

## Reconsidering Translation as Interpretation

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### Abstract:

The act of translation as a literary phenomenon lends itself to varied critical and theoretical approaches and one such approach perceives it as an act of interpretation that can be strongly linked to twentieth century German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. While conceiving and putting forward the act of translation as a specific hermeneutical experience, Gadamer, in his writings states that translation is itself a linguistic act and that language is inextricably tied with man's being in the world. His analysis of the process of translation has deeply influenced the critics and theoreticians of translation studies. My paper is an attempt to grapple with the aforesaid conception of the process of translation as interpretation.

**Keywords:** Translation Studies, Hans Georg Gadamer, Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, Linguistics, translation, interpretation.

Translation is a literary phenomenon that has led to varied critical and theoretical approaches and one of them which perceives it as an act of interpretation can be strongly linked to philosophical hermeneutics. Philosophical hermeneutics refers to the theory of knowledge initiated by Martin Heidegger and developed by Hans Georg Gadamer in his magnum opus *Truth and Method* (1960) on hermeneutics. Gadamer was a renowned twentieth century German philosopher and one of the chief thinkers of hermeneutics who took up an analysis of the process of translation which deeply influenced the critics and theoreticians of translation studies. While presenting the act of translation as a specific hermeneutical experience, Gadamer, in his book *Truth and Method* states that the translation process is itself a linguistic act and that language is inextricably bound with man's being in the world. Gadamer goes as far as to claim that "language is the real medium

of human being.” (Gadamer, *Man and Language* 68) The world is itself only when it is expressed through language; language exists only when it represents the world. Thus, the world and language intertwine with each other and determine each other’s existence which makes it difficult for us to view them as two separate entities.

Such considerations acquire a very distinct and profound meaning if we take into account the relationship between a foreign language and the translator who is also its user. In his work *The Boundaries of Language* Gadamer correctly points out that “a foreign language remains a specific limit experience,” (Gadamer 2000) and that it never convinces us that the words of a foreign language are simply other names of the same things present in our native language. Therefore, a foreign language opens up new possibilities of perception of the same reality. Learning a foreign language does not imply that man needs to change his relation to the world. On the contrary, the translator’s relationship with the world is retained, but is also enhanced and enriched. This is of particular relevance to the situations faced both by written and oral translators who, when they come in contact with a foreign language, enter into a specific relation with the world enhanced with a different cognitive horizon, but also with some unchangeable obstacles or difficulties mainly in understanding.

According to Hans Georg Gadamer, the meaning of translation can be gauged in terms of hindrance in comprehension and interpretation. Translation is, most of all, a linguistic action that involves people who mostly communicate in two separate or different languages. Consequently, their communication is said to be hindered or obstructed. Translation act doubles the hermeneutical procedure and it points to a situation of definite distance between the translator and the other party of the conversation. A message could either be uttered by a person, in the case of oral translation, or could even be a source text written by a specific author, in the case of written translation. (Piecychna 180) The distance constitutes a significant obstacle for the translator to overcome. Yet, there are several other barriers in achieving a clear comprehension for instance, translator’s insufficient language proficiency, and incorrect context, inability to maintain a neutral stance with respect to the perspectives of the various participants of the conversation, multitudinous meanings in the source message, or problems that might come up from the possibility of the translation of the source message in a variety of ways. Hence, it turns out that the translator is both an interpreter and a negotiator, and his role is to facilitate an understanding between two parties of the conversation. A translation therefore, Gadamer claims, is an act of interpretation, where the exact

semantic meaning of the source text cannot be replicated in the target text. The translator, however, labors hard to develop an understanding between the author of the source message and the recipients/readers of the target text, which also illustrates a specific doubling of the hermeneutical process. Thus, the translator creates a completely new text or a new message. According to H.G. Gadamer, the translator should be seen as a negotiator, that is, a person who mediates in the process of understanding. We can say that the translator is always present in a text, though not in person, yet as one of the most crucial elements of the process of achieving an understanding between two parties.

According to Hans Georg Gadamer, any real understanding in any conversation is carried out through the medium of language, and every language has a set of inherent values and therefore a dialogue between two different languages necessarily entails the imposition of the values of one language on the other. The translator must also be careful enough to preserve the character of his own language. Translation thus, makes possible a cultural involvement between the two languages. To quote H.G. Gadamer from *Truth and Method*, “In bridging the gulf between languages, translation clearly exemplifies the reciprocal relationship between interpreter and text”. (Gadamer 386) This very relationship between language and culture is elaborated by Susan Bassnett in her book *Translation Studies*: “No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre the structure of natural language.” (Bassnett 22)

While Gadamer describes translation as interpretation and not reproduction, he nevertheless holds on to the idea of loss in the process of translation. By contradiction, Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Task of the Translator* contends that translation is a gain or a vehicle for transforming or expanding the translated language and thereby producing a greater “pure language” whose aim is not only to give out information, but to reinstate the intentions of language as a whole, otherwise always undermined and perhaps even lost in the excesses of literary content. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was a renowned German Jewish philosopher, Marxist cultural critic who defined the role of art in society as a facilitator of egalitarianism, being a huge leveller. His works, on a variety of issues, inspired several scholars working in myriad traditions like Marxism, semiotics, structuralism, religious criticism and in disciplines as varied as literary criticism, history, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935) is a seminal work advocating the rise of

technology leading radical transformations in society, despite it devaluing the aura surrounding any art form. In his popular essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin asserted that modern technological advances had brought about a radical transformation in the concept of a work of art and that technology enabled individual works of art to be reproduced in umpteen ways, thus making them available to the masses which was once considered the prerogative of the minority elite. Benjamin understood and extolled the potential democratization of arts inherent in the advancement of mechanical reproduction which facilitated the involvement of the masses in culture and politics. Thus, he fathomed the significance of technology in the industrialized society of the twentieth century, and also the massive expansion of the media. In his view, the media had the power to do away with the ritual bourgeois elitism of art and literature and render it a novel type of political freedom.

For Walter Benjamin, technology oriented innovation not only enhances the existing art forms, but is also capable of generating novel art forms by giving us newer forms of media for artistic production. His popular essay *The Task of the Translator* is a way to perceive translation as an art form with a specific concern regarding what transpires when a particular language is turned into another one. For Walter Benjamin, translation is an art form which implies that translation is also a form of inventive and artistic writing akin to poem composition, and not a mere secondary derivative or offshoot of literary art. If we combine Benjamin's opinion that the translation process is an art form with one of his other arguments that an art form's history cannot possibly be cut off from the technical standards that exist in its time, perhaps then the conception of machine translation can be understood as a novel linguistic art form.

If the translated work is a new linguistic art form, then the translator is not only the interpreter or negotiator but also the new author or the second author of the original text. The translation which seeks to recreate the original is thus, an independent, autonomous entity. The translated text thus, has an independent standing of its own, with its own uniqueness. Translation for Benjamin does not entail a mechanical, literal, word by word imitation or replication but something that adds a whole new dimension to literary production. His theory does away with the traditional definition of translation as promoting explication and transference but sees the translational process as an enrichment of the original text in which the new author's intentions are communicated that renders it a limitless activity. Moreover, translation can also be viewed as a negotiation between two cultures. Because one translation cannot draw out all meanings, many

translations of the same text are possible. Translation, therefore, is not about mere transmission of information, meeting the reader's expectations or retaining likeness to the original. To quote Walter Benjamin from the essay *The Task of the Translator*: "It is not the highest praise of translation, particularly in the age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language." (Benjamin 79)

The real task of the translator then, is to uncover, interpret and improve upon the hidden meanings in the original text to bring about a proliferation of meanings hitherto undiscovered. Walter Benjamin's idea of translation therefore, is not lexical or limited merely to dictionary exercise. It does not entail dissecting or breaking the text into constituent units. Accuracy, precision or literalness in translation is significant but only insofar as the internal fragments within the translated language correlate with each other in the essence of their details, however different they may be from the original language. Benjamin's principal argument is that the acknowledgement of any art form does not rely on content interpretation in such a way as to extract a lesson or didacticism from it. "No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience." (Benjamin 69) Moreover, his assertion that a translation's existence is not merely for the reader who cannot comprehend or read the original language, vouching for "translation [as] a mode" (Benjamin 70) is a concept that truly establishes translation as an art in its own right. Walter Benjamin also takes into consideration the repercussions that perceiving translation as an art has on our comprehension of the translator. He observes, "Just as translation is a form of its own, so, too, may the task of the translator be regarded as distinct and clearly differentiated from the task of the poet". (Benjamin 76) Benjamin also does away with the conventional view of translation which considers the original text as the master text and the notion that translated work must measure up to the original. For Benjamin, a hierarchy between the original and the translated work does not exist. The task of the translator then serves as a larger function whereby the author as a producer transposes the original text into another, entirely new meaning or medium. And as Benjamin rightly notes in the very last lines of the essay *The Task of the Translator*: "To some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines." (Benjamin 82)

Post Walter Benjamin's work which clearly elevates the act of translation to a sublime level, the subjectivity of the translator, one branch of the studies on the translator, has become a necessary and important research subject. This also justifies the translator's subjective creativity

in the act of translation. Similarly, Gadamer's thoughts upon translation, such as translation being interpretation and involving various obstacles or compromises, have inspired people's study on the translator's subjectivity and given rise to wide application in translation studies. One might also consider that Benjamin's work performs translation, thereby detaching the conventional meaning of the word "translation" from some of the most popular traditional theories related to it. The traditional and existing concept of translation theory is the conception of reproduction or resemblance which implies that the translation ought to appear just like the original, a concept that is quite rigid, inalterable or fixed in nature. Moreover, the task of the translator compels him to acclimatize his own language mimetically to a foreign text. The translator is also obliged to entirely substitute the source text with a brand new one, one that completely eliminates the traces or removes the existence of the old.

Walter Benjamin's seminal essay states that the translator's endorsement of the ideal principle of translatability is accomplished not by communicating or enhancing the original work's meaning, but by a destruction or deformation of the original text in so far as it is the representation or expression of an individual intention. From Benjamin's writing, we might even ascertain the conclusion that translation process implies reading between the lines and also between the languages, not dependent on any translator as an institution. Benjamin goes in opposition of the idea of likeness to the original, and thereby gives us the structure of a temporary or fragmentary displacement by which any translation can be deemed representative of translatability into all the other languages. Translation is necessary, because all languages are connected to one original language which Benjamin terms as a "pure language", a universal conversing system premised on the common intentions of all languages. Thus, translation's purpose is not merely to enhance the afterlife of a text, but also to let it transcend its immediacy and become a mode of bringing languages and various cultures together.

This intimate connection between all translations and culture brings into question the position of the translator, thereby linking the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's study of literary criticism to translation studies. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher, scholar and literary critic who delved in literary theory and the philosophy of language. His works, on a myriad of subjects, inspired several scholars in various fields as wide as semiotics, Marxism, structuralism, even religious criticism, and in diverse disciplines like history, philosophy, literary criticism, sociology and psychology. Bakhtin, in his essay *A Response to a Question by Novy Mir*,

emphasizes the significance of studying literature within the culture of its epoch. However, he also cautions us against limiting any work to its own contemporaneity. Bakhtin's idea of dialogism, introduced in his book *The Dialogic Imagination* stresses the need to value the influences of past epochs on any literary work, as well as its future reception. To demonstrate this Bakhtin quite rightly takes up the example of William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's texts have clearly been the product of cultural collections ranging from Greek mythologies to Plutarch's histories. His plays are an outcome of both the official and popular cultures of past epochs. Bakhtin asserts that Shakespeare's works exist in "great time", in other words, their relevance never dies and they continue to evolve through the ages due to their specific, essential features which can be registered by other cultures, thereby leading to a cultural dialogue. Bringing in the question of perspective, Bakhtin's theory states that in order to fully comprehend a culture, it is crucial for us to be located outside it to obtain an otherness and objectivity of vision. To quote Mikhail Bakhtin: "It is only in the eyes of another culture that a foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly" (Bakhtin 7).

This concept has precedents in various other theories like Bertolt Brecht's 'Epic Theatre', a Marxist critic who applied alienation techniques to render his audience critical in their appreciation of any art work. Epic theatre was a theatrical movement that happened in the early to the middle of twentieth century with the theoretical and practical effects of umpteen theatre practitioners who responded to the political climate of the contemporary times through the production of novel political dramas. Epic theatre gave prime importance to the perspective of the audiences and their reaction to the theatrical piece through several defamiliarizing techniques that cause them to individually engage in a different way. The purpose of such theatre was not to encourage an audience to suspend their disbelief or make them passive, even blind to the injustices of the world, but rather to perceive the world as it really is, with all its flaws. This idea has its clear resonance in Benjamin's theory of the translator as an interpreter or one who objectively comprehends the language of the original text as a whole. For Susan Bassnett, Bakhtin's dialogic theory inspires her conception of translation as a cultural interaction: "The post-colonial approach to translation sees linguistic exchange as essentially dialogic, as a process that happens in a space that belongs to neither source nor target completely." (Bassnett 6)

Although Walter Benjamin and Hans Georg Gadamer most certainly differ in their methodologies concerning translations, both agree to the fact that a translated text is clearly different from the original, carrying its own unique essence, which does inevitably raise queries

regarding the authorship of any translated text. As Gadamer notes, "Translation, like all interpretation, is a highlighting." (Gadamer 388), which means a necessary alteration in meaning of certain aspects of the original as well as rendering the translator as an active participant in creating a new text, thereby questioning the supremacy of the original author as "...the interpreter's own thoughts have gone into re-awakening the text's meaning." (Gadamer 390) This implies that the translator's own cultural location becomes a crucial, unavoidable consideration which for Hans Georg Gadamer means a "fusion of horizons" as the translator's culture inevitably seeps into, influences and shapes the original work or the source text. And this yet again, quite perspicuously highlights and constantly reminds us of Mikhail Bakhtin's persistent emphasis on the cultural location of the interpreter or the translator.

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