions, to the initial concept. Is this a question of adapting to the new target culture? Interestingly enough, the Brazilian poet and theorist Haroldo de Campos (1962) had previously called for a “text laboratory” where linguists and artists would work together on translations. But an *oficina* is not quite the same thing as a *laboratory* (not even in Brazilian Portuguese). As Quine might have predicted, both can mean *workshop*, but they maintain a dynamic difference. Arrojo’s translation can thus continue to produce meaning, moving the semiosis on. It uses indeterminacy as a means of production.

The basic lesson of deconstruction might thus be that translation always involves transformation. That would seem a logical consequence of indeterminacy. The task of the deconstructionist would be to make readers aware of this. Arrojo, for example, gives us an extended discussion of *oficina* vs. *workshop*, presenting materials that the reader can then work with, just as Heidegger does with *ratio* vs. *Grund*, or Derrida does with *pharmakon*. Rather than provide ready-made solutions, the deconstructionist would use indeterminism in order to make readers think. We are engaged in an experience (perhaps as in Augustine), in a dialogue (perhaps as in Locke, albeit without final consensus), in a situation where readers themselves have to create their own knowledge (as in constructivism).

That might be the way deconstruction operates in the discourse of philosophy or in the teaching situation. What lessons, however, might indeterminism hold for translators, who often cannot dialogue with the reader quite so freely?

### **So how should we translate?**

The indeterminist paradigm would presumably be happiest with translations that have long philosophical prefaces or abundant footnotes on philological variants. It should like translations that talk about translating, as philosophers and teachers increasingly tend to do. Failing that, we would have to find ways to integrate an awareness of indeterminism into what we do in-text, in the parts of translation where the output has to be about as long as the input. As we have noted, many theories are not particularly helpful in this regard. Model examples do not abound, and there is a reason for this. In the end, from the strictly indeterminist perspective, such things are for each individual translator to decide. After all, if there is no certainty, how can any theory presume to tell us what to do?

Despite this quite logical reluctance to prescribe, the indeterminist paradigm is broadly compatible with a few prominent ideas that come from elsewhere. The basic point here was in fact raised by the French theorist Georges Mounin in 1963: translators tend to “over-translate”, to explain everything in order to make texts easy for their readers. This would be on the “domestication” side of Schleiermacher’s classical dichotomy of translation strategies. The indeterminist paradigm would see this as a shortcoming; it would tend to favor “foreignizing” strategies, the ones that make the reader aware that the text is a translation. The most developed notion of this is perhaps Philip E. Lewis’s concept of “abusive fidelity” (1985), closely related with Derrida’s work on translation. Lewis values translations that do *not* adopt the norms of the target culture, and which instead try to follow the source text so closely (hence “fidelity”) that the result will sound strange to most readers. This, says Lewis, should be done only at points in a text where there are meanings to be explored (“a decisive textual knot”, 1985: 43). “Abusive fidelity” could be a valid recommendation for anyone who wants to develop a philosophical reading of a text, or produce a series of metatexts on key philosophical terms and phrases. But can it seriously be proposed as a translation method as such? Perhaps not, given its restriction to key points (see Davis 2001: 87ff.) and its apparent indifference to the economies of translating. However, the practice of “abusive fidelity” can indeed bring the receiver into a space between two languages; receivers are made aware that there is no meaning transfer as such. The result would ideally be what Marilyn Gaddis Rose (1997) calls “stereoscopic reading”, taking place in an “interliminal space”, which remains in need of clear definition.

Beyond these few concepts, most of the modes of translation that oppose “domestication” or “fluency” might claim to raise awareness of indeterminism, at least as far as it concerns translations (rather than source texts). Theorists like Schleiermacher, Gutt and Venuti (to pick only three points of reference) would certainly want to make the reader work; they would not want translators to provide easy ready-made solutions, at least not for all translations. In this they rejoin indeterminism by seeking a complex reception experience, in a rather constructivist fashion. In Schleiermacher and the German Romantic school we find calls to translate in ways that allow features of the source text (especially in the case of Greek) to influence domestic syntactic patterns, nominally in the aim of developing the German language. Gutt, for his part, would oppose moves to translate the Bible as a modernized story (updating things like cultural practices or units of measurement); he would instead have

translators provide readers with enough information (“communicative clues”) for them to approximate the source location. As for Venuti, his call for translations that “resist fluency” privileges the use of non-standard variants in the target language. One of the theoretical basis for this is actually a deconstructionist critique of linguistics, which he sees as excluding the parts of language that are unsystematized and thus count as a “remainder” (see Venuti 1998, working from Lecercle 1990, but the idea was in Heidegger). This critique unfairly overlooks much of contemporary linguistics (especially the sociolinguistics of variation); it leaves an essentialism of the source text mostly untouched; but it does help raise awareness of indeterminism.

Indeterminism is something that translators are certainly aware of, along with revisers, editors, translation critics, and indeed anyone else who is able to read both source and translation. Translators constantly confront situations in which they have to decide, without certainty, between different interpretations or renditions. Knowledge of indeterminism might thus be considered in some way internal to the profession (see Pym 1993, 2004). External knowledge, on the other hand, would characterize a reception process in which no doubts are raised about the certitude with which the translation represents a source. Seen in these crude binary terms, awareness of indeterminacy would be well served by any mode of translation that can extend internal knowledge as far as possible into the external sphere.

### **Frequently had arguments**

Given the importance of the uncertainty principle in twentieth-century science, and of deconstruction within the humanities, one should perhaps be surprised at how little debate these theories have sparked within Translation Studies. Part of the explanation for this may be geographical. Deconstruction has been particularly important in literary studies in the United States, a country where Translation Studies has been very slow to develop. Across the world, university departments of literature or cultural studies have taken their lead from the United States, and have thus paid due attention to that view of indeterminism (and rather less to translation). In parallel, the many institutions where translators are trained have tended to take their lead from Europe and Canada, where translation is necessary for the workings of societies, and where indeterminacy is not particularly what those societies want to know about. Perhaps because of such broad conditioning, remarkably few translation analysts or translator trainers have read

deconstructionist theory, and even fewer have seen value in its complexities. With some exceptions (among which Pym 1995), the problematics of indeterminacy have mostly been allowed to go their own separate way.

One remarkable exception to this parallel development is the exchange between Andrew Chesterman and Rosemary Arrojo in *Target* in 2000. Arrojo would generally represent deconstruction; Chesterman would belong to something like philosophically aware descriptive studies. In their joint article, the two agree on a remarkably long list of things that could and should be done in Translation Studies. They show that an academic discipline can allow for exchange between paradigms, and still remain a discipline. At one point, however, Chesterman argues that the relation between a translation and its source cannot be characterized by difference alone, since meanings have degrees of stability and instability (and thus there must be degrees of difference and degrees of similarity, as in the “family likeness” metaphor). Arrojo does not accept this: “Meanings are always context-bound,” she argues. “Depending on our viewpoint and our circumstances, we may perceive them to be either ‘more’ or ‘less’ stable but all of them are always equally dependent on a certain context” (in Chesterman and Arrojo 2000: Ad.10). The deconstructionist wants no part of this “more or less”. For Arrojo, for consistent deconstruction, to analyze degrees of similarity would mean accepting the ideal of possible sameness (“more or less”, with regard to what?), and thus falling into essentialism. At that point, the two paradigms touch but separate.

Beyond that particular exchange, there has long been a hum of behind-the-back comments in Translation Studies, mostly against the role of indeterminism, and often without informed knowledge of the positions concerned. We might summarize a few general complaints as follows:

*The theories are not useful to translators.* As we have noted, theories of indeterminacy offer very few guidelines that might be of practical use to translators. They would seem to be theories for theorists, or for philosophers, or even for nitpickers. Translators, it is sometimes argued, have no time for such things; they are rarely paid for showing indeterminacy to the world. We might nevertheless concede that indeterminacy is could be of some practical consequence for the way translators are trained. Then again, opposition to commercial criteria might be one of the paradigm’s more profound contributions, and the productive use of translation within philosophical discourses is not to be dismissed as inconsequential.

*These theorists are not translators and do not care about translation.* This is a personalist version of the above criticism. Many of the thinkers cited in this chapter are indeed philosophers or literary theorists, more than they are translators. However, when Heidegger traces differences between German, Latin and Greek, or when Derrida teases out the various gaps found in translations, who is to say that they are not using translation as a way of doing philosophy?

*The theories lead to a lack of rigor.* A fairly common complaint about deconstruction is that it leads to situations where “anything goes” (some wonderful examples are given in Eco et al. 1992). Clever critics can locate any meaning in any text whatsoever, proving nothing but their own cleverness. Part of the problem here is that deconstructionist writing is relatively easy to imitate, and pretentious third-raters can indeed display a thousand inconsequential interpretations, filling their texts with unbearable puns along the way. There is quite a difference, however, between gratuitously playing with texts and the kind of close, careful reading we find in a master like Derrida, marked by punctilious attention to detail and careful tracings of myriad transformations due to translation. If anything, Derrida’s practice errs by an excess of rigor. Nevertheless, like translation itself, deconstruction has practitioners at all levels, and there is no need to discredit the entire paradigm because of the abundance, in some quarters, of facile extensions.

*Indeterminism is of no consequence.* A further debate might surround the “So what?” response we have met above with respect to Quine. Here the criticism would be that, no matter that games the theorists play, their concerns have no effect on the actual practice of translation. Indeterminism quite possibly does not interfere with the everyday practice of translation, but it should nevertheless concern any search for certainty, and thus most kinds of theory. When we make selections between various possible translations, we should realize we are mostly dealing with problems that are more complex than “right” versus “wrong”.

*These theories are merely oppositional.* This criticism would take some indeterminist theories to task for being too ready to expose the inadequacies all other theories. One cannot simply assume all theories of equivalence to be “transmissionist” or

“essentialist”. One cannot categorize all theories prior to Derrida as somehow “determinist” or “prescriptive” or “authoritarian”. Indeterminist theories have been around a long time, and they interact in quite subtle and contradictory ways with the other paradigms available. As we have noted, determinist theories of expression tend to give indeterminist theories of translation, whereas an extreme indeterminist theory of expression (the arbitrariness of the sign) would potentially allow translation to be encoding and decoding. In this situation, simple opposition seems extremely reductive.

*Deconstructive theories prescribe what translations should be.* This is one of the criticisms made by Raymond van den Broeck (1990), who viewed Derrida (1985) and Lewis (1985) as doing little more than call for a particular kind of “deconstructive translation” (1990: 54). Van den Broeck thus saw deconstructive theory as opposed, in this respect, to Descriptive Translation Studies. His critique seems very limited, almost to the point of being a misunderstanding, since the indeterminist paradigm obviously does far more than just prescribe one ideal way of translating. If “abusive fidelity” is the mode of translating best suited to deconstruction, this does not mean that indeterminism cannot be found in all modes of translating across the board. Cannot a deconstructive approach, which is basically a mode of interpreting texts, be applied to any translation at all?

*These theories do not help us live with indeterminism.* Many of the theories, particularly those associated with deconstruction, are not only bluntly oppositional with respect to other theories but also fail to seek ways in which professional practice effectively works with indeterminism. Here we have (provocatively we hope) listed Augustinian inspiration, Lockean dialogue, constructivism and game theory as four possible theories in which we find practice has come to live with indeterminism. Much more could be done in this regard. We could, for example, look closely at the way disciplines like physics and economics deal with uncertainty. What we find, quite quickly, is the development of theories based on probability and risk, concepts that go well beyond the kind of finite game theory used by Levý. This is an area in which much work remains to be done.

None of these arguments seem strong enough to diminish the importance of the indeterminist paradigm. Whatever kind of translation theory we choose to develop, we must learn to live with uncertainty.

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