

<b>TRANSLATIONS OF THE TRANSLATION</b>			<b>Applied Linguistics</b>
AN ATTEMPT OF A CLOSE READING OF WALTER BENJAMIN'S ESSAY 'THE TASK OF THE TRANSLATOR' AND PAUL DE MAN'S COMMENTARY ON THIS ESSAY			<b>Keywords:</b> literary translation, translation theory, literary theory, Walter Benjamin, Paul de Man, deconstruction, close reading.
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<b>Abstract</b>			
<p>Walter Benjamin wrote perhaps the most complex, most interesting essay on the process of translation under the title <i>The Task of the Translator</i> in 1923. This very complex work of literary and translation theory has been analysed and referred to by several literary scholars in the past almost 100 years, the Belgian–American literary scholar Paul de Man among them. The present research article makes an attempt to present a comparative analysis based on close reading of the texts between Benjamin's original essay and Paul de Man's commentary, figuring out the possible (and necessary) contradictions and ambiguities of the text, trying to find the answer to the question whether or not translation, at least in the successful sense of the word, exist at all. Deconstructionist way of reading literary and theoretical texts may give multiple answers to the questions about translation, and demonstrate the possibility and impossibility of translation at the same time.</p>			

### **WALTER BENJAMIN: The task of the literary translator (Scanning the primary text)**

Right at the beginning of his well-known and paradigmatic essay, Walter Benjamin rejects the notion of the ideal recipient, as if he were to consider poetry as existing for its own sake rather than being addressed to the reader in particular – he calls it pure language (*ReineSprache*).

According to his thesis, the translator must go beyond conveying the message of the literary work. A translation that only conveys the message of the work is not a good translation. Linguistic expressions are in some respects untranslatable, some works are essentially translatable, while others do not yield to the intention of translation.

A translated text is a text that has a life of its own in relation to the original work, since it was written later than the original text. The translation owes its very existence to the glory of the original work, i.e. its exceptional aesthetic value, since the original work is a text that has been found worthy of being lifted out of its own linguistic and cultural environment and transplanted into a foreign culture by means of translation.

Benjamin argues that languages are related to each other in what they want to say, and that translation expresses this. That is, despite superficial differences, human languages function in a very similar way, and it is this similarity of function, as a kind of anthropological unity that makes the phenomenon of translation itself possible.

A translation is not a work that can be considered definitive, as the original work it is based on changes over time. By this Benjamin surely means that it is the way in which the work is received that is changing over time, and the texts take on new and new meanings. The translator's mother tongue itself also changes, so that at certain intervals a re-translation may be necessary, since some older translations may appear linguistically outdated, making it difficult to receive them in the target language.

Benjamin introduces the notion of *so-understanding* to show that, although languages are distinct in their external structure, they are very similar in their intentions. Two words in two different languages, e.g. French *pain* and German *Brot*, mutually exclude each other, yet their meaning is essentially the same, since they refer to the same entity.

Translation is only a temporary way of fighting the alienation of languages. Benjamin reiterates that no translation can claim permanence because of the temporal aspect.

The author seems to lean a little towards mysticism when he claims that there is a layer of the literary work that no translation can convey. On the other hand, he makes a sober, considered statement when he claims that the translated text can no longer be translated, and it is therefore much less capable of being lifted out of its place than the original work.

Benjamin argues that the tasks of the poet and the literary translator are basically very different, since the literary translator need not necessarily be a poet – a claim he supports by the fact that many great translators, such as Martin Luther and Friedrich Schlegel, were poor or at least mediocre poets in relation to their epoch-making literary translations. The translator's task is distinguishable from that of the poet because, unlike the poet, the translator's task is not directed at reality, but solely at language. The poet's intention is original, reflecting reality, whereas the translator merely encounters the original work, which exists through language, and merely creates an echo of the original work through the process of translation.

Another of Benjamin's claims, perhaps containing a bit of a mysticism, and perhaps not scientific enough to our contemporary minds, is that the literary translator tries to integrate the many languages into one single true language, but what he means by a single true language is not explained in any further detail, perhaps because of the limitations of his essay. Translation, like philosophy, has 'no muse'; that is, unlike poetry, it is not an inspired activity, but rather a kind of craft that requires knowledge rather than inspiration.

Translation, according to Benjamin, is itself a form, and the fidelity to form required by literary translation can sometimes make it difficult to be faithful to the meaning. Strangely enough, a translation, especially in its own time, has little virtue if it appears to be a creation of its own language, that is, if it does not show any foreignness, if it does not feel like a translated text, with an original work written in a language completely foreign to the target language behind it.

According to Benjamin, freedom of translation seems to be justified for one's own language. The aim is to achieve a kind of *pure language*, but Benjamin does not give any further analysis of this in the last section of his essay, but merely describes the task of the literary translator as being nothing other than to redeem *pure language* as an exile, to free the language captured in the original work from the reproduction in the target language. Perhaps this actually means that the translator's task is to make visible and comprehensible in the target language text, in the translation, the content that is hidden, implicit, in the original work. It should be pointed out, of course, that Benjamin's text, which later became the subject of great controversy, as his later interpreter Paul de Man points out, is, like most works of fiction, itself resistant to understanding and allows for multiple interpretations.

At the end of his paradigmatic essay, Benjamin states that the extent to which a given translation is able to fulfil the essence of translation as a form is determined, in an almost objective way, by the translatability of the original work. Translatability and untranslatability are therefore obviously not the same for all works, and if it is not measurable, then it is perhaps still intuitively perceptible. The more a work is a communication; that is, the more it is intended to express some kind of explicit message or content, the less it is worth translating, whereas the more highly structured and complex a work is, the more it is untranslatable. Benjamin is perhaps also thinking here of the word games in some literary works, of references deeply encoded in the culture of the source language, or of the deliberate concealment of meaning, which obviously make it difficult to integrate the work into another language and to make it intelligible to another culture.

Friedrich Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles are good examples of the great harmony between languages, since they try to remain true to the form, in them the German language moves more towards Greek than Greek towards German, but at the same time they are all the more difficult to receive and understand. Nevertheless, these translations of Sophocles are a kind of archetype of literary translation, and perhaps in some way they serve as a model for contemporary literary translators as well.

Benjamin goes so far at the very end of the essay to say that some great literary texts, such as sacred texts like the Holy Bible contain their own virtual translation; that is, they are so true that their content can be reproduced for anyone in any language. The interlinear version of sacred texts, a translation written between the lines, which follows the syntax of the original text to such an extent that it does not even take into account the syntactic specificities of the target language are imagined by Benjamin as the idea of translation. It should be noted, however, that this view seems obviously idealistic to our postmodern eyes, and it is probably not feasible in practice for all texts.

An interesting observation about the text is that Benjamin seems at times to be trying to formulate his message with the precision of exact science, and at other times to be assuming certain transcendent elements that do not need explanation or cannot be explained in words, and his text seems to be speaking out of religious frenzy.

For example, it is common sense, which even today seems scientific, that different literary works can be translated from one language to another at different levels, so there are evidently degrees of translatability. It may also be argued that, while the poet (and by this we probably mean the prose writer or dramatist in the modern sense as well; that is, the author of any genre of literary text) draws the meaning of his work from reality, if we assume the legitimacy of referential readings, it is the task of the translator, his/her activity is first and foremost a linguistic one, enclosed in language, since he/she does not create his/her work entirely inspired by reality, but on the basis of another work written in a foreign language, which is itself a linguistic expression, and translation therefore refers to another text. This obviously anticipates the current view of literary scholarship that translations can themselves be treated as intertexts, since they are texts that in some way refer to and derive from a literary work that preceded them.

However, the existence of *pure language*, *reine Sprache*, by which Benjamin obviously means the language of poetry (?), but does not explain it, does not make it tangible, is a mystical and inexplicit claim, and *pure language* certainly cannot be interpreted and defined within the scholarly, literary theoretical frameworks of our time.

This constant alternation of scientifically verifiable and metaphysical claims makes Benjamin's text itself very similar to a literary work, in the way that it resists comprehension and obviously allows for multiple readings, making it difficult to decide whether, in contemporary terms, we should read *The Task of the Translator* as a text with scientifically substantiated claims, or as a work of fiction that is at least partly fictional and imaginary? Certainly, in the case of texts on literature it is not so easy to decide...

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### **PAUL DE MAN: Walter Benjamin on The Task of the Translator (Scanning the Commentary)**

Paul de Man, in his equally well-known lecture on Walter Benjamin's essay, begins by saying that it is impossible to translate from Benjamin, as the various translations of Benjamin's essay attest. He follows Hans-Georg Gadamer's suggestion that the task of 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy is nothing less than to reassess earlier concepts. In Gadamer's view, Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the philosophers of the German tradition who were paradigmatic until the age of modernity, represented a degree of naivety that we have now moved beyond. Compared to Gadamer's conception, Benjamin's essay may at first sight seem to be a step backwards, as if a kind of messianistic world view could be read out of it. In de Man's reading, Hölderlin, George or Mallarmé appear almost as saints in Benjamin's concept of poetry, he sees poetry as a kind of sacred language, which is not really addressed to the audience or the reader. The essay is therefore, according to de Man, is a step backwards to the messianic world view, and it is no wonder that it is criticised by many, but praised by others precisely because it restores the sacred status of literary texts, which has been challenged by the destructiveness of metaphysics.

De Man's presentation asks the question what does Benjamin's essay actually tell us? The answer to this question is that scientific discourse is not capable of reaching any kind of common agreement. Even the various translators of the text are not fully aware of what Benjamin is actually saying, and even when translating simple statements they go astray. But de Man also raises the question whether Benjamin, under the pretext of examining the task of the literary translator, is not doing nothing more than poetics, that is, a theoretical approach to poetic language? Benjamin originally intended the essay to be as an introduction to his own interpretations of Baudelaire, and so the text could be a kind of self-legitimation. But de Man sees more than that in the essay, and one of the main reasons for this is that, ironically, Benjamin believes that the translator, unlike the poet, is necessarily doomed to failure, since the translated text he creates can never be as good as the original work it is based on. The title of the work is tautological in de Man's reading, since *Aufgabe* in German means both task and abandonment, giving up/resigning from an intention; that is, it implies that the translator is in some way forced to abandon his own mission. (This, of course, implies in a way a deconstruction of the text, since we do not know whether Benjamin really intended to include this plane of interpretation in the title of his essay – the author's intention, of course, cannot be fully reconstructed afterwards, but we must not forget that De Man's reading is itself an interpretation of the text under examination, and is therefore by no means objective.)

De Man points out that Benjamin makes a cardinal distinction between the poet and the literary translator, and even points out that many great literary translators were poor, or at least mediocre, poets. In de Man's reading, the poet works primarily with meaning, which does not strictly speaking belong to language; the translator, on the other hand, is closely related to language, his relationship to the original text is similar to that of one language to another language, and translation cannot be placed outside language. Translation, according to Benjamin, is more like philosophy, in that philosophy is not a representation of the world, but has a different relationship to the world. In his reading of Benjamin, de Man also sees translation to be similar to criticism or literary theory, and he writes this mainly on the basis of Schlegel. It is also ironic that the translated text is in some cases more canonical than the original work, since the original by its very nature does not require canonisation or translation. Only the original work is translatable, a translated text cannot be translated further under any circumstances, and its place is in practice more static than that of the original text. The activity of translation is also similar to literary criticism in the way that it reads and canonises the translated text. Obviously, translating a text into a foreign language has some significance if it is an attempt to transpose it into another culture by lifting it out of its own national literature, but at the same time translation is also necessarily interpretation.

De Man also points out that, according to Benjamin, translation is also like history. We should not imagine history in terms of dialectics, but rather understand natural changes from the perspective of history, not the other way round. It is the same in the case of translation – we are able to understand the original work from the perspective of translations. Translation is not some kind of mapping or paraphrase. But de Man draws attention to the metaphorical sense of the

German verb *übersetzen*, which is in fact an exact translation of the Greek word *metaphorein*. In de Man's interpretation of Benjamin, metaphor is not really metaphor, which is why *The Task of the Translator* is also a rather difficult text to translate. The translation is not metaphorical in the sense that the translated text does not resemble the original, which is, in de Man's view, a paradox.

In the same way, philosophy, criticism and literary theory are not similar to what they are derived from, since they are activities within a language. But de Man argues that Benjamin points to the fact that it is in one's own language that one feels most alienated, as opposed to the idealistic assumption that it is in one's own language that one feels most at home. This is also shown by the various translations of Benjamin's text, in which de Man points out various, both minor and major misunderstandings.

Translation, as a process, gives the illusion of life, but in de Man's view it is more a kind of life after death, since translation also reveals the deadness of the original text. In de Man's reading, Benjamin is not talking about the suffering of individuals or subjects, suffering of human beings, but rather suffering of language that takes place exclusively in the world of language. Benjamin's text is itself a fine illustration of this phenomenon, since, as de Man repeatedly emphasises, even the most excellent translators cannot cope with it, nor can the interpreters and commentators who attempt to analyse it – the text is the best example of what it says about itself, and speaks of itself and the problems of translation and understanding that it manifests as a meta-language.

According to de Man, Benjamin conceives a whole theory of language in the space of a few sentences by distinguishing between *the thought (das Gemeinte)* and the *mode of thought (Art des Meines)*, between the signified and the mode of meaning of the statement. In the case of French translations, the transposition of these words also proves to be rather problematic. But de Man acknowledges that Benjamin is right that the problem of translating certain words into another language is a purely linguistic one.

According to Benjamin, the translator cannot really do more than translate literally, and in some cases ignores the syntactic relations of the target language and follows the syntax of the original text. But are grammar and meaning compatible at this level? De Man points out that Benjamin cites the example of Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, which are both literal and almost incomprehensible. The meaning of a word is so elusive that even grammar cannot capture it.

In Benjamin's view, there is a kind of original, pure language, which in de Man's reading is in fact not more than a religious thesis about the unity of human language. This is exemplified in Benjamin's essay the simile of the dish, where he says that in order for the pieces of a broken dish to fit together, they must fit together down to the smallest detail, but not be similar in form. According to Carol Jacobs's commentary also cited by Paul de Man, Benjamin does not say that the pots are assembled into a whole, but that the assembling of the broken pots only produces another broken pot, that is, that the idea of the whole is in fact a kind of illusion.

But de Man also points out that it is not at all clear in the various translations whether Benjamin is referring to the broken pots of a single vessel, i.e. whether he is assuming some kind of integrity in the metaphor. Here again, Benjamin's text, which speaks of an inerrancy in a certain sense, is itself a prime example of this inerrancy. De Man argues that every translation is a type of fragment of the original, but that the original work is also a fragment of the language – the translation is, therefore, a fragment of the fragment.

The supposed fidelity and freedom of translation are both aporias. On the one hand, it is useful if the translation faithfully conveys the content of the original text, but on the other hand, given the idiomatic nature of the target language, freedom is obviously a requirement. However, translation pushes the original work even further towards disintegration, towards fragmentation, and *pure language* exists only as a collection of all languages, but in de Man's reading, this is the real tragedy of the fact that for man, the language he believes to be his own becomes the most alien.

History is not entirely a human phenomenon either, since it also belongs to the dimension of language. Benjamin calls history the aberration that takes place through language. Pure language and poetic language are to be separated, since poetic language does not resemble pure language that Benjamin postulates. Benjamin's view of history is not, in de Man's opinion, messianistic, since some kind of coming of the Messiah would not complete history, but would rather abolish it.

Finally, de Man concludes that the chapter of Hegel's Aesthetics on *the sublime* is much closer to Benjamin's in The Task of the Translator than to Gadamer's, since he derives the category of the sublime from the separation of the philosophical categories of the sacred and the profane...

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## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Paul de Man deconstructs Benjamin's text in a way that is characteristic of him and the school of literary theory to which he belonged; that is, he attempts to re-read it in a radical, provocative way and to draw attention to its contradictions. The deconstructive/deconstructionist was reading is also characterised by the fact that de Man reads the text as a vivid example of his own claim; that is, the existence of translation itself is in some way tragic and ironic in the light of the ambiguities of Benjamin's essay and the misunderstandings found in the various translations. Another deconstructive feature of the commentary is that de Man reads out of the text word plays not originally or not explicitly used by Benjamin; e.g. he interprets the word task (*Aufgabe*) as both a *task* and the abandonment of/giving up of something, or he substitutes *the political* for *the poetic* in the text, taking Benjamin's view of history as a starting point.

The understanding of the Hungarian translations of the texts (and here it should be noted that the authors of the present research article, given that Hungarian is the first author's native tongue, they have started from mainly the Hungarian translations of the two texts, sometimes referring back to the original, source-language texts of the works as well) is of course complicated by the fact that, following the argument of Benjamin and de Man, they are themselves translations, with their own necessary imperfections. De Man, for a twist, cites, among other things, English and French translations of the original German text, which in places appear in the Hungarian text in Hungarian translation, and thus essentially contradict Benjamin's thesis that translation cannot be translated further (of course, in the field of humanities, the contrary is often proved by practice, depending on what foreign languages the given researcher knows, but we will not go into the topic of this here and now in detail).

Reading the theoretical texts on translation in translation, however, also makes them inherently more difficult to understand and interpret, which is why we ourselves believe that reading them in, for example, in Hungarian makes it even more difficult for the reader to know what Benjamin is actually saying about translation and the task of the literary translator, whether in the original text or in de Man's reading. Both Benjamin's text and de Man's text are in some way and to some degree resistant to understanding, and in both of them ambiguities can be detected, which of course can generate interesting many – and in some cases perhaps even self-serving – further interpretations, if not an infinite number...

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