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Kant on Translation

ABSTRACT: For Kant communication is possible with both non-verbal and verbal language. Non-verbal language is universal and does not require translation. Verbal language, which uses hearable signs and is based on conventions and association, is indispensable for abstract thinking but is not universal and needs to be translated. I argue that Kant's conception of translation complies with his conception of verbal language, and has interesting consequences, such as his claims that: a) only true poetry is translatable, b) translations enriched the German language making it suitable for philosophy, and c) since Germans translated everything, anyone who knew German could know everything without learning other languages. I also maintain that for Kant the German practice of translation promoted cosmopolitanism and patriotism that jointly respond to his call to eradicate nationalism. Finally, I touch on the problem of translating into dead languages and on Kant's acknowledgment of the work of translators.

KEYWORDS: Universal Non-Verbal Language; Translations of Verbal Languages; Cultural and Political Effects of Translations; Translation and Poetry; Translations into Dead Languages and the Rights of Translators

1. INTRODUCTION

Kant maintains that we have a language because we live in a society: "If in the beginning people did not live socially, they could not have a language".¹ Indeed, to have a language, as a consequence of living in a society, is what Kant characterizes as humanity [*Humanität*], which he makes consist in "communicability and urbanity [*Communicabilität und Urbanität*]"² Kant grounds this conception on the assumption of a common sense, which he considers a necessary condition not only for the universal communication of a feeling, but also:

with good reason, and indeed without appeal to psychological observations [...] as the necessary condition of the universal communicability of our cognition, which is assumed in every logic and every principle of cognition that is not skeptical.³

1. Refl 1387, AA 15: 604 (1772-1775).

2. Log, AA 9: 45.

3. KU, 5: 239.



2. NON-VERBAL LANGUAGE DOES NOT NEED TRANSLATION

Having secured a firm ground to communication, Kant does not say that language has to be verbal. For he moves from a premise, namely that there is a harmonic natural connection of mind and body, whose main example are *miens*, i.e., the “facial features put into play”.⁴ Kant argues that “every change and agitation of mind produces *miens* which harmonize with the change of mind”,⁵ and the relation between each *mien* and a specific agitation of mind is so solid that “no other *mien* can be found for this agitation of mind”.⁶

Besides *miens* Kant mentions gestures. He concedes that gestures can be subjected to our will, but maintains that, at least in some cases, they have a natural connection with feelings: “Gestures are natural signs and are well subject to our discretion, but nature has determined expressive gestures that hang together with a feeling”.⁷ Kant also declares mere tones capable of expressing an affect: “Every sound [*Laut*] that expresses an affect, every strong sensation has its special signs”.⁸

All these bodily expressions of mind:

A. can be interpreted as corresponding to specific affects of a person, even if that person would like to hide them:

it is difficult not to betray the imprint of an affect by any expression [*Miene*]; it betrays itself by the painstaking restraint in gesture or in the tone itself, and he who is too weak to govern his affects will expose his interior through the play of expressions [*Mienenspiel*] (against the wish of his reason), which he would like to hide and conceal from the eyes of others. But if one finds out about them, those who are masters in this art are not exactly regarded as the best human beings with whom one can deal in confidence, especially if they are practised in affecting expressions that contradict what they do.⁹

B. can be intentionally used by a person as signs to communicate with other people without resorting to words, for example when communicating with children: “Nurses make sure that children are afraid to pick up many things. If at the sight of a caterpillar they make a terrible *mien*, the children will certainly leave the caterpillars alone”.¹⁰

C. permit a universal communication across peoples and cultures. Kant explains that, as regards *miens*:

there does not at all exist any agitation of the mind with which no *mien* is supposed to harmonize, and because the agitation of the mind is one and the same with all peoples [...] something is here thus planted in nature.¹¹

4. Refl 1247, AA 15: 551 (1780-1789).

5. V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 667.

6. *Ibidem*.

7. V-Anth/Mensch, A 25: 1026.

8. *Ibidem*.

9. Anth, AA 7: 300.

10. V-Anth/Collins, AA 25: 131.

11. V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 667.

Therefore, miens “are valid and universal signs of mind motions”,¹² and are the same “for all human beings”,¹³ for they “have a single meaning in the whole world”.¹⁴ As regards gestures:

there are gestures established by nature, by which human beings of all races and climates understand each other, even without prior agreement. To these gestures belong nodding the head (in affirmation), shaking the head (in disavowal) [etc].¹⁵

As regards tones, in the case of theater actors:

[if] the tone of the language is to determine the action, one must let the *actors* speak emotionally in an unknown language; one would not know the true content of the speech but would know whether he begs, threatens, etc. other people.¹⁶

From all this it follows that non-verbal communication does not require translation and has advantages compared to communication with words: “We have nothing as universal as the miens, for words are not so universal; hence a pantomime comedy which could be valid for all peoples could be staged”.¹⁷ For, a pantomime, which is “an intuitive form of a serial sequence of figures of people”,¹⁸ “can surely be considered a language that is understood in the whole world”.¹⁹ Thus, according to an analogy established in the third *Critique*, “the gestures in a language”, just as the shapes produced by artists in the “pictorial art”, make “the thing itself speak as it were in mime”.²⁰ Not to mention that, according to a passage cited above, the communicative value of tones can be truly appreciated if they are used intentionally in an unknown language, i.e. if the translation is deliberately forbidden.

3. VERBAL LANGUAGE

Upon closer examination, Kant’s assessment of non-verbal language is not as positive as it seems. Non-verbal language remains important when combined with words since, as we read in the third *Critique*:

the kind of expression that people use in speaking in order to communicate to each other, i.e., not merely their concepts, but also their sensations [...] consists in the word, the gesture, and the tone (articulation, gesticulation, and modulation). Only the combination of these three kinds of expression constitutes the speaker’s complete communication. For thought, intuition, and sensation are thereby conveyed to the other simultaneously and united.²¹

12. V-Anth/Parow, AA 25: 443.

13. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1293.

14. Refl 1258, AA 15: 554 (1773-1778).

15. Anth, AA 7: 301.

16. V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 999.

17. V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 667.

18. Refl 683, AA 15: 304 (1768-1770).

19. V-Anth/Parow, AA 25: 443.

20. KU, AA 5: 24.

21. KU, §51, 5: 320.

However, on its own, non-verbal language can be ambiguous. For Kant has doubts about books that deal with the “*exegesis* of faces” since “one turns red because is aware of the crime of which he is accused, another turns red only because he finds himself offended by the fact that the other person expresses suspicions about him”.²² Therefore, “we can certainly communicate our thoughts to others through miens and gestures, but the simplest means is hearing”.²³ A lecture on anthropology explains: “words, and not pantomimes and gestures, are chosen as means to communicate one’s thoughts to another, simply because sound expands everywhere and one feels the impressions on hearing far more strongly than on sight”.²⁴ Another lecture adds:

we speak with words and not with miens (which would also be feasible) because we have no other ability to make a stronger impression on someone else; even if the other person turns away, he still hears us.²⁵

The argument that hearable words are preferable because sound expands everywhere, and, as remarked by Lambert “is such that one is rarely forced to turn one’s ear towards it”,²⁶ is not the only one Kant employs, and surely is not the main one. For, his main argument is that hearable words are preferable because they are the signs of general conceptual representations, the ones that characterize abstract thinking.²⁷ Much depends on the fact that hearing “does not present objects in [terms of] their shape [*Gestalt*]”,²⁸ with the consequence that “the sounds of language do not lead immediately to the idea of it [the object]”.²⁹ This is precisely the property that makes words the best signs of concepts: “For our cognitions as signs of the understanding, nothing is as fitting as words, because in themselves they do not signify anything else; thus, the understanding can connect the relevant concept with it”.³⁰

Moreover, words are not simply the sensible clothing of concepts. Kant criticizes a widely accepted distinction between judgment and proposition according to which ‘judgment’ [*Urtheil, iudicium*] is the mental act, and ‘proposition’ [*Satz, propositio*] is a judgment expressed in words. For him without words we could not judge at all,³¹ indeed, “without words one cannot think at all”.³² This means that hearable words have

22. V-Anth/Parow, AA 25: 447.

23. V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 909.

24. V-Anth/Parow, AA 25: 276.

25. V-Anth/Collins, AA 25: 55.

26. Lambert 1764, *Semiotik* §15.

27. Cf. Lifschitz 2012: 2.

28. V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 943.

29. Anth, AA 7: 155.

30. V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 536.

31. Cf. V-Lo/Pölitiz, AA 24: 580: “logicians define a proposition [*Satz*] *per Iudicium verbis prolatum*, which is false, however, we would not judge at all, if we had no words”; cf. also V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 934.

32. V-Lo/Pölitiz, AA 24: 588.

a constitutive role in thought.³³ A statement in the *Opus Postumum* leaves no doubt on this matter: “thinking is speaking and this is a hearing [*Das Denken ist ein Sprechen u. dieses ein Hören*]”.³⁴ Hence the privileged role Kant assigns to the sense of hearing not only in communicating, but also in the very ability to think.³⁵

These are the bases of Kant’s conception of the word: “the word in itself means nothing, but is only an arbitrary sound, thus it cannot be connected with anything other than the concept of the thing”.³⁶ A word has the mere function of *custos* of a concept that it accompanies by association, that is, by “a habit in the mind such that when one idea is produced, the other also comes into being”.³⁷ Famously, Kant qualifies words as:

characterizations, i.e., designations of the concepts by means of accompanying sensible signs, which contain nothing at all belonging to the intuition of the object, but only serve them, in accordance with the laws of association of the imagination, and hence in a subjective regard, as a means of reproduction.³⁸

Characters differ from symbols: “such a sign, that represents the idea of a thing, is called a *symbolum*, which differs from characters”.³⁹ Since words are characterizations:

words can be signs; but not symbols of representations. Through words the representations are not represented symbolically; but they are simply companions [*begleiter*] of representations. They lend themselves at best to the designation of concepts insofar as they only refer to associations and not to similarities, through words that are mere sound, thoughts are not disturbed, therefore they also serve at best to thinking.⁴⁰

33. Cf. Capozzi 2002: 443-444; Capozzi 2021; Capozzi forthcoming.

34. OP, AA 21: 103.

35. On this basis, Kant assigns a fundamental role in cognition to the sense of hearing, cf. *V-Anth/Fried*, AA 25:498: “hearing is an organ of reason; since without hearing there is no speech, and without speech, no signs of the concepts, and without that no use of the understanding can take place”. Hence his claim that people deaf from birth had a severe impairment regarding abstract thinking, despite the existence of methods that taught them to communicate and even speak. But he believed that these methods did not achieve what for him was the fundamental function of abstract thought, that is, the function of detaching the word from a specific image, something that, in his opinion, only sound signs were capable of doing. On this topic cf. Capozzi 2021: 100-102.

36. *V-Anth/Mensch*, AA 25: 1024.

37. *Anth*, AA 7: 176.

38. KU, AA 5: 351-352. Hearable and spoken words share this property with visible mimetic and algebraic signs. Mimetic signs are not to be understood as the mime that makes the thing itself speak, but are the conventional signs established for teaching mime. For the difference between words and the signs of algebra, cf. Capozzi 2021: 112-113.

39. *V-Anth/Parow*, AA 25: 338.

40. *V-Anth/Busolt*, AA 25: 1474.

4. VERBAL LANGUAGE NEEDS TRANSLATION

A consequence of having words that are arbitrary hearable signs lacking a connection with shapes and images, and based on a convention, is that there is no universal verbal language. For there are as many verbal languages as there are conventions: only if verbal language were innate (or deeply implanted in our nature) “there would have to be only one language now”.⁴¹

This means that verbal languages must be translated.

Actually, there would have been a way to avoid translations: to create a universal language, if not a spoken one, at least a written one that could allow communication between speakers of different languages. According to a widespread opinion, a model of such a universal written language was offered by Chinese writing. Francis Bacon referred to this feature of Chinese script in *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum*,⁴² included in his *Instauratio magna* from which Kant quoted the motto added to the 1787 edition of the *Critique*.⁴³ Leibniz emphasized the independence of the “écriture des Chinois” from the spoken language inasmuch as it “porrai paraître inventée par un sourd”.⁴⁴ Kant disagrees. He accords to writing an enormous value in communication, to the point that sight conquers a privileged function in communication: “Among the communicating senses is first and foremost sight, through which the longest and most general communication of ideas is possible, that is, through writing”.⁴⁵ But, having made a distinction (somewhat analogous to the distinction between verbal and non-verbal language), according to which: “writing is either 1. By letters or characters [*Buchstaben oder Characterere*] 2. By real characters or figures and symbols [*Realcharactere oder Figuren und Symbolen*]”,⁴⁶ he excludes that real characters can immediately denote things and notions.⁴⁷ He acknowledges that the Chinese script, “as some claim, is a script for things, because it always designates things directly. Therefore, their writing is used by their neighbors who do not understand a word of Chinese”.⁴⁸ He is also perfectly aware that the peculiarity of the signs of Chinese writing is that they “do not signify tones, but the things themselves [...] Those in Coghin-China and Tunquin understand well the Chinese writing but not their language”.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, his only comment is that this script is very difficult and only the “true literates” can learn it.⁵⁰

41. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1417.

42. Bacon 1623, in Bacon 1861: vol. II, I, Liber VI, p. 411.

43. KrV, Bii.

44. Leibniz, *Nouveaux Essais sur l'entendement humain*, II, ix, 10, in Leibniz 1875–90: vol. V, p. 25.

45. V-Anth/Collins, AA 25: 53.

46. V-Anth/Busolt, AA 25: 1474.

47. Kant examines various kinds of writing using real characters, figures and symbols, cf. Capozzi forthcoming.

48. V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1025.

49. V-PG, AA 26: 204.

50. V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1025.

Accordingly, he declares the superiority of alphabetic writing consisting of “characters (letters, which are signs for sounds)”.⁵¹ He attributes the invention of this writing – which “must have been invented very late”⁵² – to the genius of the person who first realized that “the whole language can be resolved itself into a few tones”.⁵³ Indeed, his appreciation of alphabetic writing is so high that he expresses the wish for a complete alphabet:

A language that has only 24 letters is indeed poor. The French have many nasal tones that we do not have, e.g., *comment*: there are also guttural tones: and it would be a pleasing thing to collect all the letters that one encounters in all languages, and thereby make a complete alphabet.⁵⁴

In conclusion, despite the suggestions of philosophers he admired, Kant does not intend to change his phonetic conception of language, so central to his philosophy.⁵⁵ He thus accepts the plurality of languages as a fact, and believes that the problem of understanding foreign languages can be solved by simply learning and translating them, since the possibility of translation is somehow guaranteed by his assumption – which I have quoted at the beginning of this paper – of the existence of a common sense as the necessary condition for the universal communicability of our cognition.

5. LEARNING AND TRANSLATING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Given this conception, it is no wonder that Kant promotes the study of foreign languages, including the languages of minorities, since he believes that all languages acquaint us with the history of nations and reveal the character of peoples.⁵⁶ Therefore, he encourages an education:

in which languages are acquired early and in an easy way, and so that [students] are not plagued for long [with learning] by the grammatical method [...] by the twelfth year of age a child can have learned languages in such a way, that it can speak them as well as its mother tongue. The Basedow Philanthropin is an example of this [manner of instruction].⁵⁷

51. Anth, §39, AA 7: 192.

52. V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1025.

53. *Ibidem*. Lambert 1764: *Alethiologie* §149, remarks that, thanks to the inventor of the alphabet, “we do not represent now things directly, but the sound of words and therefore we can write also the language of those peoples that have no writing as soon as we hear them speak. How this discovery facilitates learning a language is evident to everyone”.

54. V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1025.

55. The lack of a connection of words, as articulate sounds, with shapes and images is very important for Kant’s philosophy because it makes the schematism of empirical and pure sensible concepts indispensable. At the same time, this lack of connection is relevant to his doctrine of philosophical acroamatic proofs, which establish the necessary conditions for empirical and pure sensible concepts to belong to the entirety of all possible experience; cf. Capozzi 2021: 109-111.

56. Cf. Kant, *Nachschrift* to Mielcke 1800, AA 8: 445.

57. V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 724-725.

Anyone who has learned and speaks a foreign language actually translates it. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask how the process of translation relates to Kant's conception of verbal language. To answer this question, I quote his remark:

One can soon understand a book in a foreign language, and say what it means in our native language. But we will not be able to translate something from our native language into a foreign language so easily.⁵⁸

Kant offers a first explanation of this state of affairs:

The foreign word, which is a certain arbitrary sign, is not as closely connected with the concept of the thing as the thing is with the word to which I have become accustomed in my native language.⁵⁹

Therefore, the difficulty we encounter in translating a foreign word into our language is due to an association between word and thing that is more indeterminate in the foreign language than in ours. But Kant also provides a more detailed explanation of how and why this happens:

If we have to translate from a foreign language into the native language, then we go 1. from the word to the thing, 2. from this to the native language (but this is the way we have learned the latter, namely from things to words). On the contrary, if we want to find the foreign word from a word in the native language, this has two items: the word and the thing connected at the same time.⁶⁰

This text explains that to translate a foreign word we have to look for the corresponding thing and, when we have found it, we have to connect this thing to the word to which it is associated in our language, since “in the unknown language the words give things and then thereby the native language”.⁶¹ The last part of this process is easy because “it is easier to remember the expressions of the native language”,⁶² given that we are familiar (we have a habit) with the association of that thing with a word. But when we translate a word of our language into a foreign one, we do not simply have to translate that word in isolation: we have to translate that word *together* with its established association with a certain thing (or rather with the concept of that thing). This means that what we have to connect with a foreign word is actually a *thing*, and this is difficult, as declared by the following passage:

if I have the thing, I cannot so easily remember a foreign word because 100 words could have been connected with one thing, thus I can easily find the words for the things in my native language, but not so easily translate into a foreign language, because I should immediately get from the thing to another word, and this is difficult.⁶³

58. V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1024.

59. *Ibidem*.

60. Refl 374, AA 15: 148 (1769-1778).

61. Refl 373, AA 15: 147 (1776-1771).

62. *Ibidem*.

63. V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1024.

What Kant says about the differences in translating to and from the native language answers our question: the process of translation is related with, and confirms, his thesis that words are arbitrary sounds associated with concepts by convention, whether the words belong to our native language or to a foreign one, since it is only a different competence and a different memory of the association that differentiates them.

6. TRANSLATING FOREIGN WORKS

If learning and translating foreign languages is important, translating and publishing foreign works is even more important. The merits of these translations are cultural, as Humboldt will write in 1816 in the introduction to his translation of *Agamemnon*:

translation, especially poetic translation, is one of the most necessary tasks of any literature, partly because it directs those who do not know another language to forms of art and human experience that would otherwise have remained totally unknown, but above all because it increases the expressivity and depth of meaning of one's own language.⁶⁴

In addition to the merit of spreading knowledge among those who cannot read the original texts, Humboldt credits translations with improving the ability of the translator's language to express thoughts. Leibniz too – in a treatise known to the second generation of Wolffians also thanks to Gottsched –⁶⁵ had considered the translation of good books from other languages “the true test of a language's superfluity or deficiency [...] for that shows what is lacking and what is available”,⁶⁶ so that the activity of translating is one of the means to improve a language.

On his part, Kant claims that translations have enriched the German language, in particular the translations from Latin by missionaries, as reported by one of his students:

German is similar to Greek in this respect. It has many apt expressions. If one word does not fit, then another does, and one always expresses more than the other. One does not find this at all with French. Professor Kant attributes this to the spread of religion in Germany: the missionaries had no proper words to express their thoughts and concepts, thus they invented new ones which are closely related to Latin, because they knew that, e.g., simple [*einfaltig*] means literally that which has one fold, in Latin simple [*simplex*], which comes from single [*simplus*] and fold [*plica*]; in this way our language is much enriched.⁶⁷

These translations were valuable “because these missionaries, all improvers of the German language, wanted to enlighten the intellect of the Germans, had to speak little with tropes”,⁶⁸ and chose to coin new words. Kant points out that their choice was particularly important because it produced numerous synonyms. It should be noted that Kant denies the existence of authentic synonyms:

64. Humboldt 1816, translation in Schulte and Biguenet 1992: 56. Cf. Gasser 2003: 15-16.

65. Cf. Gottsched 1732: 369-411; cf. Buchenau 2013: 66.

66. Leibniz 1696-1697: 344, translated in Robinson 2014: 344.

67. V-Met/Mron, AA 29: 758.

68. V-Lo/Busolt, AA 24: 686.

actually there are no synonyms in any language. For when words were invented one certainly wanted to signify with each of them a particular concept, which one will always find on more exact investigation of the word.⁶⁹

Nonetheless, “the quantity of synonyms” – or it would be better to call them ‘so-called synonyms’ – “is always a proof of the richness of the language. For, one can use the synonyms to determine the different degrees of precision in the object”.⁷⁰ Almost synonymous expressions favor a more precise exposition by avoiding using the same term for different concepts.

Kant’s appreciation for the missionaries, who preferred to coin new words rather than resort to tropes in their translations, is also an indication of his preference for literal translations. This preference is clear when he comments a case of translation of proverbs. He does not have a high opinion of proverbs: “speaking through proverbs is [...] the language of the rabble, and shows a complete lack of wit in social intercourse with the refined world”.⁷¹ Nevertheless, he also says:

It would be desirable that someone would make the effort of researching proverbs in the German language and that this would also happen with other nations; since from this [research] what is characteristic of each nation would be clarified.⁷²

Consistently with this view, Kant complains that the translation of “the proverbs in Don Quixotte”, which he considers “the best and funniest things in the book”, had not been literal since these proverbs had been rendered “with German proverbs; but it would have been better to translate the Spanish ones to know the peculiarity of the way of thinking of the Spanish nation”.⁷³

7. WHAT CANNOT BE TRANSLATED

Not everything can be translated. An interesting case of untranslatability emerges in the context of Kant’s theory of poetry. Since poetry “is nothing other than a clothing of thoughts in images”,⁷⁴ a translator of poetry has to use words of his own language but must preserve the original images in the translation:

The pictorial images of the poets of things [*Die mahlerische Bilder der Poeten von Dingen*], e.g., of envy, the serenity of the air, the beauty of a cheerful summer day can represent the tranquillity of the mind. If one wants to express the tranquillity

69. V-Lo/Dohna, AA 24: 783.

70. V-Lo/Busolt, AA 24: 685-686.

71. Anth, §55, AA 7: 222.

72. V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 968.

73. *Ibidem*. The Academy editors of Kant’s lectures on anthropology (AA 25: 968, footnote) make the hypothesis that this criticism could refer to the Bertuch’s translation of *Don Quixote*, cf. Cervantes 1775-1777. If this were the case, Kant’s criticism is well founded. Recent literature has highlighted many places in Bertuch’s translation in which the German rendition is, to say the least, very far from literal, cf. Beutell Gardner 2015: 32-33.

74. Log, AA 9: 28.

of the mind in another language, one has to use another word, but the image of it can remain the same in a foreign language.⁷⁵

On these bases, Kant criticizes Klopstock. If true poetry moves with its images, then:

Klopstock is not a poet of the proper kind, he only assumes the position of someone who is touched, I do not see the thing, but one who is touched, and I am also touched *per sympathie*. Otherwise, the images would at least have to move if I take away the words, but that does not happen.⁷⁶

In this respect, Klopstock compares unfavorably with Milton. For, unlike Milton who arouses admiration “through the depiction of objects”,⁷⁷ Klopstock “moves us [...] just as someone who weeps also makes us weep”,⁷⁸ and – Kant regrets – “this has not been seen by those who compare Klopstock with Milton”.⁷⁹

In a revealing passage Kant corroborates his negative opinion on Klopstock’s poetry by claiming that it is impossible to translate it into another language:

We must not judge beauty according to charm, [and] especially not according to emotions. For they mislead very much. Poems that surely are emotional do not have true beauty. Klopstock is like this. His writings therefore cannot be translated into any other language.⁸⁰

In sum, since if there is no image there is no authentic poetry, and if the purely ‘emotional’ aspect of non-authentic poetry cannot be translated, then to be translatable becomes a test for being authentic poetry. Kant is convinced that only true beauty is preserved in translation: “if writings lose almost everything in translation, it was a contingent suggestion of the phantasy attached to national expressions, but not an independent beauty”.⁸¹

Another case that escapes translation is that of foreign words that express the peculiar character of a people:

The French language has words that cannot be expressed in German at all; this is because they express attributes of their character, for example, *frivolité* (a scholar’s inclination to represent the small as great and the great as small, and thus [to make] a satire, if one cannot manage to poke fun at it. In similar fashion, the word *conduite*, a good way of living.⁸²

In cases like these the foreign words should be left untranslated.

75. V-Anth/Collins, AA 25: 126.

76. V-Anth/Collins, AA 25: 132. Vorländer 1924: III.1, Kap, 5.1, highlights the similarities between Kant’s and Lessing’s views on Klopstock.

77. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1282.

78. V-Anth/Collins, AA 25: 97.

79. V-Anth/Parow, AA 25: 323. According to Budick 2010: 98, Kant criticizes “Herder’s reductive conflation of Klopstock’s poetry with Milton’s”.

80. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1332.

81. Refl 917, AA 15: 401 (1776-1778).

82. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1399; cf. also Anth, AA 7: 314.

8. ADOPTING FOREIGN WORDS WITHOUT TRANSLATION

Granted that we have to leave some foreign words untranslated, it would still be possible to adopt some foreign words directly into our language. Kant has an articulate position about this possibility. In some cases, he considers the adoption of foreign words ridiculous:

in a solemn speech, a foreign word sounds most ridiculous in the German language. A priest once said at the conclusion of his sermon: “If you do this you will become like this, you will promote your own well-being, and I will be much *obliged*”.⁸³

In some cases, Kant acknowledges that we prefer to use a foreign expression, but this happens because “we take pleasure in letting our mind wander about in obscurity”, since “every obscurity which is suddenly clarified, provides amenity and delights much”.⁸⁴ We may doubt whether there is any obscurity if the person we address with a foreign expression understands it as well as an expression of his own language. Kant’s answer to this doubt confirms what we have seen regarding the process of translating from a foreign language: “the foreign expression must still first be translated in the mind” of our listener, since “only then does the concept come to mind”.⁸⁵ This mental translation creates a “detour”, and “through this detour [...] the concept is weakened, just like a beam of light through repeated refraction”.⁸⁶ As a result, some of the sought-after obscurity remains, along with the pleasure of unveiling it, which finally explains why “we like the foreign expression better; for example, to use *Cour* for ‘courting’”.⁸⁷ The counter-proof of this explanation is that “if the foreign expression is used altogether too often, and is adopted just the same as one’s own, then it loses the veil it initially had”.⁸⁸

It is clear that Kant does allow the adoption of those foreign expressions that do not have to undergo a process of mental translation, and therefore have the same status of the expressions of our native language. However, he poses a condition: it must be possible to easily identify their origin. This condition is met in German, a language that is “very pure and every mixing from foreign languages is immediately noticeable, e.g. *Genie*, from *ingenium* or *genius*”, while “the French take, e.g., a Latin word, add a French ending, it immediately sounds completely French”.⁸⁹ Out of prudence, Kant advises that even in German, where this does not happen, the effort should be made “to use foreign words in parentheses”.⁹⁰

83. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1411.

84. V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 480-481.

85. V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 481.

86. *Ibidem*.

87. *Ibidem*.

88. *Ibidem*.

89. V-Anth/Mron, 25: 1411.

90. Refl 5108, AA 18: 90 (1776-1778).

9. THE ROLE OF TRANSLATIONS IN THE SPECIAL STATUS OF THE GERMAN LANGUAGE

From what we have seen so far, Kant's emphasis on the excellence of the German language is undeniable. This is confirmed when he compares it with foreign languages, for example:

The sentiment for honor is in the Frenchman vanity, in the Spaniard haughtiness, in the Englishman pride, in the German pomp, and in the Dutchman conceitedness. At first glance these expressions seem to mean the same thing, but in the richness of our German language they mark very noticeable differences.⁹¹

But what, according to Kant, makes German a special language are the following features.

German is particularly suitable for philosophy thanks to its rich vocabulary: "Wealth of ideas through the wealth of languages".⁹² Having such a great wealth of words is beneficial to philosophical terminology and makes German a privileged language for philosophy. As already mentioned, a notable component of this linguistic wealth are synonyms: "The German language is very rich in synonyms; it is therefore more suited for philosophy than French, for the latter has many words with multiple meanings".⁹³ Furthermore – Kant claims – the German language could become the common means of communication among European countries. This claim is especially noteworthy because for long time it was claimed that French was "the language that would translate all other idioms, and perhaps, in due course, replace them".⁹⁴ The first generation of the German Enlightenment had already reacted to this claim. Christian Thomasius commented: "if our ancestors the old Germans were to rise and come to Germany, they would not think that they were in their country and with their compatriots".⁹⁵ At the same time, Thomasius advised the Germans "to learn from the French self-respect and pride in their own language and traditions".⁹⁶

Kant knows that the Frenchman "thinks that his language is the best and believes that everyone has to learn it".⁹⁷ But not only does he seem to adhere to Thomasius' exhortation to respect one's own language, he also feels entitled to overturn the perspective in favor of German and, what is most interesting, he does so by appealing to the vast amount of translations made by the Germans: "The Germans translate everything, and one could advise other nations to learn German, for then they could dispense with all the other languages".⁹⁸ Kant supports this privilege by arguing:

We have this advantage over other peoples. We can certainly accept the lightness of the French, the substance from the English, but not the manner; we have our

91. GSE, AA 2: 249; cf. V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 563-564.

92. Refl 3403, AA 16: 816 (1752-1756).

93. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1411.

94. Keohane 2018: 63.

95. Thomasius 1701: 3.

96. Barnard 1965: 432.

97. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1402.

98. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1409.

own. We have to clean, expand, determine, but not change the language. It is the language of interpretation throughout Europe. Germany is in the middle.⁹⁹

An echo of these words seems to resonate when, in 1827, Goethe wrote to Carlyle: “Whoever understands and studies German finds himself in the market, where all nations offer their wares; he plays the interpreter, while enriching himself”.¹⁰⁰

10. THE POLITICAL MERITS OF TRANSLATIONS AND THE GERMAN LANGUAGE

I suggest that what Kant says about translation has also a political outcome. This suggestion comes from the following Kantian *Reflexion* that deals with cosmopolitanism and patriotism as a response to national pride and national hatred:

national pride and national hatred are necessary for the separation of nations. Therefore, either through religion [...] or through the conceit of the understanding [...] or through bravery [...] or through freedom, that all others are slaves, a people loves its country before others. Governments like to see this delusion [*Wahn*] [...] On the other hand, reason gives us the law that, because instincts are blind, they do direct animality [*Thierheit*] towards us, but they must be replaced by maxims of reason. For this reason, this national delusion [*Nationalwahn*] has to be eradicated, patriotism and cosmopolitanism must replace it.¹⁰¹

Thanks to an analysis based primarily on politics and morality, Kleingeld has convincingly argued that, although patriotism and cosmopolitanism – necessary to counteract national pride and national hatred – may seem incompatible, Kant defends them both.¹⁰²

In my opinion, it is possible to add a significant element to this analysis. To this end, it is important to emphasize that Kant considers language differences a cause of national hatred: “One already has biased attitudes towards a nation that has the same language. Prussian, Livonians. Likewise the total diversity of languages causes national hatred”.¹⁰³ Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that Kant includes language differences among the causes that hinder the compatibility of cosmopolitanism and patriotism: “the human species is divided into so many different peoples by languages, religions and customs and by each of them its patriotism is kept out of a cosmopolitan cast of mind”.¹⁰⁴

Predictably, the removal of this obstacle is entrusted by Kant to the study and the translations of foreign languages and texts, something in which the Germans excel since, as we know, he praises their polyglotism – a property usually attributed to the

99. Refl 853, AA 15: 377 (1776-1778).

100. J.W. Goethe’s letter to T. Carlyle (July 20 1827), in Norton 1887: 25-26.

101. Refl 1353, AA 15: 590-591 (1772-1778).

102. Kleingeld 2003.

103. Kant, *Bemerkungen zu den Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, AA 20: 147, translated in Kant 2011: 165.

104. Refl 1451, AA 15: 634 (1776-1778).

Germans in the 18th century –¹⁰⁵ as well as their vast production of translations: “The German [...] learns all languages and translates from all. Every stranger is at home with him. It is the country of world citizens”.¹⁰⁶ Polyglotism and translations promote cosmopolitanism because they are the sign, and the effect of a lack of national pride, and therefore also of national hatred:

In his dealings with others, the German’s character is modesty. More than any other people, he learns foreign languages, he is [...] a wholesale dealer in learning [...] he has no national pride, and is also too cosmopolitan to be deeply attached to his homeland.¹⁰⁷

The Germans’ lack of national pride is such a good quality that – Kant claims – must be preserved: “The Germans have no national pride. Some writers now want to encourage national pride, but that [lack] is a good quality that one should not get rid of”.¹⁰⁸

Now, precisely because they have nothing in common with a nationalistic cast of mind, polyglotism and translations favor not only cosmopolitanism but also patriotism. The Germans’ passion for translations has had a patriotic outcome because it has benefited the language of their homeland, but ‘patriotic’ does not mean ‘nationalistic’ since – as synthetically stated within a Kantian note devoted to their characteristics – the Germans translate because they are “admirer of other peoples. Translators [*Bewunderer anderer Völker. Übersetzer*]”.¹⁰⁹ It is interesting to note that something similar, regarding the passion for translation as proof of the cosmopolitanism inherent in being German, and as a means that Germans were able to use for their own improvement, can be found in what Novalis wrote to A.W. Schlegel in 1797:

Apart from the Romans, we are the only nation that has felt the urge to translate so irresistibly and owes it so much education [...] This urge is an indication of the very high, original character of the German people. Germanness is cosmopolitanism [*Deutschheit ist Kosmopolitismus*] mixed with the strongest individuality. Only for us translations have been extensions.¹¹⁰

As for Kant, we can conclude that cosmopolitanism and patriotism, insofar as they are the result of polyglotism and multiple translations of the Germans, are free from any connection with national pride and hatred. They therefore contribute to eradicating the national delusion condemned by Kant and are – from the ‘linguistic’ point of view that I have tried to highlight – perfectly compatible.

105. Cf. Fauser 1991: 109-114.

106. Refl 1352, AA 15: 590 (1772-1778).

107. Anth, AA 7: 318.

108. V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1409.

109. Refl 1497, AA 15: 772 (1775-77).

110. Novalis’ letter to A.W. Schlegel (November 30 1797), in Raich 1880: 41.

11. TRANSLATIONS INTO LATIN: AN EXCEPTION

For Kant Latin is a special language for many reasons. It is his second language: “by the time Emanuel was ready to leave school, he spoke and read Latin very well”.¹¹¹ Latin is also special because it is the language of some of Kant’s works, because he employs it in his German works and in his teaching activity,¹¹² and because he relies on Latin to clarify important concepts, as proved by the Latin *verisimilitudo* and *probabilitas* used to explain the differences in meaning of *Scheinbarkeit* and *Wahrscheinlichkeit*.¹¹³ Sometimes Latin is indispensable, e.g., in logic where, as many German authors, Kant has to use it to differentiate negative and infinite judgements: “In negative judgments the negation always affects the copula; in infinite ones it is not the copula but rather the predicate that is affected, which may best be expressed in Latin”.¹¹⁴ Finally, Latin is the language that he insists on knowing and preserving,¹¹⁵ because we need a model of taste for the arts of discourse, and such a model can only be a language which is dead, “in order not to have to suffer the alterations that unavoidably affect living languages”, and is also learned, “so that it should have a grammar that is not subject to any willful change of fashion but has its own unalterable rules”.¹¹⁶

If Latin is a special language in all these respects, it is also special in that it constitutes an exception to a main point of what Kant says about translation into another language.

We have seen Kant say that translating into another language is more difficult than translating from another language into ours because it is more difficult to find the right foreign word, but what happens if in the language into which we translate we do not find a word corresponding to a word of our language? Could we behave as we do when, translating from another language, we do not find an adequate term in ours, and so we create a new one? What would happen if the language we translate into was Latin?

Kant is aware that the Latin lexicon may not be able to meet all the needs of a translation from another language, in particular from German. I just need mention his disappointment when he observes that Latin does not allow us to distinguish those

111. Kuehn 2001: 59.

112. Kant adopted texts written in Latin for some of his lectures, and used Latin often in his lectures and always in his *repetitoria*, cf. Capozzi 2002: 95.

113. Cf. Capozzi 2020.

114. Log, AA 9: 104. Cf. Capozzi 2018: 17.

115. Kant reports the opinion that the study of Latin would be no longer needed since ancient texts could be read in the many translations available at the time, cf. V-Anth/Collins, AA 25: 191: “The French are currently contributing a lot to the decline in taste, because they are translating all Latin and Greek books into French. When the *Corpus Iuris* was last translated into their language, someone said that now no one will learn Latin anymore”.

116. KU, §17, AA 5: 232 note. In Refl 1524, AA 15: 899 (1780-1789), Kant points out another advantage of knowing Latin: it avoids entrusting the translation of sacred texts to “others who understand the language of the sacred documents”, and who “tell us what we should believe”, with the consequence that our natural conscience “is directed according to the sentence of scholars, and morals and virtue are replaced by observances”.

who believe or do not believe in matters of rational belief from those who believe or not believe in historical matters. For, he points out that Latin has the term “*credulus*” corresponding to the German “*gläubisch*” that, together with its opposite “*ungläubisch*”, refers to “historical belief”.¹¹⁷ But he regrets that Latin has no term to translate “*gläubig*”,¹¹⁸ and its opposite “*ungläubig*”, that refer to rational belief.¹¹⁹ Kant denounces a similar case when he writes that the Latin *bonum* and *malum* “contain an ambiguity owing to the poverty of the language”,¹²⁰ whereas there are suitable expressions in German: “for *bonum* it has *das Gute* and *das Wohl*, for *malum* it has *das Böse* and *das Übel* (or *Weh*)”.¹²¹

This being the case, one might imagine that Kant would advise against a Latin translation of his German works, so rich in conceptual and terminological innovations. But Kant wanted a translation of his main work, and he wanted it to be in Latin, since he states that some topics of philosophical speculation require scholastic precision and a scholastic language [*Schulsprache*],¹²² and Latin was still the language universally known by the scholars of his time, regardless of their native languages. Thus, in 1786 he approved F. G. Born’s project for a Latin translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*,¹²³ and in 1792, due to the delay in the publication of that translation,¹²⁴ he promptly accepted another proposal by R. G. Rath to translate the same work.¹²⁵

Rather surprisingly, we have no evidence that Kant was concerned that the Latin translation of the *Critique* might encounter lexical difficulties. All we have evidence of is his recommendation to C. G. Schütz, in a letter of 1787, to revise the translation that Born was about to make, so as “to make sure that the style, which might aim too much at elegance, be more or less Scholastic if not quite Old Latin in its precision and correctness”.¹²⁶ In his letter to Rath of 1792 Kant declares to be certain that Rath will not care too much about Latin elegance and, above all, that he would “not render the

117. Kant 1998a (Logik Bauch), Rand Text 109, ms. 93, p. 254; cf. also V-Lo/Dohna, AA 24: 734.

118. Cf. V-Lo/Dohna, AA 24: 734: for *gläubig* “we actually have no Latin word”.

119. Cf. V-Lo/Dohna, AA 24:750: “In Latin there is no word for” *ungläubig*; cf. Kant 1998b (Logik Hechsel), ms. 61, p. 383.

120. KpV, AA 5: 59.

121. KpV, AA 5: 60.

122. Cf. MS AA 6: 206; cf. Capozzi 2011: 337.

123. Cf. F.G. Born to Kant (May 7 1786), Br, AA 10: 443-444.

124. Born completed his translation many years after proposing his project, cf. Kant 1796.

125. Cf. R.G. Rath’s letter to Kant (September 8 1792), Br, AA 11: 366, and Kant’s letter to Rath (October 16 1792), Br, AA 11: 374-375.

126. Kant’s letter to C.G. Schütz (June 25 1787), Br, AA 10: 490; Kant’s recommendation to Schütz was probably due to the fact that Born, as he wrote to Kant (May 7 1786), Br, AA 10: 444, was thinking of a translation into “old classical Latin”. It is interesting to note that in KrV, A345/B 403, footnote, Kant had apologized for the numerous occurrences of Latin expressions in the German text of the *Critique*, but had justified their use because, while admitting that they did not favor elegance, he believed that they promoted intelligibility.

work not unintelligible with Germanisms, the way Germans often do”.¹²⁷ These letters are very clear. When he writes to Schütz, Kant asks him to replace the elegant classic old Latin with a ‘less elegant’ scholastic one, but he does not ask him to introduce new Latin words, in case Latin lacked words capable of translating German terms. When he writes to Rath, he is even more explicit as he makes it clear that he wants to exclude German-sounding neologisms.

This is undoubtedly a (silent) exception to the Kantian thesis according to which the exercise of translation is a privileged way to improve and expand a language. This thesis can be applied to living languages, both if the translation from another language favors the introduction of neologisms into one’s own language, and if the translation into another language favors the introduction of neologisms in the latter. As regards Latin, this thesis certainly applies to translations from Latin, which are capable – have historically been capable, as Kant reports – of enriching the German language with neologisms. But this thesis does not apply to the translation into Latin, even if Kant does not say so explicitly, or prefers not to say so explicitly. It is therefore not surprising that Born, in translating the *Critique of Practical Reason*, did not attempt to give Latin equivalents of the German terms contained in the above-quoted passage concerning the ambiguity of *bonum* and *malum*, but left them untranslated.¹²⁸ He did so not because those terms are connected to some peculiarity of the German character, as *frivolité* is connected to the French character, but because if adequate terms are not found in Latin, new ones cannot be invented. Latin is special inasmuch as it is a learned and dead language, and a translation cannot change or enrich it.

12. A LAST WORD ON TRANSLATORS

I have tried to give an overall picture of what Kant says about translation, but it seems appropriate to conclude by briefly paying due attention to the way in which he considers those who carry out the work of translation: the translators.

In 1785 Kant condemned unauthorized reprints of books.¹²⁹ This condemnation is based on his definition of ‘book’ as “a *discourse* to the public; that is, the author *speaks* publicly through the publisher”,¹³⁰ a silent discourse “by visible linguistic signs”,¹³¹ which no one can deliver apart from the author, with the intermediation of his publisher.

However, he admits that if someone “alters another’s book (abridges it, adds to it, or revises it)”, so that it would be wrong “to pass it off any longer in the name of the author of the original” because there is “another author”, and “his publisher [...] does not represent the first author as speaking through him, but another one”.¹³² What is most interesting is that Kant adds: “translation into a foreign language cannot be taken

127. Kant’s letter to R.G. Rath (October 16 1792), Br, AA 11: 375.

128. Kant 1797: 53-54.

129. VUB, AA 8: 79-87.

130. MS, AA 6: 289.

131. *Ibidem*.

132. VUB (May 1785), AA 8: 86-87.

as unauthorized publication; for it is not the same speech of the author, even though the thoughts might be precisely the same”.¹³³ This is an important acknowledgement of the work done by translators, but what deserves our attention is that it does not depend on the value that Kant attributes to the cultural and even political role of translations but, once again, to the determinant role of language. Since the original authorship is inseparably connected to the language in which the book was written, and since the translation contains a discourse to the public in a language other than the original, Kant recognizes the legal and economic rights of its publisher,¹³⁴ but only to the extent that he ascribes a linguistic originality to the translator.

ABBREVIATIONS

Citations of Kant’s writings are from *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften* (1900-), edited by the Royal Prussian, subsequently German, then Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences. This edition is cited as AA (*Akademie Ausgabe*) followed by Arabic numerals to indicate volume and page. Citations from the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* are made according to the original pagination of the first two editions of 1781 and 1787, as A/B.

Abbreviations of Kant’s texts follow those adopted by *Kant-Studien*:

- Anth = *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*
- Br = *Briefe* (AA 10–13)
- GSE = *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*
- KpV = *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*
- KrV = *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*
- KU = *Kritik der Urteilskraft*
- Log = *Logik*
- MS = *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*
- OP = *Opus Postumum*
- Refl = *Reflexion*
- V-Anth/Busolt = *Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1788/1789 Busolt*
- V-Anth/Collins = *Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1772/1773 Collins*
- V-Anth/Fried = *Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1775/1776 Friedländer*
- V-Anth/Mensch = *Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1781/1782 Menschenkunde, Petersburg*
- V-Anth/Mron = *Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1784/1785 Mron*
- V-Anth/Parow = *Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1772/1773 Parow*
- V-Lo/Busolt = *Logik Busolt*
- V-Lo/Dohna = *Logik Dohna-Wundlacken*
- V-Lo/Pölitz = *Logik Pölitz*
- V-Lo/Wiener = *Wiener Logik*
- V-Met/Mron = *Metaphysik Mron*
- V-PG = *Vorlesungen über Physische Geographie*
- VUB = *Von der Unrechtmäßigkeit des Büchernachdrucks*

133. *Ibidem*.

134. This means that the publisher of the translation does not commit “the crime of stealing profits from the publisher appointed by the author” that Kant denounced in MS, AA 6: 289. Cf. Hohenegger 2020: 365-366.

TRANSLATIONS

When available, English translations of Kant's texts are from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992-ff., which all bear the indication of AA pagination in the margin. I am responsible for the translations from: RefI; V-Anth/Busolt; V-Anth/Collins; V-Anth/Mensch; V-Anth/Parow; V-Lo/Busolt; V-Lo/Pölitz; V-PG. The translations of other authors quoted in the text, unless otherwise stated, are also mine.

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