

On *Erlebnis* within translation knowledge

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Draft 1.2. October 2017

Abstract: For Gadamer, translation operates as an illustrative “extreme case” of interpretation, of interest to the extent that it can push the logics of less-extreme interpretative practices. Yet the main thing Gadamer consistently says about *what* is extreme in translation seems to be that it strangely intellectual process, bereft of lived experience. One can nevertheless trace signals of lived experience within translation knowledge, both through what translators say and from what translation process research reveals. Further, the nature of that experience, in exceeding its interpretations, can justify an empirical attitude to its study. Hence hermeneutics could do worse than incorporate empirical attitudes into its work on translation, rather than endlessly repeat inherited insights.

Keywords: *Erlebnis*, Lived experience, Uncertainty, Translation processes, Translation knowledge

What is the place of translation within general hermeneutics? If we start from the Gadamer of *Truth and Method*, we find translation operating as an illustrative “extreme case”, of interest to the extent that it can push the logics of other interpretative practices. That characterization, however, is based on a series of assumptions that may or may not apply to the range of all possible translations. When we come to study translations seriously, looking at how they are produced and received, those assumptions become rather murky, and there are signs of rather more interesting processes at work.

The following discussion will analyse those assumption by following a few signposts, which are also my general claims: 1) What Gadamer assumes is the Western translation form, which can be defined as one among many translation forms; 2) Translating can involve a particular lived experience of uncertainty, translation knowledge, which deserves to be recognized as such; 3) Thanks to the diversity of its

possible forms and the nature of the translator's experience of uncertainty, translation exceeds its theorizations; and 4) That is why translation should be studied empirically.

Since the track is likely to wind, I start from the simplest of lessons.

1. An initial Translation Lesson

Erlebnis, when you begin learning German, is the word that is different from *Erfahrung*, since they both translate the English *experience* but do so in different ways. *Erlebnis* visibly has “life” (*Leben*) in it; it is a *lived* experience (here I will translate as “lived experience”); it is a physical engagement of the senses rather than a merely situational occurrence; it allows a plural (*Erlebnisse*). On the other hand, *Erfahrung* is accumulated experience, as in “a translator with experience”. Rival terms like Bourdieu's *habitus* miss this difference by assuming that the two kinds of experience are necessarily intertwined so there is nothing to be said about their difference. In maintaining the difference, I seek to open space for a discussion of how translation can fit into a general hermeneutic project.

The difference between these terms is of particular interest because Gadamer's hermeneutics is partly an argument *against* this thing called *Erlebnis* and the philosophical tradition it derives from – it is against the idea that lived experience constitutes any kind of foundational truth. Gadamer's project thereby opens space for its own commitment to engaged interpretation as something more intellectual than the immediate senses. And that is precisely the point I want to take issue with here. I want to claim there can be lived experience within something called translation knowledge, and that the nature of that experience, in exceeding its interpretations, justifies an empirical attitude. So I am not wholly within the traditional hermeneutic camp. Sorry about that.¹

¹ Rest assured, I accept wholeheartedly that all texts have to be interpreted, that there are human differences in interpretations, that there is deep history in those differences, and that translation involves complex instances of interpretation (even a decision *not* to seek sense is an interpretative decision). If that constitutes some kind of hermeneutic credo, then I freely subscribe. Yet my interests remain slightly elsewhere.

² I note that the notion of cultural translation being informed by “controlled equivocation”, rather than

The basic hermeneutic propositions are, I suspect, too powerful for most specific interpretative practices – they potentially apply across the board – and they certainly do not account for what I consider most specific to translation.

I shall first argue the technical point about the specificity of translation, then connect it with a call for empiricism within hermeneutic approaches.

2. Translation as “Extreme Case”

The siren call of universal explanation can wreak havoc on most theorizing, particularly, it seems, in questions of translation. People start out talking about a particular class of texts or of cognitive processes, then they find themselves addressing all possible texts and all possible cognitive processes. Common enough: “each act of understanding is translation”, “all texts are translational”, “all cultures are translations of other cultures”, and so on. Expansive claims of this kind became a mode of work in Serres (1974) and can be found in Steiner (1975), leaving little really new in more recent claims to base “post-translation studies” on the translative elements of all (literary) writing – which is tantamount to doing comparative literature under a more marketable flag (cf. Gentzler 2017). The same basic presumptiveness was dismissed, perhaps unfairly, by Berman (1985/1999: 21) as a “vagabondage conceptuel” that falsely assumed “universal translatability”. And the same thrust and counter-thrust can be found in debates on “untranslatability” that have remained somehow meaningful in the United States from Iser (1994) through to Apter (2013), and counting.

The simple problem is that, in willfully expanding the frame of translation in this way, critical discourses cease to address the specificity of translations, at least as a class of texts produced and consumed as such. They are talking about how the self relates to the other, or how cultures should address each other, all of which is very important and interpretative, but little of it is specific to translations.

That is a problem within contemporary translation studies; the philosophers are not particularly to blame. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer is actually rather eloquent in taking the opposite tack, identifying a certain specificity of translation as an “extreme case” of general interpretation (where “interpretation” is the movement to

understanding, not the oral form of translation). The references to an “extreme case” geometry mean that “the situation of the translator and that of the interpreter are fundamentally the same” [...] “the translator’s task of re-creation differs only in degree, not in kind, from the general hermeneutic task that any text presents” (Gadamer 1960/2013: 405). The trick is then to say exactly what is extreme about it. Most obviously, translation is an “extreme case that doubles the hermeneutical process” (1960/2013: 403), although that in itself need not mean that each movement is unlike the whole. Then we are told that translation is “an extreme case of hermeneutical difficulty – i.e. of alienness and its conquest” (405), basically because the construal of meaning is complicated by a special compulsion to faithfulness, although exactly why this should not be so of all interpretation is not immediately clear. The extremeness is fine as a claim, but the descriptions of it remain vague and unsupported by evidence. And then Gadamer elsewhere seems to claim that translation is rather *unlike* other modes of understanding:

The hopeless inadequacy of all translations shows this distinction very clearly. One who “understands” is not bound by the constraints of a translator – where one must give a word-for-word rendition of an assigned text. Rather, one takes part in the freedom that comes with true speaking, with saying what is meant or intended. (Gadamer 1994: 42)

So translation is apparently extreme in its own *lack* of freedom, its being bound by faithfulness, its apparent inability to partake of “true speaking”. Something similar is found in Lakoff, in an argument that, although not as seductive as Gadamer’s “freedom”, is nevertheless clear and strong enough to merit citation *in extenso*:

The difference between translation and understanding is this: translation requires a mapping from one language to another language. Understanding is something that is internal to a person. It has to do with his ability to conceptualize and to match those concepts to his experiences on the one hand and to the expressions of the new language on the other. Translation can occur without understanding and understanding can occur without the possibility of translation. (Lakoff 1987: 312)

This is where *Erlebnis* comes in (note Lakoff’s reference to “experiences” in the plural). Translation is apparently supposed to miss out on it. For Gadamer, the missed

life experience comes about because translators are condemned to word-for-word, to follow the text, and at best to express ourselves by distributing necessary “highlighting” (Gadamer 1960/2013: 404). We translators do not have the life experience of full engagement in whatever we are doing, apparently; we do not understand our languages by living in them, or so we are told.

What must strike any translator as being particularly presumptive in these aspersions is the consummate ease with which *all* translations, and *all* translators, are put into the same boat. Who knows that all translators are bound to work word for word? Who says all of us are always constrained by faithfulness to the text, and nothing more? Even Gadamer himself is reported as subverting his own generalizations: “Herr Stanley,” he says to his translator into English, “vergessen Sie den Text” (cit. Stanley 1994: xi), forget the text, as if hopeless inadequacy were for all translations except those of his own words. So not even Gadamer himself believed in his generalizations.

That is not to say the philosophers are wrong. It is merely to point out that they are not sure: Gadamer, who is nothing if not intelligent and self-reflexive, presents translation as an extreme case of understanding, then a counter-case, then a counter-case that can be countered. And nowhere here, or in virtually anywhere else in the many philosophies of translation, is there much empirical evidence of what translation is, or any serious attempt to grasp its historical, cultural and discursive variety.

In these cases, to say that translation exceeds its theory is simply to point out that the philosophical discourse has not really looked at it. Yet there are also more interesting reasons for the excess.

3. Defining the Nettle

Let me propose that there are many translation forms, and that the one that is being talked about here is peculiarly Western, ensuing from the Renaissance and travelling beyond Europe as a companion of modernity (Pym 2012). When Gadamer looks at translation, he sees this form.

This translation form depends on several maxims that, to my limited knowledge, are not found to be operative together elsewhere:

- *The alien-I*: When translating translators say, “I am tired”, they mean that someone else, called an author, is tired. Actors also use this alien-I.
- *Assumed non-significance of quantitative difference*: If a translation is shorter or longer than a corresponding anterior text (a “start text”), the difference is assumed to be small enough to be of no communicative significance. Transcriptions also incorporate this assumption.
- *Assumed language alterity*: A translation is assumed to mark a border between languages. Additional-language teaching also institutes this assumption.

Those three are probably enough for us to identify the thing we are talking about, although further principles can be added if required. Gutt claims that a direct translation entails “a presumption of complete interpretative resemblance” (1991: 186), which I would re-write as the assumed non-significance of *qualitative* difference, and that kind of claim can indeed be operative in a strong version of the Western translation form. As in Grice (1975), these are socially operative maxims because they can be broken in meaningful ways, creating implicatures. Pseudotranslation and its borders play with the alien-I, as do all cases where translators speak through their translations in one way or another. The quantitative relations between the texts are never exact and allow for elasticity and play. And the boundaries of languages are never linear, in contradistinction to the illusory line operative in this translation form. The way these maxims interact is poorly understood: only the quantitative relationship operates in a prototypical way; the other maxims depend on fictions of radical *discontinuity*, to the extent that the “extreme case” description (different in degree, not kind) is technically not accurate, at least on this score.

The form is also historically fragile, particularly to the extent that it depends on a fixed start text for all maxims to work their illusions. Prior to the age of print, there was little such fixity: translations were a part of recitative traditions, where quantitative relations were of little consequence (texts were reduced or expanded to suit the

occasion) and each retelling instituted points in what we would otherwise call dialect chains. Manuscript copying would do similar things, adapting language in incremental ways that did not need to assume linear borders between languages. Similar recitativity and copying is found in many non-European translation traditions, where the Western translation form tended to arrive just after the colonial railway lines.

Similarly, our age of electronic communication introduces a fundamental instability into the start text, since every website and every electronic instruction manual is subject to instant updating and adaptation. When instability enters the text that is supposed to embody the authentic “I”, to manifest the referent quantity, and to typify a systemic lingual location, then the very foundations of the Western translation form begin to crumble. As they are.

Try to define translation historically, and you soon see how precarious it is to assume the universality of assumed “word for word” procedures or subservient “faithfulness”. It is not just that the philosophers have not looked close enough; it is that they have not looked beyond the long Renaissance.

There is more than definition at stake, though. *Erlebnis* has something to do with it.

4. The Extremities of Uncertainty

Where the “extreme case” scenario does seem to apply is in assumptions of referential *incertitude*. It makes intuitive sense that texts produced and consumed within the one language and culture pose fewer problems of interpretation than those that move into different languages and cultures. There is greater predictability within the more homogeneous cultural unit, and greater uncertainty along the frontiers.

That model does not mean, of course, that there is just one way of dealing with uncertainty. Translational introspection can tell us this, as do a growing number of empirical studies. To risk a simple question: do translators map from expression to expression (as Gadamer seems to assume, along with Lakoff) or do they go from expression to function (or interiorized understanding) and then to expression? By all

accounts, the answer is neither wholly one nor the other. There is evidence of both things happening, and of things in between.

Douglas Robinson (2003: 56) describes how he found himself daydreaming while translating a chainsaw manual from English into Finnish: “While he translates, subconsciously he recreates in his mind scenes from his life in Finland, memories of cutting firewood with a chainsaw.” That subconscious daydream then gives him the Finnish words he is looking for, and does so when the first-stop mapping operations have failed. *Erlebnis*, indeed, and perhaps not just a remembered kind of experience. Commenting in a later book on what sounds like the same scene, Robinson claims a physical involvement as well: “I noticed that I was moving my body in odd ways at the computer – hunching my right shoulder, for example. I gradually realized that I was acting out the movements described in the manual” (2013: 59). And that bodily enactment of the Finnish experience also brings him to the words he is trying to locate. Do such things indicate internalized understanding? Do they partake of the “freedom that comes with speaking”? Certainly not in any full way, but they are obviously not simple mapping operations somehow performed by rote, external to all personal experience.

As a magisterial counter-weight to physical enactment, Philippe Forget spoke at the Köln conference against the absurd obsession with translating “meaning”, citing descriptions of perfumes that defy any rational decomposition into transferrable semantic units but nevertheless “work” – they evoke sentiments and bring up associations that can, in part, be recreated in the target language. In such cases, yes, there may be mapping operations of some kind, but not in the sense of applying algorithms or set patterns. The perfumed expressions, too, would require a kind of translatorial experience, at least in the translator’s capacity to interiorize the experience of the words and create from there.

Other accounts come to mind. The Sinologist and translator John Minford writes, “If what we write is to have a chance of living on the page, then we must also live, we must observe life, we must experience and learn to transmute that experience” (2012: 2). This means connecting the performance of translating with the life experiences of the translator. That kind of translating cannot be without life.

These are fragmentary, isolated accounts, of course; they are claims that are unsubstantiated beyond personal experience and could always be the result of translators inventing themselves *après coup* (Robinson's different accounts of the same experience might arouse suspicion.) There can be no claim that lived experience is involved in *all* translating. Then again, in the light of these accounts, who could say that translating is necessarily an entirely lifeless activity? Who could ignore the call, explicit in Minford but also in Nord (2014), that our anodyne official translations need far more life experience in them, more courage, more personal involvement?

Some counter-evidence concerns the internalized operations that translators learn and deploy, quickly, professionally, almost without thinking, certainly without anything like lived experience. That does happen. Yet research on translation processes suggests that it happens in a very inconsistent way. Professional translators, more than novices, tend to automatize quite complex tasks (a passive in English often but not always becomes a reflexive in Spanish, for example, without much cognitive effort) but then spend *longer* than novices on conscious problem-solving (see, among others, Krings 1988, Jääskeläinen and Tirkkonen-Condit 1991, Englund Dimitrova 2005). Professionals go fast when it is routine, deploying the mapping operations that are our bread-and-butter, then enter "bump" mode when necessary, spending *more* time on the production of alternatives, on thought about the end-user or client, on daydreaming and the like. Indeed, as neural machine translation now does much of the routine stuff for us, our cognitive effort can be invested precisely in the thorny items of maximum difficulty, the ones that require our fancier solutions, our deeper thoughts, sometimes our lived experiences.

Much of the work of twentieth-century linguistic translation studies was to identify the many ways in which translation problems can be solved (a summary is in Pym 2016), even though discourses outside of linguistic translation studies have registered very little of that work. The basic model for movements between European languages is of a baseline literalism where form corresponds to form as much as possible (yes, routine mapping operations) and then there are many cognitively complex solutions as one moves either in the direction of cultural adaptation or in the direction of linguistic borrowing. That is, translators have a lot more than faithful

word-for-word choices available to them. And when the typologies deal with movements between European and Asian languages, the baseline moves to the levels of what Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/1972) called “transposition” and “modulation”, where the translation solution tends to be generated from an imagined situation rather than the start linguistic form. Any assumption of default literalism could be relying on the assumption that all translating works like European translations, which is clearly not the case.

The point is that, seen from the perspective of process research, translating is very clearly not just one thing. It is indeed an “extreme case” in terms of interpretative demands, but it is *not* just *one* case in terms of the way translators find solutions. Once again, now for a different reason, translation exceeds its theory.

There are further reasons as well.

5. Translation Knowledge

As the typologies show, translators have many different solutions available to them. One can argue, fairly easily, that none of those solutions is ever definitive. The argument only requires a simple appeal to definition: if there is only one viable solution, then it is a question of applied grammar or terminology, not translation. Whenever there are absolute rules for movements between languages, they concern either the tyrannies of grammars or the authorities of terminologists, not translation. Translating, on this view, necessarily involves choices that are always uncertain to a certain degree. And it I suspect that this *pronounced uncertainty* is what most profoundly makes translation an extreme case, different from other interpretative acts in degree but not in nature.

I want to suggest that there is a kind of knowledge involved in translators’ constant work with uncertainty. Let us call this “translation knowledge”, although I make no particular claims about it being exclusive to work on translations.

This is not about theory versus practice; it is about a kind of knowledge produced in both research and in practice, or better, in a practice that operates in cognitive work on uncertain conceptual relationships.

This is certainly not about rules. All those facile assumptions about word-to-word mapping operations, or indeed of faithfulness as a guide to optimality, have little to do with translation knowledge. A linguist can apply them, or a terminologist, or a machine. Translation knowledge kicks in when the rules fail, which is often.

Translation knowledge has more to do with choosing between probabilities, as our statistical and neural machine-translation systems now know. If it remains at the level of pure process, it might mean constantly navigating the probabilities. But there is still something more to it.

Let me approach from an example in Derrida's *Du droit à la philosophie*, which is one of many possible instances. Derrida is reading Kant and stops at the second appearance of a particular sentence:

Ici se donne à entendre la deuxième occurrence du « *man kann nur philosophieren lernen* ». L'accent porte cette fois sur l'apprendre (*lernen*), alors que dans la première occurrence il portait sur le philosophe (*philosophieren*) : 1. On ne peut apprendre la philosophie, on ne peut apprendre qu'à philosopher (seulement à philosopher); 2. On ne peut qu'apprendre à philosopher (seulement apprendre : car la philosophie est elle-même inaccessible). Telle serait la progression d'un énoncé à l'autre. Les énoncés restent les mêmes, à l'exception du trait qui vient souligner le mot *philosophieren* dans le premier. 1. On ne peut apprendre qu'à philosopher (*nur philosophieren*) : et non la philosophie. 2. On ne peut qu'apprendre à philosopher, s'approcher de la philosophie sans jamais la posséder, donc sans vraiment philosopher avec elle. Question de traduction : en français le déplacement syntaxique du *ne que* (on ne peut apprendre que, on ne peut qu'apprendre...) permet de bien marquer la différence. En allemand, la phrase restant la même dans sa syntaxe, il a fallu souligner *philosophieren* dans le premier énoncé - et l'équivoque demeure, il n'est pas exclu que les deux occurrences aient gardé à peu près le même sens pour Kant. (Derrida 1990: 368)

[...] The utterances remain the same, except for the emphasis on the word *philosophieren* in the first. 1. One can *only learn* to philosophize (*nur philosophieren*): one cannot learn philosophy. 2. One can *only learn* to philosophize, to approach philosophy without ever possessing it, thus without ever truly philosophizing with it. A question of translation: in English the syntactic displacement of "only" (one can *only* learn, one can learn *only* to philosophize, one can learn to philosophize *only*) marks out differences. In German, where the sentence stays the same, with the same syntax, the verb *philosophieren* had to be emphasized in the first utterance – and the equivocation remains. It is not impossible that the two utterances may have had more or less the same meaning for Kant. (Derrida 1990: 368; my translation)

The uncertainty could probably be in any reading of Kant, but the moment of translating makes the alternatives sharper, allowing words to be attached to them – and Derrida was typically wont to make a mountain out of a molehill anyway, unable to let things ride. Note that the translational act identifies the uncertainty in different ways in accordance with the linguistic resources at hand: the German *nur* (only) can be rendered in two positions in French, and three in English. What is special about translation here? First, it brings out the alternatives that are otherwise not as clear. Second, the translational act obliges an uncertain choice to be made, if only because the Western form does not allow enough space to write an essay on the meaning potential of each foreign utterance. And third, as Derrida remarks, “the equivocation remains,” even when the translator is obliged to select one alternative over all others. In the space of translating (as process), before and behind the presentation of the translation (as product), doubts persist. The translation could always have been otherwise, and that is part of its special knowledge.²

True, in Derrida this is presented as a purely intellectual problem, cold and analytical, like Derrida himself. That same sense of linguistic equivocation might nevertheless provide the spark of concern or anxiety that elsewhere approaches a lived experience of some more palpitating kind. In support of this, I note that the distinction between the alternatives in Derrida’s example requires a certain performance: you have to say those sentences out loud, or imagine each being said in a particular situation, testing different scenes, in order to feel the pragmatic weightings of the adverbials. To institute translation knowledge in any full sense, one needs more than the words on the page.

6. Why Conceal Lived Experience?

One of the great delights of conference interpreting is that, when the day is finished and you walk out of the booth, there is an immediate sense of relief and fulfillment.

² I note that the notion of cultural translation being informed by “controlled equivocation”, rather than equivalence, has been picked up in Brazilian anthropology (cf. Castro 2004), without reference to Derrida, to describe the simultaneous maintenance of several cultural perspectives, as when a translation allows the foreign to shine through.

The adrenaline drops, a sense of calm takes over, and what's done is done: no one is likely to find your mistakes or try to improve your renditions. You have escaped.

In written translation, on the other hand, there is rarely anything like that moment of calm and relief: someone can always pick up your text, find the mistakes, and quibble over all the decisions that could always have been otherwise. The making of underdetermined choices leads to a mode of prolonged anxiety that we all learn to live with.

If we can accept this difference, at least as an interesting proposition to be explored, then it becomes possible to understand why some translators present themselves as exactly the opposite of doubt-ridden worriers, seeking to ward off any suggestion of quibbles. The world is full of self-proclaimed expert translators who know exactly how everything should be rendered, who can constantly correct lesser mortals, who require no qualifications other than professional experience, and who definitely have no time for academics or, worse, “theorists” or “philosophers”. In short, they bluff, professionally.

An example of such up-front certitude is the brochure *Translation. Getting it right* (2011), written by the experienced professional translator Chris Durban and translated and endorsed by professional translator associations across the world totaling some 25,000 members. In this brochure Durban constructs the image of a professional translator who works alone, who does not trust translation technologies, who is rigorously not an academic, who translates into their mother tongue only, and who is an absolute expert not only in that language but also in the fields they work in, to the extent that clients should take heed of their every advice. There is no trace of anything like equivocation in the brochure. On the contrary, up-front certitude is the knowledge that individual professional translators logically want their clients to have about translation: trust me, because I have experience (here very much *Erfahrung*) so I can provide very sure solutions.

The social function of that image can only be understood against the background of the deeper kind of translation knowledge that is a constant engagement with uncertainty. The external, social image is undermined not just by translatorial introspection and empirical process studies, but these days by the very evolution of the

language industry. The discourse of the lone expert is increasingly contradicted by our current age of postediting and collective translation memories, by localization teams, by crowdsourcing, by extensive professional use of L2 translation, and indeed by the high percentage of academics who translate professionally: a survey of 305 translation scholars found that some 96 per cent of them had translated or interpreted “on a regular basis” (Torres-Simón and Pym 2016). The external, social claim to certainty by professionals, necessary in order to constitute a certain social trustworthiness, conceals the active internal nature of translation knowledge.

The kind of lived experience that we might want to associate with translating is thus not an easy thing to grasp, since it is willfully concealed by an outward translatorial discourse. The important point, here, is that we admit the possibility of its existence. That is, we allow that the experience of translating is something more – and something other – than what the external professional discourse says about it.

7. Beyond Idealizations

I have argued elsewhere that “translation exceeds its theory” (Pym 2009: 28).³ Here I have been accumulating reasons for that statement: translation has many historical and cultural varieties that extend well beyond the Western translation form (the one our philosophers mostly look at); it concerns a wide range of possible solution types; it can involve modes of lived experience that are irreducible to simple statements of principle; it obliges people to make choices based on uncertainty and then, in some instances of professionalism, encourages them to hide that same uncertainty.

Let me now venture just a little further. In the same way that introspection and research can call professional bluffs, they can and should question similarly presumptive statements made by translation theorists. Formally, this is because a metalanguage that purports to describe categories is inherently as unstable as the

³ This is not to claim any great originality in the statement. Karin Littau similarly claims that “translation exceeds any *single* theoretical appropriation,” although not for the reasons I enlist here. Commenting on the famous non-debate between Gadamer and Derrida, she makes the general assumption that translation “falls neither simply one side nor the other, but on all sides at once, exceeding them” (Littau 1996: 119). Personally I have no such insight into the true nature of all translation.

categories themselves. In the case of translation this is often compounded by the way translation knowledge is of linguistic alterity, potentially undermining the monolingual status of most theoretical pronouncements. Pragmatically, though, the problem is more commonly one of theorists striving to say too much on the basis of too little, and not just within the hermeneutic tradition.

Examples abound. Here is just one, of interest for theories of lived experience. Arnaud Laygues (2007), working from French-language philosophies of dialogue, claims that the ethical translator does not ask the text “What does *this* mean?” but “What do *you* mean?”. That is, there is a translatorial attitude in which the text is *personified*, as the translator enters into dialogue with an imagined person rather than the text as a linguistic object. That is a great idea; I want it to be true; I actually present it to all first-year translation students within my reach, trying to *make* it as true as possible. But when we get down to analyzing actual translation performances, soliciting think-aloud protocols in search of second-person pronouns (“What do *you* mean?”) (Pirouznik 2014), we find that instances of second-person address are actually very rare. Personification is more frequently indicated through *third*-person utterances (“What does *he/she* mean?”) and mostly it is not indicated at all. True, we are finding that personification is more prevalent among women than men, that it correlates positively with Contentious personality traits, and so on. But it is certainly not part of the lived experience of most translators. This particular kind of *Erlebnis*, which I would very much like to find in translators’ performances, can indeed be questioned by applying a simple discovery procedure.

Translation exceeds its theory, sometimes in ways that are less than ideal.

8. Why Adopt an Empirical Approach?

Because translation exceeds its theory, we should be able to explore that excess, discovering more than we know. That means some kind of empirical approach is necessary. It does not mean, of course, that we need fall into the traps of positivism (there is no need to suppose that a description is transparent to its objects, that truth is only probabilistic and quantitative, that knowledge can be free of subjectivity, that

research is not political, and so on). All basic empiricism really requires is that researchers admit there is something they do not yet know, and that there is some procedure by which they could reduce that ignorance. It is not much to ask.

The point is worth making not just because of the elusive nature of translation – similar things could be said of many complex objects of knowledge. It is particularly worth making now, I propose, because several of what were once our most sophisticated approaches to translation have generally failed to evolve over the past twenty years or so. Hermeneutic studies of translation have certainly had their word to say, and that word has been heard, but once we have accepted that translating is a hermeneutic activity, what further problem has to be solved? For a while, some dynamism could be generated from debates with *Skopos* theory, but that school of thought has also stagnated, similarly for want of anything like an empirical research component.

Once the insights have been repeated, a way to move forward is through a coordinated empirical research paradigm, with clear problems to solve. One such problem might be the types and nature of *Erlebnis* in the constitution of translation knowledge, on the surface of which I have only been scratching.

9. Return: Gadamer and Fear of the Event

Why did Gadamer go out of his way to argue *against* translation as a life experience? I suspect that it was partly because he held a particular conception of *Erlebnis* as something to be suspected, resisted, held at arm's length by the investigative intellect. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer takes time out to consider the origins of *Erlebnis* as concept, tracing it back to Dilthey, Simmel, and Husserl, where he appreciates its role in countering mechanistic models of understanding. Within *Erlebnis* there is life (*Leben*), and its pedigree does indeed pass through Bergson and similar anti-Cartesian attempts to resist the mechanized world. What is wrong with *Erlebnis* is that it might then be called upon to function as an *ultimate* referent, in the way the illusory transcendental signified would work in Derrida:

That is what the concept of experience states: the structures of meaning we meet in the human sciences, however strange and incomprehensible they may seem to us, can be traced back to ultimate units of what is given in consciousness, unities which themselves no longer contain anything alien, objective, or in need of interpretation. (1960/2013: 56-57)

In other words, that is where we stop interpreting, intimates Gadamer; it is where we leave off the vigilance of deconstruction in Derrida; it might be were we enter the particular truth of pure experience, of the event as proclaimed by Badiou (1988) and as Venuti apparently seeks in translations (2012: 184–6) – the experience of translating should inform the experience of performing and receiving translations as events with nothing but their own experience as truth. In Germanic tradition, one senses the specter of the Nuremberg Rally and the like informs the fear of temptation, as in classical debates over rhetoric vs. ethics: experience as the ultimate referent might lead to the cessation of critical thought, of which there are disastrous historical examples.

There is a catch, though. If the particular risk of *Erlebnis* is that it risks being misconstrued as certitude, as the opposite of interpretative process, we find in the case of translation that the modes of experience are themselves typified as engagements with uncertainty; they can be identified as “extreme cases” precisely in terms of ongoing engagement with that same indeterminacy, since doubts accrue along frontiers. In underscoring that translation can be a creative act, that it can involve the person as well as the mind, and that translations can and should be made motivating and exciting rather than being written off as boring mechanical products, translation scholars are very far from proclaiming any kind of ultimate truth. The very nature of our task goes against precisely that, at least for as long our *Erlebnis* is itself a restless engagement with uncertainty.

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