

Translatability

In brief



SPA Traducibilidad

origins

Translatability derives from the verb *translate* which, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, comes from Middle English *translaten*, from French *translater*, from Latin *trānslātus*, past participle of *trānsferre*, 'to transfer': *trans-*, 'trans-' + *lātus*, 'brought'.

abstract

We will first discuss translatability by highlighting the relationships between language, thought, and reality. Two opposed trends stand out: the relativist and universalist approaches to translatability. The former advocates its impossibility (Humboldt, Sapir, Whorf), whereas the latter speaks for its possibility (Fedorov, Steiner, Nida). Translating is a bilingual communicative event involving a source language (SL) sender with a specific intention, a target language (TL) receiver, a translator who seeks to recreate the SL message in the TL text, and a commissioner who asks for a “translation proper” or any other type of text (e.g. adaptation, commentary). At the textual level, some kind of equivalence or representation holds between the SL and the TL texts. The TL socio-cultural translation norms may call for a transformation or even a manipulation of the original. Translatability can then be approached as a relative (Cosériu, Koller, Neubert & Shreve), not as an absolute notion.

Translatability problems may be classed into metalinguistic and text-bound. Metalinguistic difficulties (e.g., wordplays, puns, ambiguity) arise when the SL text contains cases where the content derives directly from its linguistic form. On the other hand, text-bound problems occur in the translation of specific text types. Translatability-related difficulties in philosophical, biblical, and literary texts are briefly discussed. As a conclusion, translatability seems to be impossible if one holds a purely formal linguistic perspective that strives to exactly match the syntactic and semantic structures of the SL and TL systems. Translatability between the SL and TL texts holds, as long as the intended communicative purpose of the SL text is reproduced in the TL text. Textual pragmatic equivalence would be the translatability criterion in this case. Finally, cultural untranslatability is overcome, if the

translator recreates a TL text that is adequate regarding the TL socio-cultural translation norms and the expectations of the TL audience, e.g., literary and advertising texts. The translatability criterion would be socio-cultural adequacy. Textual pragmatic equivalence and socio-cultural adequacy are complementary translatability criteria, e.g., one can translate a literary text maintaining pragmatic equivalence with specific cultural adaptations.

record

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Entry



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Introduction

We all have frequently heard that some words such as *saudade* (homesickness) in Portuguese, *gemütlich* (comfortable, snug) in German, or *komorebi* (sunlight piercing through tree branches and leaves) in Japanese are very difficult to translate. Some would even say that they are simply untranslatable into other languages. The crux of the matter is that the translatability of 'words' is closely related to the definition of translation one has in mind. Isolated words such as those above are only untranslatable if one considers translation as a decontextualized process of seeking correspondences between isolated lexical units. In this case, we will obtain no adequate (useful or functional) results because the lexicons of different languages very seldom, if ever, coincide completely in the semantic features constituting their **meanings** (cf. [Anisomorphisms](#)). This implies that every language organizes or structures words in specific ways. Thus, the systemic semantic relations of synonymy, polysemy, and semantic fields, to name just a few lexical semantic phenomena, do not coincide between languages. For instance, in French and English edible animals bear different names when they are alive (e.g. *mouton*, *couchon*, *vache*) than when one eats their meat (e.g. *agneau*, *porc*, *boeuf*), whereas in Spanish, this distinction is not generally made (*cordero*, *cerdo*, *res*).



Saudade and its (impossible?) translation scope / translatability.

Translatability is then an interesting topic for the nonprofessional, the linguist, and the translation scholar alike to the extent that, to delve into the nature of this phenomenon, it is necessary to relate it to the notion we have about translation itself. In translation studies (TS), a first approximation to translatability describes it as the capacity of expressing the content of a source language (SL) text into a target language (TL) text. Even if one understands translatability as formal correspondence,

one should bear in mind that translating is a communicative process, embedded in a TL socio-cultural context. It is not simply a product (translated text), but also a (communicative) process.

In the remainder of this entry, we will discuss the relationship between language, thought, and reality, presenting the two opposing views of relativism and universalism that would render translation impossible or possible, respectively. Then, we will review a modern conception of translation that supports translatability as a relative, not an absolute notion. Finally, we will discuss some cases of metalinguistic translatability, which pose apparently insurmountable translation obstacles, and text-bound instances where translators manage to solve the difficulties they encounter.

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¶ Translatability - the relationship between language, thought, and reality

The interest in the links between language, thought, and reality can be traced back to ancient philosophers. In his dialogue *Cratylus*, [Plato](#) considered that words have an inherently natural connection to the things they designate. This was the so-called naturalist view of the relationship between words and things. [Aristotle](#), in *De Interpretatione (Περὶ Ἑρμηνείας)*, opposed Plato's conjecture and suggested that there existed a conventional, not a natural, connection between words and things, a hypothesis that would revive in [Saussure's](#) principle of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign (Coseriu 1977). Plato's position roughly implies that there is an intrinsic relation between language (words) and reality (things), where the syllables and letters of each language would *imitate* the essential nature (*οὐσία*) of each thing. As languages differ from each other in their syllabic and alphabetic structure, then at the level of *language use* where translation occurs, it would not be possible to establish *interlinguistic* common ground. Besides, although Plato seems to find a compromise between conventionalism and naturalism at the end of the *Cratylus* (Kretzmann 1971:138), we share the view expressed in the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) that he still leans more toward the natural correctness of names by imitation or etymology, in which case, we argue, translatability would be jeopardized. Every language would designate, i.e. imitate, reality its own way. A similar idea will appear in the 19th century (W. von [Humboldt](#)), in a position one can now call relativist. On the other hand, if one accepts Aristotle's conventional relation between language (words) and reality (things), which, as Calero (1990: 453) points out, clearly links a name with its meaning *by convention* (κατὰ συνθήκην), one would accept the feasibility of translatability. Each language would organize its semantic content in such a way that it will be suitable to designate any reality, as will be discussed more recently, especially by Jakobson (1959) and Nida (1964). This would be the universalist approach, that one can also trace back to the 17th- and 18th centuries with [Descartes](#) and [Leibniz](#).

The relativist approach to translatability

One usually recognizes the inception of this approach in some remarks by W. von Humboldt (1796), very much linked to the Romantic approach to translation:



It seems to me that all translation is simply an attempt to solve an impossible task. Every translator is always bound to fall into a trap: either he is to adhere to the original at the expense of the taste and the language of his nation, or he is to conserve the peculiarities of his nation very precisely at the cost of the original [my translation] (Koller 1992: 159-160).

Wilhelm von *George*

Humboldt. *Steiner.*

[[Source](#)] [[Source](#)].

Von Humboldt speaks of the impossibility of translation when he establishes a close relationship between language, literary taste, and nation with two possible and opposite choices, to focus either on the original or on the receptor's nation, which would necessarily finish at a translation dead end. [Steiner](#) (1975: 85) also brings up von Humboldt's dictum, "Language is the formative organ of thought". In this case, one sees the basis for the foundation of the relativist approach to translatability and its ensuing impossibility because of the unique relationship between language and thought. Von Humboldt expresses this thesis quite unequivocally some years later, "The difference between languages is not a distinction of sounds and signs, but a difference of world views themselves" [my translation] (Humboldt 1822: 255). Furthermore, "Language is as it were the external occurrence of the spirit of the peoples; their language is their spirit and their spirit their language; one cannot think of them but as completely identical" (Humboldt 1836:42, cited by Salevsky 2002:170) [my translation]. Thus, one would think exclusively within the parameters of one's own language. Later Edward [Sapir](#) and Benjamin Lee [Whorf](#) would take up and further develop this idea.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Whorf's mentor, Edward Sapir (1929), cited by Steiner (1975: 91), summarized some of the most important postulates of the relativist, intrinsic and almost natural, relationship between social reality and language:

The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

Unlike Humboldt's thesis, Sapir's conception does not zoom in on 'reality' in general, but specifically on 'social reality', which is here equivalent to the 'real world'. However, just as in Humboldt's case, Sapir also seems to envisage an inextricable bond between language and (social) reality. In 1940, Whorf wrote the paper "Science and Linguistics", reprinted in 1956, where he postulated the so-called *principle of relativity*, after which this whole approach is usually known nowadays:

We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated (Whorf 1940 [s.p.]).

This relativist view of the relationship between language, thought, and reality came to be known as the Sapir-Whorf-hypothesis. At present, this hypothesis is usually argued to have a strong and a weak form, even if the authors above mentioned did not propose it. According to the strong

assumption, interlinguistic and intercultural communication, including translation and learning foreign languages, would be impossible, as one would not be able to perceive reality outside the parameters set by one's language. One would seem trapped in one's own tongue. Thus, translatability would be impossible. This is what one can actually follow from the ideas by Humboldt, Sapir, and Whorf. On the contrary, the weak version of this hypothesis, which they did not state explicitly, would certainly recognize that one usually internalizes reality in terms of one's native tongue (Slobin 1996). However, it does not exclude the possibility of expanding one's perception of the world when translating or learning a foreign language. From this perspective, one would accept that all languages are flexible and dynamic, and cultures change continuously (Koller 1992: 173). This means that neither languages nor cultures are closed-off systems. J. de Waard & E. Nida (1986: 43) also share this view: "[...] all peoples share far more cultural similarities than is usually thought to be the case". Thus, this instance would clearly allow for translatability. However, this weak form of the hypothesis is not what the Humboldt, Sapir, and Whorf actually said about the complex issue of language, thought and reality.

The universalist approach to translatability

According to Koller (1992: 69), some of the first authors to postulate the possibility of a philosophical universal language were Descartes and Leibniz. They thought that the unit of language should correspond to the unit of science and knowledge. This same idea of a *lingua universalis* underlies N. Chomsky's initial conception of a formal logical language, reminiscent of the [Port Royal universal grammar](#), which would be common, in a deep structure, to all languages. Thus, languages would only differ in their "surface structure" (Koller 1992: 70). If this were true, then translatability would be possible. The problem with this rationalist approach is that it is an idealization of the nature of languages. They would be ahistorical and would not be part of complex socio-cultural contexts. Another critical issue is that translatability would depend on the mechanical or automatic transfer of the so-called formal surface structures, especially words and sentences, but not necessarily their meanings, which, being common to all languages one would not require to translate. This type of translatability would roughly correspond to the early stages of machine translation, when one could not integrate the semantic and pragmatic components into the computer processing of translation.

Leibniz poses a very interesting case in this universalist approach because, as Steiner (1975: 78) says, he first puts forward the "suggestion that language is not the vehicle of thought, but its determining medium. Thought is language internalized, and we think and feel as our particular language impels and allows us to do". This we could clearly identify, *ante litteram*, with the relativist view. However, Leibniz "was profoundly interested in the possibilities of a universal semantic system, immediately legible to all men" (Steiner 1975: 78). Thus, Leibniz fuses two viewpoints one could tend to consider irreconcilable. We could also state that Leibniz's conception embodies the dynamic nature of translatability, mostly possible but with some borderline cases.

Briefly, the semantic universalist approach ensures translatability to the extent that one can think of a common cognitive semantic basis for every language which represents shared human-thought structures. Searle (1969: 20) conveys this idea in the principle of expressibility:

We might express this principle by saying that for any meaning X and any speaker S whenever S means (intends to convey, wishes to communicate in an

utterance, etc.) X then it is possible that there is some expression E such that E is an exact expression of or a formulation of X.

Searle's principle of expressibility moves translatability one step forward toward real theoretical feasibility because he links meaning to the pragmatic dimension of language use within the framework of speech act theory. Meanings are not part of isolated systems, but constitute communicative acts where speakers intend to convey a message. As a principle, it applies not only to monolingual, but also to bilingual communication, as is the case of translation.

This is where one should study translatability: within the boundaries of actual communication, taking into account the meaning speakers intend to convey in their utterances or texts. Languages are powerful enough to allow speakers to express all their thoughts. As Hervey (1998: 12) puts it from a modern pragmatic perspective:

The illocutionary functions manifested in one language/culture are autonomous cultural/linguistic categories (relativism), but are imaginable by members of other cultures (qualified universalism) and, to some extent, are cross-culturally translatable, though not, of course, without translation loss.

On the other hand, several authors have pointed out that translatability is possible *de facto*. For instance, [Fedorov](#) (1953: 106) states: "The reality, the feasibility of the principle of translatability is demonstrated by practice itself" [my translation]. Steiner (1975: 98) also points in the same direction:

Moreover, if the Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis were right, if languages were monads with essentially discordant mappings, how then could we communicate interlingually? How could we acquire a second tongue or traverse into another language-world by means of translation? Yet, manifestly, these transfers do occur continually.

More recently, Salevsky also shares this idea: "The philosophical conception that languages separate us and therefore all human beings cannot know the same is opposed to the evidence of every day translation activity" [my translation] (Salevsky 2002: 166). The universalist approach that supports translatability is based on the philosophical and cognitive theoretical tenet that all human beings are endowed with similar thought capacity which they can materialize not only through their native language but also via any other language they might learn. Moreover, the universal empirical evidence of the translation activity among the most diverse languages of the world also seems to support translatability. In this respect, the [Bible](#) has been translated into more than 3,000 languages.

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¶ Relative not absolute translatability

A modern definition of translation should consider its communicative, textual, and contextual dimensions into an integrated proposal (Bolaños 2008). Several authors have recognized the communicative nature of translating (e.g., Jäger 1975: 36; Wilss 1977: 72; Shveitser 1988: 102; Kussmaul 1992: 36). From this perspective, one defines translation as a [teleological](#) or purposeful activity where a SL sender intends to convey a message to a TL receiver via a translator. One usually finds an external participant in this process, the so-called initiator or client who commissions

the translation and may eventually demand a few or in-depth modifications in the final product's purpose or function for the target audience. However, the usual assumption is that maintaining a constant function between the SL text and the TL text is the translation default case (Albrecht 1998: 259).

The communicative translating process materializes in the text. Several authors also consider the text as a crucial component in translation (Fedorov 1953: 108; Coseriu 1977: 215; Koller 1992: 177; Neubert & Shreve 1992: 5; Nord 1997: 39, Kommissarov 1999: 110). At the textual level, equivalence appears as the key concept linking SL and TL texts. The translator produces the TL text according to the pragmatic orientation, i.e., the assumed communicative intention of the SL sender. The intention may be to provide instructions to assemble a machine, to convince an audience to vote for a political party, to report on the results of a scientific research, to convey personal or imagined experience in a fictional narrative, etc. When the translator maintains the SL pragmatic orientation in the TL text, one can say that the Default Equivalence Position (DEP, Bolaños 2016) has guided him. Translators may produce several different retranslations of the same original over time. This is feasible because there exists an Equivalence Range (ER), i.e., a series of valid translation alternatives for the same original. DEP usually guides these alternatives. At times, the translator can override DEP if the initiator's instructions (IIs) or his own convictions call for it, for instance, a novel can be adapted for children or a scientific report summarized or commented on for a newspaper broader audience, etc.

The translation communicative act is part of a socio-cultural context. Depending on the text typology available in the SL context, the SL text can activate specific aspects of this context. For instance, if one were dealing with a scientific or technical text, it would seldom reflect peculiarities of the SL context. However, if one had to translate a prose text aimed at a local TL audience, it will likely display socio-cultural features of that community. This means that the point of departure for translating cultural nuances would be the SL text itself. Koller (2001: 47) holds a similar stance: "I tackle the 'cultural problem' not from the perspective of a 'cultural theory'; what one can understand as 'cultural' or a 'cultural translation problem' can only be explored and systematized from the text or (a corpus of) texts [my translation]. Moreover, at the context level, one can identify the so-called norms. For Hermans (2000: 11):

Norms imply that there is, among a range of options that present themselves, a particular course of action which is generally accepted as 'proper' or 'correct' or 'appropriate'. That course of action, it is agreed, *should* therefore be adopted by all who find themselves in that type of situation. Each time a norm is observed, its validity is confirmed and reinforced.

Thus, translators are expected to consider the TL translation norms. These norms may compel them to override DEP, i.e., to produce a non-equivalent text with a different communicative purpose from that of the original, i.e., a text that complies with the TL socio-cultural norms. In this case, the translation would be adequate for the TL audience. TL linguistic translation norms are part of the TL socio-cultural norms. They are dynamic and change continuously over time. It helps to explain, for example, the alternative translation strategies that one usually encounters throughout the history of literary translation. As Levý (1969: 25) puts it:

The translator is an author of his time and his nation. One can investigate his poetics as an example of the differences in the literary development of two peoples, of the differences in the poetics of two periods. And, finally, one can unveil, behind the work, the translator's method as an expression of a given translation norm, of a given attitude vis-à-vis translation [my translation].

Within this conceptual framework, translatability is, as well as translation, a dynamic, historically determined concept that one can conceive of in relative, not absolute terms. Several authors also point in this direction (Mounin 1963: 278; Catford 1965: 93; Jäger 1975: 122; Shveitser 1988: 110; Koller 1992: 165, 178; Barnstone 1993:49; Toury 1995: 58; Salevsky 2002: 182). Translatability is then determined hierarchically and primarily by the current translation norms in the TL socio-cultural community at any given period. These norms determine what an acceptable or adequate translation is. The potential equivalence between the SL text and the TL text will depend on whatever the TL translation norms prescribe. Translation norms can also override the original author's communicative purpose. Thus, the sequence of translatability determinants would be first the translation norms (socio-cultural factors) and then the potential equivalence between SL and TL texts at the pragmatic (author's intention), semantic (text meaning), and stylistic (text form) levels. The feasibility of translation depends on the translation norms valid in a specific TL socio-cultural community at any given period. For example, Mounin (1955: 59) refers to the case of the complete avoidance of the possibility of a word-for-word rendering:

[...] the terror of word for word translation, the *hypertranslation*: when the French expression calques the foreign turn exactly, the dissatisfied translator resorts, among several French expressions, to the one whose French form is furthest away from the turn to translate [my translation].

In this case, one might ensure translatability as long as the translator adheres to the prevailing norm at the time, mid 1950s, i.e., "avoid using literal TL grammatical structures found in the SL text". Discussing Romanticism and the Victorian age, Hale (2000:67) similarly states, "[...] a number of early Gothic novels consisted of extremely free adaptations of French works (e.g., Sophia Lee's *The Recess*, 1783–5, which is clearly based on Prévost's *Cleveland*). In this instance, again, distance from the original's form could be the norm for an acceptable or adequate translation. However, one may also find the opposite tendency. As Robinson (2000: 15) states, "For ancient Rome, translation was strict, slavish literalism; any liberties the rewriter might be inclined to take with the source text were by definition beyond the limits of translation".

Translatability is not an intrinsic aspect of texts. It does not lie on the potential equivalence between SL and TL texts either. Instead, it matches the TL socio-cultural translation norms. Just as these norms change over time, so too do the criteria for translatability. In this sense, due to its historical determination, one can say that translatability is a relative, not an absolute concept. For instance, referring to the translation activity during the Renaissance, Boutcher (2002: 46) points out:

The problem may be that if we read these works as 'translations' in the modern sense they will inevitably disappoint, because good modern translations will almost always be found to be more faithful, more fluent, more sensitive to literary texture.

The key judging criterion for translatability is adequacy of the translated text for the TL audience according to the TL socio-cultural translation norms.

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¶ Difficult cases of translatability

Catford (1965: 93-97) illustrates metalinguistic untranslatability with an excerpt from Maxim Gorki's *Childhood*:

Ty otkuda prišla?

Thou whence came-on-foot?

Where have you come from?

S verxu, iz Nižnego, da ne prišla,

From above, from Lower and not came-on-foot.

From upriver/upstairs, from Nižnij/Lower, and I didn't come on foot.

Po vode-to ne xod'at.

On water- (!) not-they-go-on-foot.

You don't walk on water!

The untranslatability of this text, argues Catford (1965: 97):

[...] rests on the SL items *prišla, s verxu, Nižnego*. [...] *Nižnego* illustrates ambiguity arising from shared exponence –*nižnij* (genitive singular *nižnego*) as exponent of (a) an adjective meaning 'lower' and (b) the common abbreviation of the place-name *Nižnij Novgorod* ('Lower Newtown').

For Catford (1965: 98), this is a case of linguistic untranslatability “because failure to find a TL equivalent is due entirely to differences between the *source* language and the *target* language”. Interestingly enough, Catford fails to consider that one is not dealing here with a case of general *linguistic* untranslatability. This is an instance of *metalinguistic* untranslatability, i.e. the translation difficulty arises from the linguistic reflection one of the speakers makes, namely, she came upriver from the city, and therefore one should not ask her about her provenance using the Russian verb *prišla*, which implies coming on foot. It is just a misunderstanding, where one of the speakers uses a *linguistic form* inattentively with one meaning in mind, and the other corrects the *interpretation*. How to translate it into English? Catford (1965:98) proposes the following.

Where have you walked in from?

I've just come down from Lower.

And I didn't walk. You don't walk on water.

He argues that *Lower* "would convey nothing to an English reader without a footnote explaining that 'Lower' is a translation of the abbreviated form of Nižnij Novgorod" (Catford 1965: 98). However, there is no need to translate the place-name Nižnij Novgorod. It suffices to say, "I've come down from Nižnij". The other speaker can infer immediately that the interlocutor is referring to 'upriver from a city'. One can confirm this conjecture because she adds, "And I didn't walk. You don't walk on water". Briefly, this case illustrates that one might solve some translation difficulties if one moves from the level of abstract linguistic systems to the level of texts embedded in pragmatic communicative acts. As we said above, the structural semantic fabric of languages seldom overlaps completely. It is futile to force them to come together

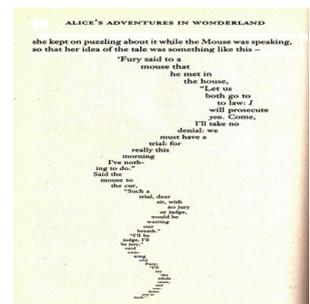
Salevsky (2002:174) also mentions another interesting case between Russian and German numbers. For instance, in Russian the cardinal number 2 declines in nominative case according to the gender of the noun it modifies, whereas in German it remains the same:

zwei Stück Zucker – *два куска сахара* [two cubes of sugar]

zwei Tassen Kaffee – *две чашки кофе* [two cups of coffee]

This is a very enlightening example of the morphological asymmetry between languages. In Russian, *два* modifies a masculine noun (singular *кусок*, 'piece' / plural *куски*, 'pieces'), and *две* modifies a feminine noun (singular *чашка*, 'cup' / plural *чашки*, 'cups'). In German, one uses the same number form *zwei* regardless of the gender of the modified noun; in this case, *Zucker* and *Kaffee* are both masculine nouns. On the other hand, in English *two* in *two cubes of sugar* and *two cups of coffee* maintains the same form, and the nouns are not marked for gender. Despite the structural differences between these languages, one could produce equivalent TL utterances.

Schreiber (1993: 47) brings up an example of a wordplay, initially mentioned by Forster (1958:3): *Is life worth living? It depends upon the liver*. Here *liver* is ambiguous or polysemic. It refers either to the glandular organ, or to the person who lives in a specific way. It is a communicatively valid utterance. The receiver may activate the two word meanings of the message, but not simultaneously. That is the pun. One makes a cognitive effort to interpret the utterance with the two possible readings. Is it translatable? The French version goes like this: *La vie vaut-elle la peine? Question de foie*. The word *foie* also has the meaning of 'glandular organ', and it is homophonous with *foi* ('faith'). In this example, one has also ensured translatability. This time, the word meanings are different. However, a similar communicative effect has been achieved.



Wordplay – "The Mouse's Tale" - *Alice in Wonderland*. [Source]

Coseriu (1977: 232) mentions a borderline case of translatability of a beverage advertising text that reads in Italian, *Chi bevi Neri, Neri beve* ['he who drinks Neri, Neri drinks'] which can also be interpreted as *Chi bevi Neri, ne ribeve* ['he who drinks Neri, drinks Neri again']. Coseriu argues that one can maintain the same designation, but not the meaning of the original wordplay. This is also a case of a metalinguistic translation. The key aspect is to try to convey the same message as the original. The problem arises from a grammatical aspect of Italian that uses the pronominal particle *ne*, which replaces *the beverage Neri*, and the prefix *ri-* to indicate the repetition of an action,

ribevere ('drink *again*'). There is no easy way out because the form and the meaning fuse inextricably in the Italian utterance. In other words, the meaning derives directly from the intrinsic morphological structure of the original. In this case, if one wanted to translate the advertisement, some type of adaptation or localization could take place to make it fit in the TL context.

Text-bound translatability

This type of translatability occurs in the translation of specific text types. For instance, Salevsky (2002: 183-184) presents a philosophical text by Heidegger (1927: 5), where "the translator faces the challenges of objective boundaries with full creativity and intuition" [my translation]:

Das Fragen hat als Fragen nach [...] sein Gefragtes. Alles Fragen nach [...] ist in irgendeiner Weise Anfragen bei [...] Zum Fragen gehört ausser dem Gefragten ein Befragtes. In der Untersuchenden, d.h. spezifisch theoretischen Frage soll das Gefragte bestimmt und zu Begriff gebracht werden.

The English translation reads:

Any inquiry, as an inquiry about something, has that which is asked about [sein Gefragtes]. But all inquiry about something is somehow a questioning of something [Anfragen bei]. So in addition to what is asked about, an inquiry has that which is interrogated [ein Befragtes]. In investigative questions – that is in questions which are specifically theoretical – what is asked about is determined and conceptualized.

Here the translatability problem arises from the nominalization of the German verb *fragen*, which displays great flexibility regarding prefixing. The basic meaning 'ask' can be modified by several prefixes, e.g., *ge-*, *an-*, *be-* with the corresponding specification in meaning. English, a rather analytic language, does not have the same synthetic structure to reproduce a similar meaning. It is necessary to resort to paraphrasing. The German nominalizations *Gefragtes*, *Befragtes*, *Anfragen* function as a highly specialized terminology that has no direct equivalent in English. The German reader has internalized the use of these prefixes and can infer their meanings. The English reader also has to make a metalinguistic reflection about the meaning nuances expressed in the translation. This renders some philosophical texts arduous to understand. The concision and precision of the original decondense in the translated text. However, the translation into Russian, another synthetic language, maintains the same level of condensation of the original. Philosophical texts are indeed translatable. The question is whether one manages to find equivalent resources in the target language to express the SL conceptualization. Salevsky is clearly right about the "creativity and intuition" that the translator should put into practice.

Nida (1945: 196) discusses several linguistic and ethnological problems, especially in Bible translation, and shows how to tackle them. He considers five areas: (1) ecology, (2) material culture, (3) social culture, (4) religious culture, and (5) linguistic culture. This last aspect refers to what we described above as the metalinguistic translatability. As to ecology, Nida (1945: 197) mentions, e.g., the difficulty of translating *desert* because for a Maya Indian all places have vegetation. He proposes to translate it as *an abandoned place*. Problems involving the material culture are more difficult to solve. How to translate, for example, the account on Acts 9.24, *in which the gates of the city are*

closed, into aboriginal languages with villages without gates? Nida (1945: 198) states that in some aboriginal communities, when they are apprehending criminals or there is public work, guards close the roads and no one can leave. One could use the latter image in the translation. Regarding the social culture, Nida (1945:199) points out that in the Maya language “[...] there is no term for ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ as such. But one must designate whether the person is an older or younger brother or younger or older sister”. Thus, an age-relationship is explicit in the translated text, even if the original does not say so. The names for ‘sanctity’ or ‘holiness’ are a continuous problem for the translation of religious culture. They are taboo-related words. For instance, for translating ‘holy spirit’, as ‘spirit’ is more readily related to an ‘evil spirit’, the translator should look for an adjective such as ‘pure’ or ‘clean’ to construe gradually the concept of ‘holy’ (Nida 1945: 202). Nida sets practical guidelines for tackling culture-related problems that ensure the translatability of the Bible for very distant and distinct TL audiences.

The translatability of literary texts is highly controversial. Some authors point out the impossibility of translating poetry. For instance, Wandruszka (1967: 7), cited by Koller (1992: 160), says:

Poetry is untranslatable. Its sound is untranslatable, its rhythm, its melody, but not only that. Poetry is untranslatable because it requests us to examine not only through language in and out, but also language itself. Poetry is the other great possibility of language, the possibility of transforming the tool into a work of art [my translation].

Wandruszka’s view is justifiable to the extent that in literary texts, but especially in poetry, the formal structure is as meaningful as the content of the work. However, Levý (1969: 104) demonstrates with the poem *Das ästhetische Wiesel* by Christian Morgenstern that translatability holds even in cases where the formal (rhythmic) features override the semantic aspects of the original:

Ein Wiesel
 saß auf einem Kiesel
 inmitten einem Bachgeriesel

The English translation by [Max Knight](#) reads:

A weasel
 penched on an easel
 within a patch of teasel

Levý (1969: 104) adds, “More important than the detailed preciseness of the individual words is the maintenance of the wordplay” [my translation]. This means that even when the form of the literary text is in the foreground, it is still possible to find an adequate version in the TL socio-cultural context.

Despite the fact that there are multiple instances, where translatability faces several challenges and is called into question, we would like to subscribe to Jakobson’s (1959: 115) dictum,

All cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language. Whenever there is deficiency, terminology may be qualified and amplified by loanwords or loan-translations, neologisms or semantic shifts, and finally, by circumlocutions.

The TL socio-cultural translation norms play a crucial role in determining the adequacy and the acceptance of the translated text. In the case of the literary text, these norms include the literary canon in the cultural polysystem where the translation's role will be central (innovative) or peripheral—conservative—(Even-Zohar 1990: 193–194). Moreover, translation norms also respond to TL powerful socio-political instances that may instill a post-colonial stance in the content of a TL text:

Indeed, the evolutionary, or “natural”, process of translation exists as a repression and projection of the textual process of translation in a way that I have associated with the dynamics of reduction, homogenization, and displacement characteristic of U.S. foreign policy (Cheyfitz 1997: 18).

From this perspective, translating is a powerful political act intended to perpetuate the domination of the colonized peoples. We should also consider these powerful instances, not only as commissioners with a specific goal in mind (skopos theory), but as key agents in the transformation and manipulation of TL socio-cultural values through translated texts.

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Research potential

Translatability represents an interlinguistic and intercultural phenomenon. We have shown here some of the most relevant aspects that pose problems according to the perspective one assumes. When translation is defined in purely linguistic terms, focusing on the matching of the syntactic and semantic structures of diverse language systems, via the so-called translation shifts, translatability proved very difficult, if not entirely unfeasible. At the textual level, when pragmatic equivalence holds between the SL and the TL texts, one can validate translatability. If one considers the socio-cultural translation norms, one can move still one step further in the right direction, when adequacy seems to be the determining factor of translatability. On the other hand, a very promising field opens for systematic research on translatability if one works on a text typology, including technical, scientific, literary and advertising texts. For instance, it will be very useful to determine if the hypothesis about the unequivocal terminological equivalence between technical, and to some extent scientific texts, actually holds. Likewise, one could investigate what the limits of translatability of literary texts is. Are SL and TL texts pragmatically equivalent, i.e. do they maintain a similar SL intention and a similar TL effect? Are TL texts adaptations of SL texts? Have the SL text characters, plot, message been modified or manipulated to comply with TL powerful socio-political instances? In relation to advertisements, it would be interesting to establish how one can localize or adapt them for the different TL audiences, thereby

ensuring translatability. In all the cases, one could investigate if translations are 'transfers' or 'recreations' of the SL text. What working definitions of translation are we using implicitly or explicitly in our everyday activity? How do they relate to translatability? What criteria seem to prevail in the different text types, translation shifts, equivalence, or adequacy?

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