

LOST IN THE LABYRINTH:
SOME ASPECTS OF DIFFERENCE AND TRANSLATION

LILIANA SIKORSKA

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

"Wordless in the midst of words"
Maurice Blanchot

The first version of this paper originated in consultation with dr John Leavey when I was still working at the University of Florida, and, as I wrote in the summary, it concerned the problems related to the notions of difference, community and translation. It provided the framework for further discussion on how these concepts operate in contemporary cultural and literary context. Luckily, the summary was enigmatic enough so that deletion of the notion of "community" did not drastically affect what had remained of the original paper. This change, however, shifted the emphasis on difference, seen from the point of view of sociolinguistics as well as women's studies.

This paper is not a substantial analysis of a given work. Being neither technical nor prescriptive, it presents translation through its philosophical dimension as a form of literature. Concurring with Jacques Derrida's claim (1990: 76) that we have already put theory to the n-th power I do not wish to create another one. Rather, I offer a play of associations which can serve as a commentary to Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" and related articles by Jacques Derrida "De Tour de Babel", Carol Jacobs' "The Monstrosity of Translation" and Paul de Man's "Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of The Translator'". What follows, is an attempt if not to tame, at least to understand "the confusion" (The Babel). Oscar Wilde says: "if you want to exhaust the topic, you exhaust the listeners". Hopefully, the latter will not happen, and for not carrying out the former the author will be forgiven.

In the recent years there has been a lot of dissension in establishing the status of translation. Lured to the idea of intertextuality, post-modernism accepted multiplicity of meanings, openness and inherent fragmentariness of texts. Within the framework of deconstructive incommensurable discourses in which the meaning is

scattered and dispersed along the chain of signifiers (Eagleton 1992: 128) the translation no longer seems to call the authenticity of the original into question. Consequently, translation cannot be a unified product characterized by one type of meaning. Viewed from the post-modern condition of culture, the translation is not autonomous work but also a plural web of intertexts. Hence, the fragmentariness is projected from the work onto its translation. What is more, the status of translation concerns not only textual strategy raised by the translator. It also concerns the translator himself/or herself, as I will try to argue further in this paper.

The central idea of Walter Benjamin's paper (1923, translation: 1968) is not the problem of translation (the object) but the problem of translator (the subject). Although he is not concerned with gender issues, the nature of his argument shifts the stress from language, as purely technical tool, to its personal/spiritual strata. Thus, it can be contrasted with Kristeva's notion on language as symbolic form, or chierarchical structure, in which women have to struggle to find their identity. It is the issue of "unsaming the same" to use Luce Irigaray's term (1992: 205) or Derrida's problem of "Translatoress" (1985: 179). Seen from the perspective of feminist literary criticism one can easily relate to Wittgenstein's notion of language as labyrinth opening the infinite possibilities but also closing many paths shutting the way out. Is there a way out is yet a different question. The mastery of language not always provides the most pertinent guidelines. No wonder one can get lost even if we assume that the labyrinth of language is, in itself, a finite entity. This stance can be better comprehended if put against another Wittgenstein's assertion, that is, language limits one's world. The problems with translation arise, however, not only on the pure linguistic level but rather on the metaphysical one, denoting the difficulties of self-expression of one human being as translated into the self-expression of another human being. The difference pertaining to gender-oriented perception of the world largely influences the process of translation, and hence, the search for the way out of the labyrinth.

Consequently, it is an individual who incorporates dissimilarity. But it is through the community constituting cultural unity that the notion of difference in relation with translation emerges. It is for that difference, as Berman asserts, that we reach for the foreign (Berman 1992: 1-3) to naturalize and assimilate it. Translation is done by and for the community, strenghtening its cultural identification. Naranjana (1992: 60-61) elaborates on the political aspects of translation and re-translation, and the society's need to rewrite history. Apparently, community as defined within language limits is not only self-created in writing but also in translating. Culler (1982: 52) asserts that feminist criticism is trying to act in a similar way. He, as well as many other critics, associate feminist criticism with a political act whose aim is to interpret and necessarily re-translate the world from a female angle, and also to change the consciousness of those who undergo the process.

Gender is largely a cultural construct, it is essentially the way we are brought up (Faludi 1992: 394). The notion of difference, then, begins and ends with the notion of experience. On a macro-scale, there is different cultural background and,

on a micro-scale, gender is narrowed to the perception through education and social setting. All these ingredients compose a diversified picture of a community. Irigaray argues, though, that this difference in the phallogocentric universe is never fully acknowledged. What follows, "women's experience tells them, on a cultural level, that they are first and foremost asexual or neuter, apart from when they are subjected to the norms of the sexual arena in the strict sense and to family stereotypes" (Irigaray 1993: 21). As a consequence, woman is characterized through the family relations, and is expected to filter her experience through such a prism, while a man relates himself to the world outside family bonds.

"Women are more often conceptualized in a singular condition, while men are allowed an individualism that transcends gender" (Coates – Cameron 1988: 8). That means that male linguistic patterns are usually considered as the general, unmarked ones while female patterns are marked for difference. Detrimental, as it is, such a difference is not perceived as equally valid but rather as deficient implying the need for improvement to reach male standards. Irigaray elucidates how certain cultural aspects affect the perception of a woman, language is one of them.

"Just as an actual woman is often confined to the sexual domain in the strict sense of the term so the feminine grammatical gender itself is made to disappear as subjective expression, and vocabulary associated with women often consists of slightly denigrating, if not insulting, terms which define her as an object in relation to the male subject" (Irigaray 1993: 20).

Women are excluded from the patriarchal linguistic order, "the mother tongue", is in fact, "the father tongue". In the labyrinth of differences the cultural transfer happening each and every day of our life is what Jacobson calls intratextual translation, and in itself provides prerequisite for communication.

Various definitions stress that woman's idiodialect is different from man's. Different patterns of speech, and consequently different understanding of linguistic patterns is usually labelled as genderlect (Maltz – Borker 1982: 197). There are two main methods in treating sex differences in communicative framework interpreting linguistic differences in women's and men's communicative competence: dominance and difference approach. The former is a reflection of men's dominance and women's subordination, the latter, asserts that man and woman belong to different subcultures: the difference in woman's and men's communicative competence are clarified as reverberations of these different subcultures (Coates – Cameron 1988: 65).

The cross-sex communication is labelled by Maltz and Borker (1982: 196) as miscommunication. Such a stance comprises the notions of cultural difference between sexes. "When men and women have different experiences and operate in different social contexts, they tend to develop different genres of speech and different skills for doing things with words" (Maltz – Borker 1982: 200). It is connected with the patterns of domination and sexual roles in the society and goes as deep as the perception of reality and reading.

“In literary criticism, a powerful strategy is to produce readings that identify and situate male misreadings,” asserts Jonathan Culler (1982: 54). “The more convincing its critique of phallic criticism, the more feminist criticism comes to provide the broad and comprehensive vision, analyzing and situating the limited and interested interpretations of male critics” (Culler 1982: 55-56). Women critics focus particular attention upon different things identifying with the concerns of women characters trying to provide the alternative to patriarchal power structure. Focalization, then, entails the problem of linguistic representation. Sapir and Whorf Hypothesis maintains that experience structures world (language) in disparate way, what follows the reality is conceptualized differently (Montgomery 1986: 172-173). If man and women speak different genderlects then consequently they would structure their written expressions in a different way. In this sense women’s experience with the text would provide a different bias than that of a man. Is that the case with reading, interpreting and then translating? Kristeva understands the symbolic form of language in terms of sexual and symbolic difference. Women need to be part of the experience of the society and must be introduced to “the father tongue”. To start with, they have to understand and concentrate on their sexual and symbolic difference in the framework of social, cultural and professional realization (Kristeva 1986: 198).

The notion of difference can thus be seen both as a social as well as political phenomenon. Sociolinguistics corroborates the fact that social position and function of women entails different linguistic behavior (Coates – Cameron 1988, Tannen 1990), whereas feminist literary criticism, (Kristeva 1986, Irigaray 1992, 1993) sees the difference in a more abstract philosophical dimension bound to concrete political conditions. It is argued that social and gender variation are superimposed in spoken language and are not as ostensible in the written one. As a result, one can maintain that status based “role-playing” in the society is neutralized in the written language. Still, if reading is essentially constrained by interpreting and writing as a man, or as a woman, (Culler 1982: 43-64) then reading and writing that comprise the process of translating indicate the same law. A woman-translator, to use Derrida’s term, is the reader and the interpreter of a text.

Derrida, drawing on the metaphor of Babel-confusion sets out an argument on inherent untranslatability of texts. It suggests the irreducible multiplicity of tongues, incompleteness that works against totalization. Babel is the Name of the Father: the origin and the originator of the confusion and names are inherently untranslatable. Translation, then, becomes a forbidden fruit: “...necessary and impossible, like the effect of a struggle for the appropriation of the name, necessary and forbidden in the interval between two absolutely proper names” (Derrida 1985: 170). *Finnegans Wake* could exemplify the above assertion. The book calls for translation, yet, its language precludes it.

Our civilization arises with translation, transformation and adaptation as the means of expanding the horizons of our learning. Greek comedies were translated into Latin, Ancient philosophical treatises were transposed into Latin and then from Latin into vernacular languages. Yet, the borderline between translation and

adaptation was very thin. In fact, some of medieval translations could be regarded as a metaphor for textual criticism.

“Translation, in humanist thought, was simply the sign of a wider transcendent impulse under which empires and learning (*imperia* and *studia*), entire segments of human consciousness, came forward to merge with articulated experiment of the present” (Norton 1984: 18, quoted after Nirnajanana 1992: 61-62).

The survival of our literature is in translation, so is the knowledge and culture. The translation as well as the work is always constrained by individual experience. Paradoxically, the same civilization developed a strong conviction that the translation is always a forgery of the original (Derrida 1985: 198). It adulterates the pristine, the work then, is working against the translator. The translator can never retrace the original meaning. Differance, the irreducible absence of intention states the inherent untranslatability. It induces the illusion of correctness, an ideal which is never possible to be reached. Platonian hatred towards written language seems to be well in place here. In speech one can involve all sorts of features of the context which are not possible to be used in writing intended for absent receivers without explicitly representing these features. Once we have lost the original presence the gap between language and idea always remains.

Writing communicates something in the absence of the addressee, translation is based on the same premise. The receiver is facing homogenous presence in representation. “The concept of representation is dissociable from the concepts of communication and expression” (Derrida 1982: 312). Retracing the original meaning is also connected with the search for an author and inherently bound to the humanistic idea that an author is the originator of meaning. This is the chief argument Foucault makes in his essay “What is an Author?” (Foucault 1984: 101-120). The question of authorship and hence, unified meaning, organic unity permeating the text, signifies for Foucault the humanistic concept of individuality. Disposing of the notion of an author, that quality which seems to underline the meaning of the work by virtue of the proper name, one can no longer talk about the original being the immaculate. What we are left with is unoriginal original, a subject to various readings, and, obviously, misreadings. The necessity to re-translate, being a fairly modern phenomenon stems from yet another source, it is the everlasting pursuit to make the translation conceptually allegiant to the original. It is almost as if one wanted to make it a facsimile, while forgetting that translation is primarily an artistic form: “And the law of this form has its first place in the original” (Derrida 1985: 181). It is neither the beginning nor the end but always the middle from what it splits.

Accepting the absence of the voice means breaking with the context, and also gender oriented issues. Still, de-contextualization guarantees the presence of the scriptor whose “inscription” still carries the entire horizon of experience and intention. Misread, misinterpreted and displaced, nevertheless through the fundamental feature of iterability, becomes communicable through the sole function

of inscription, writing, or to use Derrida's term "grafting" (1982: 317). And that in itself engenders the identity of a given text, without, however, granting it the unity of self-identity.

The whole issue of a loss is inherent in cultural perception of the task of a translator/a translatress. It appears that paranoid anxiety against misreadings and misinterpretation always refers to the task of a translator as a struggle. This fear extrapolates the idea of disfiguration, the loss of the intangible elements of the original.

Based on the extreme version of Sapir and Whorf hypothesis the statement that most texts are untranslatable, leaves the translator in the abyss. Here Wittgenstein's saying "My language limits my world" proves to be very true. What is more, within the frames of a translated text my apprehension of reality delineates my translation, as it provides the infrastructure for my comprehension of the world. The difference, as it was already mentioned begins and ends with experience. *Traditore, traduttore*, (translator/traitor) as the Italians say (Derrida 1985: 198). To translate means to transgress the laws of fidelity. And it is certainly not the question of absolute linguistic fidelity, but rather conceptual diffusion.

For Benjamin, the ideal, the core of both the original and the translation is enclosed in what he calls *reine sprache* "pure language". This concept is understood not as the ideal language but as the communicated ideal that lies beyond the language and that is what should be found within the work of literature. According to Carol Jacobs Benjamin's definition is rather lucid focused on negation of what it is not: "Kinship between languages is not similarity nor can it guarantee the preservation, in translation, of the original's form and sense" (Jacobs 1975: 759). Chomsky's universal grammar and also to an extent Jakobson's poetic language stress the existence of the common core and appear to repeat the same idea.

"In all languages and their creations there remains, beyond the communicable, something incommunicable, something symbolizing or symbolized, according to context. Symbolizing only, in the ultimate creations of the languages; symbolized, in the evolutions of the languages themselves. And what seeks to come forward, indeed to come to birth, in the evolution of the languages is the germ of universal language. But if the germ is fragmentary, is nonetheless present in the actual life as that which is symbolized, it exists in works of art only in the form of its symbolic representation" (Benjamin 1968: 93-94).

In such a delineation, one can talk about the survival rather than death of the original. In the representational mode, the translation gives life to the translated text being in relation of the complementarity. The untranslatable becomes, within the new dimensions, the translatable through the use of the symbolic code, thus giving the original the after-life, *überleben*.

If literalism does not seem to be the main idea: "The unfixable task of translation is to purify the original meaning: only poor translations try to restore it" (Jacobs

1975: 758), then there is a way out of the labyrinth. But translation is context-bound, and cultural context is highly conventionalized, so is the notion of gender, and consequently, through social conditions, genderlects. Even if it is restitution of meaning, not imitation or paraphrasing, something is irreparably lost. God, the father, handed over the right to name the universe to men. The right to translate, the right to name seems to be appropriated solely to man. Women are excluded from that discourse. Working on the prerequisite of logocentricity it is: "Man becomes God as the Word made flesh" (Irigaray 1993: 68). No wonder that men get the privilege of naming.

Feminist criticism advocating the recognition of culture of difference promotes the idea of "writing as a woman": "Not to contribute to making language and its writings sexed, is to perpetuate the pseudo neutrality of those laws and traditions that privilege masculine genealogies and their codes of logic" (Irigaray 1993: 53). Irigaray made it very clear that there is no neutral language: "Language is the product of the sedimentations of languages of former eras. It conveys their methods of social communication. It's neither universal, nor neutral, nor intangible (...) every era has its specific needs, creates its own ideals, and imposes them as such" (Irigaray 1993: 30). Therefore, Derrida's remark on the status of translatress becomes a viable issue in which woman's discourse deserves full acclaim.

Does this, however, if a may pose such a prescriptive question, affects the translation from the same premise, is yet another issue. Translation, as it was already said, is also interpretation. If we take Stanisław's Barańczak, undoubtedly very good, translation of Emily Dickinson's poems, are we getting to the core of her very complex lyrical expression. Are we touching upon what is untouchable in her femininity? I would not venture to give an answer. The example of the reverse situation would be Zofia Chądzyńska's translation of Cortazar's fiction and especially *La Rayuela (The Hopschotch)*. Some critics challenged her translation declaring that it is no longer Cortazar's fiction, but Chądzyńska's Cortazar in prose. One thing certainly proves to be true, the untranslatability of the proper name: La Maga is a fairy, somebody whose powers are contained in the name. In Polish translation "Maga" sounds like a diminutive from Magdalena. Her powers are lost. The polarization between the universal and the unique vary from text to text allowing only a certain degree of penetrability. The problem is, however, where, then, is the line dividing a translator's self from the text and to what extent can a translator interfere within the text, even if we accept the fact that: "translation denies linear law of nature in order to practice the rule of textuality" (Jacobs 1975: 757). Benjamin does not specify that either. Although he does talk about the task of the translator as opposed to the task of the translation, in this way shifting the stress from the object to the agent, he avers though, that both are equally significant in attaining the ideal form. The acknowledgment of this importance is only the return to what we have already known and accepted.

The inherent dichotomy of translatable/untranslatable (Berman 1992: 3) lies not so much in the distaste for unfaithfulness, and supposed abuse of the original but rather in the anxiety of human fallibility within the maze of language and culture. Translation as a work and a form belongs to a certain community, this,

corroborates its endemic quality but at the same time raises the difficulty in transmission of one reality to another. Comprised by the idea of cultural and gender difference this transposition happens both on a general as well as personal strata respectively. For if an individual translates for a community and within that community he still imposes his gender related linguistic competence onto the text translated. Hence, the need for acknowledging the rank of translator. Apparently, there is no panacea for such a predicament other than the belief in Benjamin's "pure language" understood as universal, representational and symbolic mode through which the translation can be realized, and re-born not only in the archetypal "father tongue" but also "mother tongue", even though the original is never retrieved in its full form. Such a stance signifies the poetics of failure and this is the message of Benjamin's essay. We are left wordless. The inherent tautology *aufgabe* in German also means the one who gave up: *aufgegeben* (DeMan 1986: 80). The recognition of impossibility to reach unattainable ideal is in itself the victory of post modern translation. It is also Ariadna's thread for those who, nevertheless, feel lost in the labyrinth.

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