The challeges of Translating Philosophy

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‘ In every possible sense, translation is necessay but impossible’

(GAYATRI CHAKRAVOTRY SPIVAK)

Introduction :

The translation of philosophy falls within an exegetic framework in which the accuracy and adequacy of concepts are paramount. The relationship between philosophy and translation is very strong to the extent that philosophy can be described as ‘a type of translation’, and translation can be regarded as a philosophical matter endeavouring to establish the limitations of translation within the dichotomy of ‘translatability’ and ‘untranslatability’.

How does philosophy define translation ?

From a traditional point of view, translation has been conceived as a simple process that involves taking what is expressed in one language and converting it into another language, establishing a scheme of synonymous words or sentences.

The etymology of ‘translate’ reflects its designated function ; from the Latin *translatus,* the word means literally, ‘to carry across.’ Hence, ‘to

translate' is to take the meaning of words and sentences in one language and 'carry them across' to another.

It is this view that is discussed and defended in many philosophical writings, but it is approached differently according to the philosophers ideas and belonging. For example, **Derrida** claims that :

'with the problem of translation, we are dealing with nothing less than the passage to philosophy.' [1]

Derrida regards translation as a philosophical practice, emphasising the fact that a discussion about the nature of translation is merely a discussion about the nature of philosophy. Moreover, he notes that translation is itself inscribed within a double bind which involves a logic of paradox when dealing with the relationship between philosophy and translation, starting from the focus on translatablility vs untranslatability.

On the other hand, Davidson attempts to link the practice of translation to the development of conceptual schemes within the frame of a non-relativist semantics. Hence, he argues that :

'**studying the criteria of translation is therefore a way of focusing on criteria of identity for conceptual schemes.'**[2]

He also tackled the issue of the possibilty of translation, stating :

'it seems unlikely that we can intelligibly attribute attitudes as complex as those [i.e. beliefs] to a speaker unless we can translate his words into ours.' [3]

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[1]- Jack Derrida, **la dissémination**, 1981, paris, p : 80.
[2]- D. Davidson, **Truth and Interpretation**, Oxford University Press, 1984, p : 184.
[3] - Ibid, p : 186.

Be it possible or impossible, many philosophers dealt with translation and tried to provide more accurate definitions and establish different dichotomies for the study and investigation of translation as a theory, a process, a product and a practice.

Why is philosophical translation important ?

The translation of philosophy is of huge importance. It contributes in shaping our understanding of the world around us in many ways, enabling us to perceive the world differently and enlarge our thoughts regarding the concept of 'philosophy' lying behind translation as an activity, which results in a clear understunding of the concepts of 'translation' and 'philosophy' at the same time.

It is worth noting that the act of translating is the half part of the act of philosophising. Hence, there exists a strong relationship between philosophy and dialogue in which texts and languages meet and melt together. Translation and philosophy are two activities of the human intellect that are both the closest and the most impenetrable to each other.

Both of them do use the text, read it, analyse it and interprete it for the purpose of deciphering its meaning and presenting it in a different language or to a different way of thinking. Indeed, there are many philosophers who patrol the border between translation and philosophy and who are aware of the fact that philosophical texts should be translated within the scope of philosophical practice.

It is precisely this zeal that pushed philosophers such as **Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Lacane** and many others, to transfer many philosophical writings to their own languages. By doing so, they did not only provide philosophical

texts but they also modified some concepts. These philosophers read their translations and compared them to the original, thereby taking the philosophical text as ‘ an object’ to be exploited, explored and exploded.

Though the importance of translation is not always an explicit topic in philosophical writings, it can be admitted that :

‘**many philosophers argue for the necessity of translation for the survival and enrichment of a language ; and that this positive aspect of translation in linguistic terms might be viewed, analogously or not, as an argument for the necessity of the Other in the constitution, and indeed the very survival of the self.’**[1]

Philosophical translation may be proved to be successful and important only if it can establish such a relationship between the Self and the Other. It is not merely an act that consists of producing a great number of philosophical texts in a different language suggesting a set of philosophical terms and equivalents, but it is an effective philosophical practice based on a pertinent interaction with the text.

We may say that this is the reason behind the failure of philosophical translation into Arabic to the degree that some of them are regarded as ‘dead translations’. There are a number of examples that confirm such a view, like the translations of **Sigmund Freud** done by **Mustafa Zeyor** and **Sami Mahmoud Ali** or the translation of **Ludwig wittgenstein’**s **Tractatus logico-philosophicus** done by **Azmi Islam**.

Thus, the task of the translator here does not consist only of translating major philosophical works, instead he should intereact with the text and

[1] - Lisa Foran, **Translation and Philosophy**, Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2012, p :75.

create an intellectual and cognitive network in which he works with and through the text. Philosophical translation is likewise an infinite intralingual and interlingual process based on reflection, and this is exactly what Ricoeur considers saying that '**translating, in every possible sense, can become a model for interpretation, a model for hermeneutics.**'[1]

From this point of view, it is argued that translation of philosophy is a process of 'resistance' and 'appropriation'. Both the source and the target texts are supposed to say the same thing in different manners. The source language poses its pecularities, whereas the target language (the mother tongue) refuses to be subjected to the test of the foreign language. It is this paradox which makes the translator involved in appropriation, i.e, making the text that was initially foreign as his own one.

In this realm, translation becomes a different and difficult task and the role of the translator becomes more important. Hence,

' In translation, there is created what might be termed a 'third space' between the text of the original and the reader of the translation and it is here that the translator operates. The translator acts as host to two guests ; the original work and reader of the translation, serving as it were two masters, striving to achieve a balance between 'bringing the author to the reader' and 'the reader to the author'… and it is this mediation that the test or trial (épreuve) of translation lies.'[2]

This reflection has been opposed by many Arabic philosophical writings in which Arab thinkers and philosophers emphasise the need to

[1]- Paul Ricoeur, **Sur la traduction**, Bayard, Paris, 2004, p : 42.
[2] - Lisa Foran, opcit, p : 79.

adopt fundamental translation method rather than communicative or informative translation methods that are applied in philosophical translation and that don't help in developing the philosophical mindset of the Arab reader.

Within this regard, the Arab philosopher **Taha Abdulrahmane** states,

"ليس في الأسئلة عن الفلسفة العربية الإسلامية سؤال يشغل البال و يستحق الجواب مثلما هو السؤال عن قدرتها على التجديد و قدرها من الإبداع: فهل الفلسفة الإسلامية العربية مجددة ومبدعة بالإضافة إلى المنقول الفلسفي، قديمه و حديثه، أم هي منحصرة في تقليده، مقتصرة على اتباعه؟"[1]

This quotation makes it clear that creativity and innovation are basic components for an ideal Islamic Arabic philosophy. Moreover, it is necessary for an arabic philosophical knowledge to be creative and innovative instead of being built on the basis of the Other's philosophical content. We may conclude here that the idea of the translator as a host is not really welcomed by this arabic philosopher while transferring philosophical writings into arabic. A consequence of this is that some Arabic thinkers believe that the importance of translating philosophy lies in the ability of such a practice to generate new ideas and develop new ways of thinking.

What makes philosophical translation so difficult ?

The translation of philosophical texts differs greatly from other forms of translation. These texts are characterised by the use of a kind of technical terms and phraseology but are not regarded as technical texts. They also use a lot of literary devices and rethorical passages that some

[1] - عبد الرحمن طه، فقه الفلسفة 1- الفلسفة و الترجمة، المركز الثقافي، الدار البيضاء- بيروت، ط1، 1995، ص: 49.

philosophical works have attained the status of great literature (like the dialogues of Plato). Therefore, the translator should be prepared to face the challenges posed by the nature of these texts.

Let us now turn to examine the difficulties posed by the translation of philosophy.

- **Terminological problems** : philosophers frequently invent their own terms, or assign new meanings to old terms, or use ordinary words in a new, technical sense, etc. So, philosophical terms are said to lie within a specific strategic dimension and aren't easy to decipher. Undoubtedly, their translation poses many problems for Arabic translators due to the opaque nature of the term itself. So what is a term ?

A term can be defined as an expression whose meaning is altered for certain purposes and this alteration is agreed upon by a specialised group. The term is related to a concept and the relationship between the two is described as a relationship between the content (concept) and the linguistic realization or expression (term).[1]

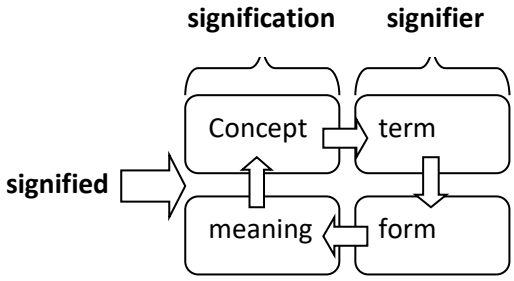

Figure 1 : the four dimensions of concept, term, meaning and form

It should be noted here that the difficulty of translation is not due to divergences and differences between languages as linguistic systems,

[1] - Ali Darwich, **Terminology and Translation, A Phonological-Semantic Approach to Arabic Terminology**, Writescope Pty Ltd, Malbourne, 2009, p :31.

instead it has to do with the preservation of the signified (content) despite the use of different signifiers (terms) which is an inevitable condition of translation.

To cope with this problem while translating philosophical terms into Arabic, different approaches existed. Some of the translators are sticked to original terms believing that creating new signified does not mean altering the existing signifiers since they belong to the same sphere. Other translators charged themselves with the task of arabicizing. Taking it for granted, they introduced new terms and new derivational forms. A third category of translator deny the existence of terms, and simply re-express the content of philosophical texts.

The diversity of the approches has created a real terminological chaos and threatened the uniformity of the Arabic terms among the terminolgy theorists in the different Arabic Linguistic and Scientific Academies (المجامع اللغوية و العلمية العربية). The following table illustrates this situation :

The term	Its translations
Habitus	"البنى الذاتية من الاستعدادات و التصورات"، "السمت"، "الملكة"، "آبيتوس".
Phänomenologie	"ظاهراتية"، "علم الظهور"، "ظهورية"، "فينومينولوجيا"، "فيمياء"، إلخ.
Hermeneutik	"تأويل"، "تفسير"، "فسارة"، "هيرمينوطيقا"، "هيرمينوطيقية"، إلخ.
Concept	"مفهوم"، "تصور"، "أفهوم"، "أفهومة"، إلخ.
Deconstruction	"التفكيك"، "التفكيكية"، "التشريح"، "التشريحية"،

***Ambiguity :** philosophical texts are characterised by ambiguity and the use of connotative expressions that are not easy to understand. Philosophers deliberately use ambiguous and unclear language, and some of them claim that a philosophical text is not read like other texts. It is not

only a set of words and paragraphs presenting ideas since it conveys an intended meaning and a different reflection.

Such a characteristic makes it very hard for the translator to deal with the philosophical text and its 'inherent ambiguity' as Romen Ingerden calls it,

'**Philosophical texts are often ambiguous (equivocal). What should the translator do in face of this fact ? to answer this question it is necessary to realize that there are different kinds of ambiguity deriving from different sources. They can be divided into three classes : (a) ambiguity intended by the author ; (b) ambiguity not intended but having a deeper justification either in the authors's mode of thinking or in the state of knowledge about a subject at the time of the work's creation or in the so-called 'spirit of the language', etc. ; (c) ambiguity not intended but accidental (and) clearly overlooked by the author for some minor reasons.'**[1]

This means that the translator not only has to be able to identify these ambiguities but also have the competence to evaluate them and deal with them according to their categories. Otherwise, his translation will entail a lot of misunderstundings, misinterpretations and controversy. The reason why some translators hesitate to publish their philosophical translations and admit that it is an arduous task.

To justify such a view, we quote the words of **Abdel-Amir Al-Aessam** who experienced the translation of one of Derrida's lectures into Arabic to be published in a book, and then he cancelled it just as an English translator did. Thus, he asserts :

[1] -Roman Ingarden, **On translations**, translated by J-W Wawrzycka, In AT Tymieniecka, IN GARDIANA, Boston, 1955, p :169.

"تجد دريدا يبحث دائما في تفتيت النص و الاستغراق فيه لإعادة بنائه بصورة مجهرية لتفاصيل أجزائه. من هنا فقط أستطيع أن أزعم أن بحث الأستاذ دريدا الذي لا يضمه هذا الكتاب نص صعب، لم يسعف الحظ قراء العربية، كقراء الإنجليزية، الاطلاع عليه، و ظل حبيس فرنسيته الرصينة. "[1]

Al-Aessam claims that **Derrida** attempts always to deconstruct the text and then, reconstructs it to unpack its appearance due to the details of its smaller parts. Therefore, it is very hard to translate Derrida and though we may find different translations into Arabic, it does not mean that their translators achieved them without difficulties and impediments because 'a philosopher is best read in his own language'.

***Untranslatability**: Philosophical translation, perhaps more than any other translation, is pushed to its limits in an effort to carry across terms and expressions that may not exist in the target language. Terms such as : Dasein, seiend, Geist, différance have specific meanings in the languages in which they are coined and for the people who speak those languages. It is this untranslatable residue of meaning that cannot be brought out in the target language and that makes translation 'impossible.'

Untranslatability is an inevitable phenomenon in philosophical translation because it has to do with inherent features of languages, cultures and philosophers' preferences and intended meanings , not with the individual abilities of the translator or the limitations of the craft, hence,

'The problem of 'untranslatability' arises from the fact that different cultures divide up the universe in different ways, and that

[1] - كريفيتز، أ فيلبس، **الفلسفة و الأدب**، ترجمة: ابتسام عباس، دار الشؤون الثقافية العامة، بغداد، ط1، 1989، ص: 10 من جزء تقديم الكتاب لعبد الأمير الأعسم.

their languages therefore contain ideas, words, and expressions to describe those different concepts and culture-specific features.'[1]

The differences and disparities between languages and cultures are evident and numerous. There are lots of terms, concepts and expressions that fall so deeply into the lexical and cultural voids. However, it is not necessarily that the target language doesn't contain a direct lexical, cultural or 'philosophical' equivalent and that there is no way to render the 'untranslatable'. Instead, some theorists argue that the language must be unique and self referential and should not be totally subsumed into another language.

Within this regard, Derrida claims that the issue of translation centres on the problematic of the translatable/ untranslatable, and that every text must be both and at the same time translatable and untranslatable :

'A text lives only if it lives on [sur-vit], and it lives on only if it is at once translatable and untranslatable. Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as a body of language [langue]. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately.'[2]

In other words language exists as language only if it is understood by the others and moves beyond itself to establish an agreement with the others. Thus, we may invent a word or numerous words for an already existing object, but these words should be understood for the act of communication to be achieved. The translator should always look for the

[1] -. James Nolan, **Interpretation : Techniques and Exercises**, Multilingual Matters LTD, Clevedon, 2005, p : 57

[2] - Jack Derrida, **'Living on/ Borderlines'**. Translated by Hulbert. In H. Bloom (ed), Deconstruction and Criticism, Henley : Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1979, p : 102.

equivalent that transmits the intended meaning on the basis of the original, as Benjamin puts out :

‘Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability.’[1]

This means that the translator attempts endlessly to understand the original and renders it accurately. Otherwise, the translation will look unclear and unaccepatble as we may notice in the following two examples taken from the Arabic translation of **Christopher Norris**’ book entitled ‘Deconstruction : theory and practice’ done by **Raed Abdeldjallil**

Example 1 : ‘Kantianism without the transcendental subject is a description often applied to structuralist thought by those who doubt its validity. Culler’s line of argument demonstrates the force of this slogan, showing itself very much akin to the Kantian philosophy of mind and reason.’	"إن الكانطية من دون موضوع الإبهام ما هي إلّا وصف يطبق غالبا على الفكر البنيوي من قبل أولئك المتشككين في قدرتها، و تظهر مناقشات كوللر بوضوح قوة هذا الشعار حيث تتبدى مماثلة للفلسفة الكانطية القائمة على العقل و السبب."
Example 2 : ‘Culler’s main claim for the structuralist approach is that it offers a kind of regulative matrix for perceptions that might otherwise seem merely dependent on the critic’s personal flair or virtuosity.’	"و الهدف الرئيسي لمنهج كوللر البنيوي تقديم نوعية من المواد المنظمة للملاحظات التي يمكن أن تبدو معتمدة على النزعات الذاتية للناقذ أو براعته."

In the first example, the translation of ‘transcendental’ by ‘الإبهام/ fuzziness’ was criticised because the term ‘transcendental’ doesn't mean

[1] -Walter Benjamin, The Task of the Translator, Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926, Harvard University Press, USA, 5th ed, 2002, p : 254.

‘الإبهام’ and there are more appropriate equivalents of this term in Arabic like ‘التسامي’ and ‘التعالي’ and some translators even borrowed it using ‘ترنسندال’ . Moreover, if the translator had a humble knowledge of Kantian philosophy, he would never translate the word ‘reason’ by ‘السبب’ though it is a lexical correspondent.

In the second example, the translator opts for literal translation without paying attention to the meaning in the choice of words. Thus, he translated the term ‘matrix’ by ‘المواد/ matter’. It is clear in this context that there is a difference between ‘المصفوفة’ which is the more accurate equivalent than ‘المادة’ because the mathematical concept illustrates better the nature of the structuralist approach.

Conclusion :

Translating a philosophical work is a serious challenge. The translator has to move a text into the target language, preserving as much as possible its quality, spirit, intended meaning and more particularly, its philosophy.

Philosophical translation requires a good understunding of the nature of philosophy which has a specific conceptual and cultural framework, not easy to decipher. Thus, the task of the translator becomes more difficult and complicated because he has to deal with the philosophy of the source language and make it possible to render in the target language.

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