

DICTIONARY OF UNTRANSLATABLES: A PHILOSOPHICAL LEXICON
EDITED BY BARBARA CASSIN

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To get the obvious out of the way: this new version of the collective work edited by Barbara Cassin, originally published in French in 2004, and now revised and translated into English under the supervision of Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood, is a monumental achievement and a book whose not inconsiderable heft should be immediately craned to the shelves of all comparatists, philosophers and translation theorists. It is also an atypical work, placed somewhere in between philosophical lexicon, history of philosophy, treatise on translation and a more traditional dictionary. As the editors put it in their introduction by way of justifying the use of the term “dictionary”, this is, at bottom, “an alphabetical list of words with information about them” (viii). Information is indeed plentiful here: while absolute comprehensiveness is not of this world, at 1,5 million words this dictionary at least lays a claim to becoming the foundation of all future works in this vein. The book consists of a number of essays on a number of philosophical terms and concepts (more on this distinction later) that, for a variety of reasons, resist translation out of the language in which they were originally conceived; a number of signposts encourage the reader to move from one word to another two or three, and thus to create their own “story”. One may recall the 18th-century *Encyclopédie*, another comprehensive work that featured a great number of cross-references in an attempt to both categorise and show the difficulty of categorising. There are also essays on languages, which purport to offer generalisations about what philosophising in, say, German rather than Portuguese entails.

The essays in this book are very dense and information-heavy, and as one may suspect do not make for light reading. For those interested in the history, philosophical pedigree and semantic nuances of particular concepts, however, many of them will be an indispensable reference. It is of course impossible to do justice to the scope of such an enormously ambitious and heterogeneous book in the space of a review: as a brief synecdochical pointer, readers will learn about the navigational etymology of “desire”, they will be able to ponder over the imposing history of “logos”, including twenty-two competing definitions by Greek grammarians, and generally learn much both about the heavyweights of Western philosophy (“subject”, “object”, “essence”...) and about the vagaries of less technical concepts which present difficulties for the translator (“mir”, “saudade”, “sprezzatura”...). As for the essays on languages, there is a very interesting discussion of the philosophical implications of the distinction in Spanish between two senses of the word “to be” (“ser” and “estar”; to grasp the distinction is already a philosophical education of sorts for language learners). The essay on “Syntax and Semantics in Modern Philosophical German: Hegel and Kant” is highly demanding but illuminating for those armed with patience. The essay on “Italian” is much less rewarding and in fact it is hard to see what purpose it serves in this context: it consists of a series of very wide generalisations on the practice of Italian philosophy (which, as the writer correctly states without following up from the principle, is nothing but philosophy written in Italian, and cannot be said to feature ideas directly dependent on the characteristics of the language), with a number of disjointed mini-essays on selected figures which read more like a whimsically partial history than an essay on translation, in a way that is obviously at odds with the dictionary’s stated aims. The entry of “gender” also leaves much to be desired, in that it lacks a clear thread, indulges in a kind of

muddled rhetoric that should probably be left out of works of reference (“The terrain on which it is decided whether a given person identifies as male or female concerns [...] the links [drives] have with scenarios of sexual climax in which the subject is in relation to figures of otherness [...]”) and does not say much about translation at all.

However, with some exceptions, probably unavoidable in a work of this scope, the execution of the book is admirable. The main difficulty I have is rather with some of the rhetorical moves involved in its presentation. What one can bring away from the book, apart from an enormous number of local observations and data, is that philosophers have struggled to render old concepts into new languages, and that in the process they have encountered a number of difficulties. But the editors do not stop at this, and move on to formulate a thesis in the philosophy of language, namely that “nothing like a smooth, mathematizable space [for concepts] exists outside the fantasy of a certain Neoplatonist” (xi). This “certain Neoplatonist” may him/herself be a fantasy, but there are signs that the editors think s/he should be equated with “Anglo-Analytic [*sic*] philosophical traditions” (*ibid.*). This characterisation may be instrumental in constructing a familiar heroic narrative wherein “we”, the small but righteous avant-garde, are courageously combating a stolidly entrenched mainstream; and yet, one may wonder how fair this is, both conceptually and institutionally. “Wittgenstein [,] Austin, Quine, or Cavell” are somewhat begrudgingly cited as “those [of them] who teach us again to question the language” (xviii); but these thinkers are not a wild bunch of mavericks within analytic philosophy: altogether, and leaving aside the differences between them, they effectively constitute a key part of the *canon* of a discipline which has been, from day one, centrally concerned with the articulations between language and thought. This characterisation of analytic philosophers as a homogeneous body (apart, perhaps, from those we know something about) of recidivist perpetrators of all the things “we” have left behind is, in short, a straw man, and I would urge that it is high time to abandon these “othering” rhetorical shortcuts and articulate the exact import of any divergences involved.

In fact, what seems to me to be the strand of thinking most obviously inimical to any project concerned with the practice of translation is precisely the sort of fetishisation of “otherness” and “difference” that insists that no such thing as a “right” translation is possible, and that any such attempt is an ideological move aimed at flattening any pre-existing variability onto a dominant model. Needless to say, this has nothing to do with analytic philosophy and everything to do with a certain strand of Continentally-inspired literary and translation theory. In her introduction Cassin does defend herself against a line of argument in this vein: to say that some terms are untranslatable, she writes, “in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating” (xvii). Should this be a little too vague for comfort, she helpfully adds that to hold that “the failure of translation is always necessary and absolute [...] rests on a mystification, on a dream of perfection we cannot even want, let alone have.” (xiv) This is unimpeachable, but Cassin does not acknowledge how deeply antipathetic such strands of translation theory are to her own task as a translator. At the bottom of any act of translation, it seems to me that there must be the conviction that something is indeed being “brought across” apart from the recognition of the impossibility of the enterprise: that is, an ideal or at any rate conveyable element, not reducible to the text as such. Whatever qualifications we may wish to add, we keep on “translating”, rather than on “not translating”.

Given the excellent job that many of the essays in this book do in laying out the difficulties without throwing their hands up in despair, this is probably only a rhetorical rather than a methodological issue, and to point it out may seem like mere quibbling; however, to my mind the idea of “(un)translatability” is *the* main theoretical conundrum on which this book hinges, and it is worth considering it seriously to get an idea both of the

scope of this book and of some of its shortcomings. To say that a concept resists translation, as Cassin rightly maintains, is not quite the same as to assert that it is untranslatable. A more plausible claim may be that there are specific difficulties in translating philosophical terms because of the very strain under which they are placed within the “language game” of philosophy. Not only are philosophical terms, like all words, attached to a welter of associations, ambiguities, puns and so on; in addition, much more so than, say, “dog”, or even “pineapple”, they carry a hefty metaphysical baggage with them. They are “words”, but they also purport to be “concepts”. Here I can only refer readers of the book to the excellent relative entries, as well as to those on “claim” and “proposition” for the epistemological difficulties involved: as a brief pointer, suffice it to say that if you and I did not agree on the definition of “dog”, dog-like creatures would still be running around; whereas if we didn’t agree on the definition of, say, “signifier”, the concept could arguably be said not to exist.

This, however, is only one of the many strands of thinking that can be pursued starting from this dictionary. Aside from the unprecedented breadth of the empirical data included, and the intrinsic interest of the new connections proposed, this book allows one to get a sense of the many ways in which philosophy and translation theory are connected. Whatever our positions on the issues involved, this work will provide virtually endless food for thought, and demand considerable stamina.