Untranslatable Text: Myth, Reality, or Something Else?

A Translator's Reflections on Translation and "Untranslatability"

By Christelle Maginot

There inevitably comes a time in a translator's life when he or she starts to challenge translation/translatability as a concept. More often than not, this occurs as a result of finding oneself confronted with a term that is deemed untranslatable and questioning not only the meaning of the word itself, but also the reality of the concept. In doing so, the translator joins the ranks of the thousands who have reflected and debated on the subject throughout the history of translation. Indeed, the notion of *untranslatability* has been argued by the best minds for centuries, including translation theorists, philosophers, linguists, writers, and poets. Therefore, no article can pretend to even *introduce* the subject, let

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alone offer any new and startling revelation. But humor me, as I reflect on the topic and attempt to demonstrate that when it comes to untranslatability, everything may be a question of definition, that using the term lightly may backfire, and that the answer to the translatability/untranslatability conundrum is as elusive as ever.

Untranslatability: An Arguable Reality

According to Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, "some degree of partial untranslatability marks the relationship of every language to every other."[1] Total untranslatability, however, is believed to be rare. In fact, it is generally agreed that the areas that most nearly approach it are poetry, puns, and other word-

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plays. This is because of their connection to sound, images, rhythm, and sense, which are often (if not always) difficult/impossible to render into another language without losing some essential components of the original text. Yet, the term *untranslatable* seems to find its way into everyday speech effortlessly. But are we always using the term correctly?

To find out, let's start with a simple definition. Simple, you say? Not so much, as no two dictionaries agree fully on how to define the term *untranslatable*. Definitions range from the one-dimensional "Impossible to translate" (MacMillan) to the basic "Not able to be expressed or written down in another language or dialect" (Collins) to the less theoretical "Of a word or, phrase, or text not able to have its sense <u>satisfactorily</u> expressed in another language" [emphasis mine] (Oxford). While all true, no definition seems to convey fully the reality of the concept of the term as we translators know it. We must turn to more comprehensive works to find a balanced, complete definition with which we can relate. From these sources we learn that:

- Untranslatability is a property of a text, or of any utterance, in one language, for which no equivalent text or utterance can be found in another language when translated.

- Terms are neither exclusively translatable nor exclusively untranslatable; rather, the degree of difficulty of translation depends on their nature, as well as on the translator's knowledge of the languages in question.

- Quite often, a text or utterance that is considered to be "untranslatable" is actually a lacuna, or lexical gap. That is, there is no one-to-one equivalence between the word, expression, or turn of phrase in the source language and another word, expression, or turn of phrase in the target language. A translator can, however, resort to a

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number of translation procedures to compensate for this. Therefore, untranslatability or difficulty of translation does not always carry deep linguistic relativity implications; denotation can virtually always be translated, given enough circumlocution, although connotation may be ineffable or inefficient to convey. […][2]

In other words, the term *untranslatable* is most often used to refer to lexical gaps (i.e., terms or expressions that do not exist in another language) or cultural gaps (i.e., concepts that do not exist in another culture). However, it is not necessarily because a language doesn't have a direct lexical or cultural equivalent for a term/expression/concept that there is absolutely no way to express it in another language.

Translators have many methods at their disposal to do so (think: adaptation, borrowing, calque, loanwords, compensation, paraphrase, translator's notes, etc.). Does this mean that all words, expressions, verbal forms, honorifics, etc., can be translated *precisely*? No. But it is generally agreed that most, if not all, texts can be exported into another language, even though all elements of those texts (e.g., cultural connotations, rhymes, rhythms, puns, etc.) may not always be exported alongside successfully. So, in essence, no text would be truly untranslatable, but the translation of culturally irreconcilable texts would inevitably result in some degree of loss. It is that loss that validates the notion of untranslatability, even though the text itself can be translated.

In truth, our world is home to so much cultural diversity, so many lan-

guages, and so many disparities among them that there are bound to be terms/expressions/concepts that fall so deeply into the lexical and cultural voids that they are labeled *untranslatable*. Indeed, who could argue that some notions are so incredibly specific to a culture that no other culture has a direct equivalent for them?

Take the word *mamihlapinatapai*, for example, which is Yahgan for "a look shared by two people, each wishing that the other will offer something that they both desire but are unwilling to suggest or offer themselves."[3] Not surprisingly, it appears in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the "most succinct word," but it is also considered one of the most difficult words to translate.[4] But is it really untranslatable? Would you say that "an expressive, meaningful look between two people wishing to initiate something but reluctant to do so" is a translation (versus a definition or an interpretation)? The answers to those questions depend on your definition of translation.

Translation/Translatability: A Less-Than-Absolute Truth

Translation as a concept is subject to many interpretations, and countless definitions have been put forth by translation theorists over time. The American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti, for example, defines translation as "a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language, which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation."[5] Venuti's argument

supports the deconstructionist ideas that everything is about context, that any text may have more than one interpretation, and that all forms of reading a text (including translating it) are forms of interpretation.

Like many, when it comes to certain types of translation, I find it difficult not to agree with the deconstructionists. In fact, I often find that in order to reach the intended goal (e.g., a text that reads smoothly, elicits an emotional response, convinces, etc.), I have to take "interpretive liberties" that prioritize sense over words. More times than not, I feel that the boundaries between translating and rewriting/transcreating are rather blurry. But without getting into the debate of whether translation is a creation or "regurgitation" process, or arguing over the merit of fidelity over transparency (or vice versa), we can all agree safely on the fact that translation is an elaborate deconstruction-reconstruction process that involves a great deal of creativity and "stretching" of the target language.

While translation always captures the meaning of a text, the way and form in which the message is communicated may depend as much on personal interpretation as on lexical interpretation and lexical choices. The more idiomatic or culturally laden the text, the more room for interpretation of both sorts, and the more creative the result.

In truth, when words/concepts such as "good and evil" (in the way we relate to them today) find their way into time-honored religious texts and become embedded so deeply into our collective cultural heritage, even when they are said to have had no equivalent in the language(s) in which they were originally written, isn't it possible that *everything* is a question of interpretation? Isn't this also implying that translation is always the subjective expression of an idea, which is itself rooted in a specific cultural, historical, and linguistic context? Going further, isn't it possible that *translatability* is not so

much an absolute truth as a relative notion—at least as relative as untranslatability? The only certainty is that one cannot question *untranslatability* without questioning *translatability*, and that both concepts are two sides of the same coin with one thing in common: loss, or at least some degree of it.

Because language is a cultural phenomenon, loss is ever present in translation. Some connotations are bound to elude target-language readers who are unfamiliar with the cultural context behind them, or don't associate them with the same emotion as source-language readers—even when a text is deemed translatable. Because translators typically have one foot in each culture and are accustomed to bridging the gap between the source and target cultures, they will most likely always understand the text and its connotation, but may not always be able to export the latter across cultures. However, as long as the message (i.e., the meaning of the text) makes it through gracefully, a text will generally be deemed adequately translated. The question is what happens when the message *cannot* make it through? Can we then talk of *untranslatability*? Or rather, should we?

The Everyday *Untranslatable* Text

Translators often come across texts whose idiomatic nature makes it necessary to rethink their definition of *untranslatability* and to stretch the target language to its very limit. (All of us know how much flexibility, creativity, and innovative thinking are required in the process!) In some instances, a translator will come up with a culturally appropriate equivalent (albeit distant from the original idea). Where choices are limited by

factors that cannot be controlled, the translator may substitute the text with something else altogether. In rare instances where a concept is completely unknown to a culture, the translator's work will go even further to make up for the conceptual void. In all cases, the text will be deemed adequately (albeit creatively) translated and, by extension, translatable.

However, there are instances when translators simply *cannot* make the decision to stretch the language, substitute text, or explain an alien concept, because that decision is simply not theirs to make. These are instances in which translators may find themselves using the word *untranslatable* to refer to something else altogether.

When *Untranslatable* = Does Not Translate Effectively

One such occurrence of a text that is often labeled untranslatable is "must-translate" text that may not translate effectively. We've all been there. In order to avoid a simple (to us) explanation that will confuse our monolingual client, we might refer to that text as *untranslatable*. But should we? Let's use a simple case of marketing translation gone wrong to illustrate that particular dilemma.

We've all heard of the Braniff Airlines' "Fly in Leather" campaign that sought to highlight the airline's luxury leather seats, but was a fiasco in some parts of Latin America, where the slogan "*Vuela en cuero*" was interpreted as "fly naked/in the nude/topless."[6] Braniff's misstep has become a classic example of unfortunate translation choices, but it might as well have been a case of unheeded warning. Consider the following scenario (with which more than a few marketing translators may be familiar).

Translator: The copy is untranslatable to a degree. If translated literally, it will miss the mark with the target audience because of XYZ.

Client: We'd like to keep it as is. It worked well here.

Translator: To readers from another culture, the text has a different connotation. I've taken the liberty of coming up with a few alternatives and their back translations to give you an idea of what would make sense to your target audience.

Client: We don't like how any of those sound.

Translator: They sound better in the language. The back-translations are only aimed at giving you an idea of what the text means.

Client: We would rather use our original copy.

Translator: You may want to consider retaining an in-country consultant who could advise you further as to how to market your brand/product effectively.

Client: We've taken your advice under consideration, but we really feel our original copy is the best way to go. We've asked our bilingual employees and they think it sounds good, so please translate the copy as is.

Obviously, if a client trusts the translator's expertise and already appreciates the fact that cultural differences make it necessary to adapt copy rather than translate it verbatim, the above scenario is unlikely. But clients new to intercultural communication, ignorant of the intricate differences between languages/cultures, or overly confident in the global effectiveness of their copy/message may not understand why writing copy for a specific market is preferable to translating copy written for another. To these clients, words and expressions such as "untranslatable," "not translatable, "not translating

well/effectively," and the like often equate to "failure to understand [the copy because of its idiomatic nature]" and "failure to translate," so using them to avoid a likely ineffectual explanation rarely leads to the desired outcome. On the contrary, it often leads to a situation where translators find themselves trying to prove that they understood the copy and can translate it "as is." However, it's not in the client's best interest to do so (so back to square one).

A better approach might be to avoid all explanations having to do with translation (and especially the word *untranslatable*). State simply that target readers will not relate to the message because of a cultural gap and request a more culturally neutral text. If trained as a marketing writer, for example, one may go as far as to ask the client what other directions they may consider taking and offer to come up with alternative copy based on those. Recommending that the client seek the advice of a target-language writer is another option. Regardless of the road we choose to take, staying away from the word *untranslatable* and adjectives like it will save a lot of time and effort.

When *Untranslatable = Incomprehensible*

Another case of text that a translator might refer to as *untranslatable* is one that is so unintelligible or inarticulate that the translator cannot commit to a translation. At least not without first attaining a reasonable degree of certainty about its meaning as it was intended originally. Bible translators know this dilemma well, as religious texts are fertile grounds for impenetrable copy (which more and more translators are now choosing *not* to translate). For example, the new Swedish Bible reportedly features some 67 such instances! In the January 2007 issue of *The Bible Translator*, published by The United Bible Societies, Christer Åsberg, a professor of Swedish language and literature, explains:

Those who read Ps 141.6b in a sample of modern Bible translations may wonder why the verse is translated in so many different ways.

- **RSV [Revised Standard Version]:** *Then they shall learn that the word of the LORD is true.*

- **CEV [Contemporary English Version]:** *Everyone will admit that I was right.*

- **NAB [New American Bible]:** *and they heard how pleasant were my words.*

- **NJPSV [New Jewish Publication Society Version]:** *but let my words be heard, for they are sweet.*

- **EHS [Evangelical Homiletics Society]:** *sie sollen hören, daß mein Wort für sie freundlich ist (they will hear that my word is favorable for them)*

- **TOB [Ecumenical Translation]:** *eux qui s'étaint régalés de m'entendre dire: (those who were invited to hear me say:)*

- **DB [Die Boodskap]:** *og man skal erfare, at mine ord var gode (and people will find, that my words were good ones)*

In the 2000 Swedish translation (SB/Svenskbibel), the verse is not translated at all; it is indicated with three hyphens inside square brackets, [—].[7]

But translators don't have to specialize in ancient texts or languages to face that particular dilemma, and the challenges that the situation creates are not any less exacting. Indeed, when translating current texts, leaving the copy blank is not an option, and dealing with actual writers/clients may at times be even more challenging than translating texts from the ancient ones who are no longer around to explain them.

When confronted with texts so incoherent that they cannot be translated in a way that makes sense, a translator's first reaction might be to inform the client that the copy in question is *untranslatable*. Honestly, this sounds better than a candid truth that may alienate the client. However, by doing so we may be doing ourselves (and our client) a disservice. Not only might the client equate "untranslatable" with "failure to understand/translate" (something that sounds perfectly comprehensible to them), but they might also get defensive, thereby lessening the chance of getting the text edited for both translation and publication purposes.

A better approach might be to inform the client that you are having trouble understanding the copy and asking them to explain it. Most clients will realize while verbalizing their thoughts that the copy is in need of editing/rewriting and thank you for your careful reading of their text. (If not, you may at least use your newly-found understanding of the copy to make sure that the translation is intelligible.)

If previous or subsequent content allows you to ascertain without a doubt what the text should say, then you may also take it upon yourself to rewrite the copy. Whether you should and the consequences of such an action are another matter entirely. (See "The Translator as an Editor" in the March 2014 edition of *The ATA Chronicle*).[8] As to how to deal with clients who think their carelessly written text makes enough sense to be translated and insist that you translate it "as is," the best approach may be simply to stay away. After all, a translator's ethics and reputation are worth more than the number of clients on a list.

Regardless of the translation challenges we face and how we choose to respond to them, reserving the term *untranslatable* to actual instances of untranslatability will go a long way. In everyday translation scenarios, most of the challenges that present themselves to us (besides lexical gaps, which can generally be man-

aged without much fuss or client input) are typically either oversights in the source text or cultural discrepancies. Presenting them as such may serve us and our clients well.

Which leaves us with one big question. If texts deemed *untranslatable* can be translated and texts that cannot be translated are *not* untranslatable, what are we to make of untranslatability as a concept?

Myth or Something Else?

Although much has been said and written about the "myth of untranslatability," the concept keeps defying black-and-white categorization. Both rare and commonplace, real and not, and certainly as difficult to prove as to disprove, untranslatability may masquerade as a paradox. However, it is, more than anything else, a relative notion linked to the very definition of translation/translatability, and the extent to which text and meaning can be exported across languages satisfactorily—if ever.

There is no question that terms, expressions, and concepts that have no direct equivalents or do not exist in another language pose great difficulties to the translator, regardless of how many compensation methods may be used to render the translation. There is also no question that a certain amount of loss (both lexical and non-lexical) is inevitable as a result of circumventing the challenges that lexical and cultural gaps present, and that the more culturally-bound the text, the greater that loss. The question is to know whether texts that have no equivalents should be labeled as *untranslatable*, and whether "non-equivalent translations" are less or more accurate translations than equivalent ones. When non-equivalent translations yield better results than equivalent ones, couldn't it simply suggest that *untranslatability* is inherent to language itself and that the myth is actually *translatability*?

Finding the answer to that question seems as elusive as ever. After all, there is a reason translation theorists, philosophers, and linguists have

been debating the subject for centuries. So let's leave it as that. As Friedrich Nietzsche said: "Words are but symbols for the relations of things to one another and to us; nowhere do they touch upon the absolute truth."[9] And neither does there seem to be any absolute truth in the notion of untranslatability (or translatability, for that matter). ■

Notes

1. A. MacIntyre. *Relativism, Power, and Philosophy* (American Philosophical Association, 1985), 383.

2. Definition of Untranslatability, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untranslatability.

3. Urban Dictionary, http://bit.ly/1NMVBsj.

4. Matthews, Peter, and Norris McWhirter. *The Guinness Book of World Records* (Guinness Media, 1994), 392.

5. Lawrence, Venuti. "The Translator's Invisibility," *Criticism* (Wayne State University Press, 1986), 17.

6. Wooten, Adam. "International Business: In Global Airline Marketing, Idioms Must Be Handled Carefully," *Deseret News* (January 1, 2011), http://bit.ly/airline-idioms.

7. Christer Åsberg. "The Translator and the Untranslatable: A Case of Horror Vacui," *The Bible Translator* (January 2007), http://bit.ly/Asberg.

8. Maginot, Christelle. "The Translator as an Editor," *The ATA Chronicle* (March 2014), 16, http://bit.ly/ATA-Maginot.

9. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (Gateway Editions, 1996), 83, http://bit.ly/Nietzsche-Greeks.