

Lexilalia: On Translating a Dictionary of Untranslatable Philosophical Terms

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Abstract:

Lexilalia, a kind of repetition disorder or form of ‘repeat-after-reading’, is contextualized in this article as a term for continual or interminable translation. Barbara Cassin has emphasized how one definition of the ‘Untranslatable’ is temporal, associated with a symptomatic condition of ‘keeping on translating’. In extending Cassin’s ‘time’ of translation to the psychic condition of translating philosophical terms and working with encyclopedic objects, the article concludes with some reflections on anxiety, concept-making and the death drive.

Keywords: lexilalia, echolalia, philosophy, untranslatable, concept, death drive

In 2006 the literary narratologist Gérard Genette published a book with the inscrutable title *Bardadrac*. It refers to a nickname coined by Genette for a handbag belonging to an early love. ‘... [A]s vast as it was shapeless,’ the bag was ‘dragged around everywhere, inside and outside, and contained too many things to allow her to find a single one. Yet the false certainty that the thing was there reassured her. The word came to be metonymically applied to the bag’s improbable contents; becoming a metaphor for all manner of disorder, fanning out to encompass the world and its cosmic surround. Like a spreading oil stain, it was extensive and comprehensive ...’¹

‘Bardadrac’ justly describes what Genette applies it to: a unique kind of dictionary or *système-objet* tending towards manifold disorder; a combination of autobiography, intellectual biography (of the heyday of poststructuralism, containing flash vignettes of his long intellectual partnerships with Barthes and Derrida), translation exercise (especially of idiomatic American expressions) and dictionary (its

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entries organized from A to Z). The book opens with a prologue situating itself in a line of dictionary-like texts that make it impossible to know what a dictionary is, including Montaigne's *Essais*, in which he writes 'J'ai un dictionnaire tout à part moi' (I have a dictionary severally and fully to myself), Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, and Barthes's *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*. 'Bardadrac' — a term for a dictionary as mixed genre as well as a metaphor for the infinitely expansive encyclopedic object — is also an exemplary Untranslatable, a word on the edge of nonsense that exhibits an intractable singularity. As such, it could well have warranted an entry in Barbara Cassin's *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (published by Seuil/Le Robert in 2004), which was described in one review as a mad, encyclopedic endeavour that 'wears its modest megalomania well' and whose 'planet is continental philosophy'.²

Taking up half a suitcase, weighing in at a million and a half words, its hard white cover cracked at the spine, my copy of the *Vocabulaire* was hauled around with me up flights of subway stairs, over rocky pathways in Corsica and Burgundy, and across airports and train stations. My work on its translation into English between 2007 and 2013, undertaken with co-editors Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood, involved reviewing the work of five translators, revising the bibliography and reorienting the entire project to an anglophone audience. The *Vocabulaire* presented us with a daunting set of challenges: how to render a work, published in French, yet layered through and through with the world's languages, into something intelligible to anglophone readers; how to communicate the book's performative aspect, its stake in what it means 'to philosophize' in translation over and beyond reviewing the history of philosophy with translation problems in mind; and how to translate the untranslatable.

The 'Untranslatable' — capitalized here not to reify the intractable properties of select concepts but to indicate a range of nouns, syntactical structures and habits of speech that pose particular translation problems — broadly indicates ways of doing philosophy. In rendering multiple and micropolitical what Félix Guattari would call (following Foucault) 'analytic singularity' (such that it no longer allows the statement to function as the 'authority of a segment of a universal logos leveling out existential contingencies'), the Untranslatable goes against the grain not only of analytic philosophy, but also of Platonism, medieval scholastic logic, Port-Royal hierarchies of grammar and the universalist language ideologies of the *encyclopédistes*.³ D'Alembert saw

the plurality of languages as an encumbrance, a stumbling block to producing a unified field theory or universalist philosophic history of the mind. Cassin explicitly shuns universalism, embracing in its place the messiness of linguistic multiplicity:

what really suits us philosophers is the plural (. . .). The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* does not pretend to offer ‘the’ perfect translation to any untranslatable, rather, it clarifies the contradictions and places them face-to-face in reflection; it is a pluralist and comparative work in its non-enclosing gesture, rather more Borgesian or Oulipian — ‘the modern form of fantasy is erudition’ Borges tells us — than destinal and Heideggerian.⁴

Cassin came to the *Vocabulaire* project less with a precise sense of what an Untranslatable is and more with a sense of how it performs. In the ensemble of her writings on the pre-Socratics and the Sophists she developed the construct to point up the instability of meaning and sense-making, the equivocity of homonymy and amphiboly, the performative dimension of discursive sophistic effects, the risks and rewards of ‘consistent relativism’.⁵ The *Vocabulaire* was conceived not as an ensemble of transhistorical concept-histories but as a dynamical system of terms that lay bare their usage and *usure*, that assimilate actually existing ways of speaking.

A subcutaneous debate runs throughout the *Vocabulaire* which positions *concepts* against *terms*. For Leibniz, the two were hardly distinguished. He defined the ‘term’ as a predicate of a proposition that is non-contradictory in much the same way as one might define a noun: ‘I call everything that exists on its own a TERM, that is, everything that can be a subject or predicate of a proposition; for example: *man*, *chimera* [. . .]. A term is either possible or impossible. But what is POSSIBLE is that which can be conceived distinctly, without contradiction.’⁶ But according to the entry TERM in the *Vocabulaire*, written by Alain de Libera (and from which this citation from Leibniz is drawn), ‘term’ refers to a kind of term-limit within the proposition and in this respect it differs from name or noun. According to de Libera: ‘In the vocabulary of the Scholastic *Organon*, the Latin expression *terminus*, “term,” designates an element of the *propositio*, the “proposition”: this is what delimits a proposition, like the endpoint of a line’ (*DU*, 1118). As the space between subject and predicate, the term performs as a copula that eludes being pinioned, as are nouns and concepts, by nominalism, conceptualism and intentionalism. ‘The history of the term “term”, writes de Libera, ‘is also a history of the

copula and thus a history of the opposition at work in the apophantic Aristotelian logos' (DU, 1118).

In his '95 Theses on Philology', Werner Hamacher speaks of 'ontology in philology' posed against the logic of propositions or *logos apophantikos*. This is the logic of sentences capable of truth. Hamacher is interested in Aristotle's other logos: the logos that does not say something about something. This other logos is identified as *euche*, with, according to Hamacher,

the plea, the prayer, the desire. Propositional language is the medium and object of ontology, as well as of all the epistemic disciplines under its direction. Meaningful but nonpropositional language is that of prayer, wish, and poetry. It knows no 'is' and no 'must' but only a 'be' and a 'would be' that withdraw themselves from every determining and determined cognition.⁷

Philology in this context does not speak for logology but for non-apophantic utterances that no longer privilege predication over the plea. *Euche* becomes the channel for '[d]eparting from the other, going out toward the other that *is* not and is not *not*, *phílein* of a speaking, addressing, affirming without likeness, unlike itself; impredicable'.⁸

If what is principally at stake in the Aristotelian theory of the concept is the contest between the predicable and the impredicable (with all the heteronomy of ontology embedded in the latter), with Kant the focus shifts to the grounding of concepts in fact-value, bringing in its train the Kant–Fichte debates over the nature of what is *factisch*, *faktum* and *Tatsache* ('matter-of-fact'). As the preferred German word for the British empiricist notion of real experience or the object whose objective validity can be proven (as in the case of geometric properties), *Tatsache* refers to events or factual data that legitimate true knowledge.⁹ Kant's concept of the concept replaces empiricist fact with intuitive ways of knowing that foreground figurability and representability. The empiricist ordering of facts thus gives way in the Kantian scheme to modes of cognitive constructability (DU, 1114).

In an essay on 'Concept' for the journal *Political Concepts*, Adi Ophir underscores that the Kantian concept was not only anti-empiricist but also anti-linguistic:

For Kant, a concept is a pattern that allows us to recognize what appears before us as-what-it-is when it appears. Kant's concepts (or Husserl's ideas) populate the mind, and have nothing in particular to do with the language through which they are acquired (...). The 'linguistic turn' has brought back the hitherto neglected

linguistic dimension of concepts, usually at the expense of giving up their special cognitive and ontological status.¹⁰

Much could be said about the myriad ways in which concepts were de-ontologized in theory's heyday, from structuralism to deconstruction, but for Ophir what is particularly significant was Deleuze and Guattari's rejection of the concept as pre-given entity. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari maintain that:

In general philosophers have preferred to think of the concept as a given knowledge or representation that can be explained by the [mental] faculties able to form it (abstraction or generalization) or employ it (judgment). (...) But the concept is not given, it is created, it is to be created.¹¹

Here the concept is moved closer to something like what Cassin would call a term; a deterritorialized, multiple mode of expressionism.

As the concept mutates into the infinitely created and creatable term, it acquires dimensions of futurity and infinitude that confirm the important role of temporality in translation. Already in 1998, in the introduction to her translation of Parmenides' poem *On Nature*, Cassin ascribed untranslatability to the interminability of translating: the idea that one can never have done with translation. Associated with the principle of infinite regress, translation's 'time' in Cassin's usage, also signals something like the limit-experience of 'after finitude' (to borrow the English rendering of Quentin Meillassoux's *Après la finitude*). In her preface to the *Vocabulaire* Cassin submits that:

To speak of untranslatables 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. But this indicates that their translation, into one language or another, creates a problem, to the extent of sometimes generating a neologism or imposing a new meaning on an old word. It is a sign of the way in which, from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed. (*DU*, xvii)

What happens when one gives oneself over to a praxis that involves relinquishing the hold of words and conceptual networks? What symptomologies emerge when we keep on (not) translating? For Cassin, the step from this point involves stepping into the labyrinth of Lacanian sophistry, a psychoanalytic doxography if you will, in which non-sense is an incontrovertible core of signifying practices that must then go to great lengths to perfect the art of the rhetorical work-around.¹² Psychoanalysis becomes a linguistic process philosophy, perpetual and presentist as a succession of moments of enunciation.



As my work on the English edition of the *Vocabulaire* neared completion, I found myself in the grip of what might be called ‘Post-Dictionary Stress Disorder’, itself a sequel to what I have referred to in this essay title as *lexilalia*, a pre-existing term for a form of repeat-after-reading Tourette’s. As a condition — and I stress *not a disability, but rather an ability* — whose symptoms involve slowly sounding out or miming words, *lexilalia* may be seen as a variety of copyist’s syndrome; the kind found in Melville’s *Bartleby*, Flaubert’s *Bouvard and Pécuchet* or the real-life figure Jules Tricot (1893–1963) who, I discovered in the course of working on the *Vocabulaire*, was a French translator of Aristotle employed as a functionary at the SNCF in the department of legal affairs, and who served the needs of exacting Aristotelians with translations that made no pretense to originality or brio but that were commended for accuracy. Copyists, like translators, are often depicted as an army of anonymous bureaucrats, consigned to the back office, rarely appreciated, and addicted to the repetitive task.

The heroic or tragic model of *lexilalian* may be identified in Flaubert himself, who repeated his words as part of the ritual of writing. He called this syndrome the *gueuloir*, a practice that involved, as he wrote to Louise Colet in 1853, shouting into the night until his throat was raw. During his early career, while engaged as Flaubert’s secretary, Guy de Maupassant would record the physical tics of these creative exertions:

Sometimes, tossing the pen which he held in his hand into a large Oriental tin plate filled with carefully sharpened goose quills, he would take up a sheet of paper, raise to the level of his gaze, and leaning on an elbow, declaim [its contents] in a loud, biting voice. He would listen to the rhythm of his prose, stop as if seizing a passing cadence, combine the tones, eliminate assonances, place the commas with exact knowledge, like the halting places on a long road.¹³

As a repetition disorder, *lexilalia* is akin to *echolalia*, associated with the pre-linguistic babble of children or, in mythology, with the destabilizing effect of Echo on Narcissus. In his book *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language*, Daniel Heller-Roazen conjectures that adult languages are always *echolalia* in so far as they retain a memory of originary babel as their aporetic precondition: ‘they would be only an echo, of another speech and of something other than speech: an echolalia, which guarded the memory of the indistinct and immemorial babble, that, in being lost, allowed all languages to be’.¹⁴ Here, we see language cast as a giant echo chamber and memory container for lost enunciations.

The memorial and mimetic operations of *echolalia* are equally as important a feature of *lexilalia*, especially when they are associated, as I am suggesting they might be, with an anxiogenic condition induced by translation on an encyclopedic scale. In so far as translation involves continuous repetition in a target language of words or expressions from a source, it has that quality of ghost speech that Genette discovered when, as a child, he listened to his mother intone Victor Hugo's 'Le revenant' (The Ghost), a poem from *Les Contemplations* about a dead child. Realizing that he himself was a placeholder for a deceased sibling, he comes to see 'reading' as a double session, or way of living for two. Unsure at times of whether he might have been dead before he was born, or whether it might be his lost brother who in fact writes in his place, Genette evolves into a theorist of secondariness in language — *le déjà dit* — as well as a defender of metalinguistic technical vocabulary. In *Bardadrac*, under the entry 'Jargon', he recounts how his dissertation director chastised him for his predilection for theory-speak — 'un "jargon technique" passablement "barbare"' — which led to the habit of rephrasing what was already stated or sayable in plain speech (B, 172). Genette defends himself by insisting that, if he had meant to say the same thing, he would not have invented a neologism. New concepts, he vigorously contends, necessitate new words. He ends the story, however, with a joke on himself. One day, confounded by a set of technical instructions translated from Korean into French, he contacts the help desk, only to be told by the assistant: 'Dear sir, as the author of *Figures III* you of all people should be able to decode the instructions for a DVD player' ('Cher monsieur, quand on a écrit *Figures III*, on doit pouvoir décoder le mode d'emploi d'un lecteur de DVD') (B, 173).

Lexilalia is not just saying it twice, or saying something simple in a more complicated way, it is about moving around the clock, compulsively, reproducing a cycle of tasks. The nervous tic motions of Tourette's are clinically identified by 'bouts of bouts'. These became familiar in my work on the *Vocabulaire* in the form of sequences characterized by intermittences: Greek, *To ti ên einai*, Arabic, *haqiqa*, Latin, *quidditas* English, *quiddity*; French, *essence*, Greek *esti*, French *être*, German, *sein*, English, *to be* Greek, *logos*, Hebrew, *davar*. Or, Greek expression into German, check; German into French, check; French into English, stop; no, doesn't work, *contresens*. Pause, search, find, reset, start over. Questing after equivalence; chasing after lexemes, building semantic chains: the rhythm was stop and go, OCD-compulsive. *Lexilalia*, according to this biorhythm, is defined by bouts,

but it also takes the form of flatlining, expressed in the drive to go ‘on and on’, willy-nilly and in all directions. Bouvard and Pécuchet serve once again as prime exemplars. Working together at a two-sided desk:

They copy haphazardly, whatever falls into their hands, all the papers and manuscripts they come across, tobacco packets, old newspapers, lost letters, believing it all to be important and worth preserving. Notes from authors previously read. They have plenty to copy, for on the outskirts of town is a bankrupt paper mill, from which they buy masses of old papers.¹⁵

We learn that, despite the ‘pleasure they feel in the physical act of copying (...) they are often at pains to catalogue a fact in its correct place, have bouts of conscience. The difficulties increase the further they advance in their work. They continue all the same’ (*BP*, 280). ‘Continuing all the same’: this approximates the state of *vorleben/nachleben* which Derrida, translating Walter Benjamin, dubbed *sur-vie*, after-life, or ‘living on’. *Lexilalia* at its most existentially perturbing (and exhilarating) refers to the vertigo of translational infinitude. Perpetual translatability (like perpetual peace) opens onto a vista or cosmically extensive *Weltanschauung*, something like the figuration of the death-drive.

In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, this death-driven *angoisse* aligned by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* with ‘the reflective apprehension of freedom by itself’, is concentrated in the word ‘viduity’, fixed on by Krapp as he listens to the recording of his younger intoning self.¹⁶ As if performing the playbook of *lexilalia*’s identifying symptoms, Krapp stops, rewinds, replays, mouths the word’s syllables, and stumbles off to retrieve a dictionary:

[*Reading from dictionary.*] State — or condition — of being — or remaining — a widow — or widower. [*Looks up. Puzzled.*] Being — or remaining? ... [*Pause. He peers again at dictionary. Reading.*] ‘Deep weeds of viduity.’ ... Also of an animal, especially a bird ... the vidua or weaver bird. ... Black plumage of male. ... [*He looks up. With relish.*] The viduabird!
[*Pause. He closes dictionary, switches on, resumes listening posture.*]¹⁷

If we take the word through the French *vide*, ‘viduity’ hatches a new concept in English, designating the space between ‘being’ and ‘remaining’ a widower, between bird and mourning, between sign and meaning, and between dictionary and referent. As Jacques-Alain Miller observes in an essay ‘Language: Much Ado about What?’: ‘Language seen as a tool of reference takes on all its meanings in the discourse of the master for the master. But (...) [i]f language were really a tool

dedicated to reference, the conclusion would be: it does not fit'.¹⁸ Miller gives us a version of language logic suited to a dictionary of Untranslatables when he conjectures further that 'what you find on every page is (...) misunderstanding, and pages and pages are written about various misunderstandings and how to resolve them' (*M*, 25). Miller makes a swerve from Lacan to Quine to underscore the point that not only is reference ambiguous, it is also and above all vacuous, a kind of primary metaphor that 'kills' the thing (or the real):

The real is what it is, but when it is represented, expressed, referred to, connected in some way or another to language, the real begins to be what it is not.

(...) Lacan says that language is not a code. A code is computed by the fixed correlation of signs to the reality they signify. In a *language*, on the contrary, the various signs — the signifiers — take on their value from their relation to one another. (...) [W]hen Lacan proposes a definition of the signifier, it is a circular definition he gives: a signifier represents a subject for another signifier. That is not a true definition, because in the definition itself, you have the word to define. This circularity is very well detailed by Quine who asks 'What is an F?' If I ask what is an F, the only answer is, 'An F is a G.' That is the structure of all answers to all questions about a word: you define a word by another one. And Quine says, the answer makes only relative sense, a sense related to the uncritical acceptance of G. That is the foundation. But if you stop here, it is the foundation of an infinite metonymy. (*M*, 30–32)

The vertigo brought on by the referential aporia of the verb 'to define' leads to a heightened consciousness of what I would call runaway, *unsafe sense*. Almost any entry chosen at random in the *Vocabulaire* exemplifies this epiphenomenon, but the entry on COMMONPLACE (*LIEU COMMUN*) is exemplary. The entry by Francis Goyet notes that, in Pierre Bayle's 1686 *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jésus-Christ*, the commonplace is 'both a *faux ami* and a true heir': 'This is what I reply to the commonplace, which has become so worn out from use by ignorant people, that the change of religion brings with it a change of government, and that therefore we have to be careful to prevent any innovation' ('C'est ce que je répons au lieu commun qui a été si rebattu par les ignorants, que le changement de religion entraîne avec lui le changement de gouvernement, et qu'ainsi il faut soigneusement empêcher que l'on n'innove'). Goyet observes:

The proximity of *lieu commun* and *rebattu* gives the impression that we are already dealing with its contemporary meaning. We are already, it is true, in generality, and even political conservatism, the very kind that Flaubert scorns so joyously

in his *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. But what the *faux ami* prevents us from seeing is that Bayle is here referring to an entire historical development. Those who are ignorant have for a long time, passionately, discussed the question which concerns, as in Cicero, the homeland in danger. The category-word is something like 'Government' or 'Dangerous Innovations', and on this subject arguments and quotations have been collected eagerly, since it is known in advance that they can be re-used. The author only gives us the substance of these long developments on a question of principle. He is the one who abbreviates it, and who gives us the false impression that the commonplace is reduced to one or two expressions, to what we nowadays understand as 'cliché.'

And yet the very possibility of such a reduction is not unfaithful. A cliché only needs to be expanded, just as the expansion itself can be abbreviated. This is not the main point, which is rather the excessive visibility that the method of commonplaces has given to the commonplace. Bayle is not reproaching the commonplace for being over-used, but for being worn out through overuse by ignorant people. What we reproach the cliché for, following Flaubert, is to be over-used, period, by intelligent as well as by ignorant people. In other words, if the commonplace in the modern sense is truly the distant heir of former meanings of the term, it is that the legacy itself has become too ponderous. *Doxa* was once near to Wisdom, and we now find it closer to Stupidity. (*DU*, 158)

At stake here is something more than just a short history of how a term accumulates unexpected meanings that diverge from their primordial usage or loses semantic richness by dint of overuse in one of its more limited ascriptions. Here, the *contresens* and the *faux ami* are sovereign agents in the unmasking of a philosophical event — the becoming-cliché, or becoming-common of exceptional power, the revelation of something like 'Homeland Insecurity'. Goyet shows that in assuming that *lieu commun* signified in the seventeenth century what it signified for Flaubert and the moderns (worn-out ideas, bourgeois homilies, platitudes), a connection to 'Government' and 'Dangerous Innovations' was lost, and, with it, a measure of the term's political force. Goyet allows that it is not wrong to see *lieu commun* as a conservative form of expression, representing the *idée reçue* at its most conventional and unthinking. But he wants to exhume the history of its violent side; its grounding in the politics of coercion, censorship, state repression and the biopolitics of danger, insecurity and auto-immunity. He re-sutures the violence of customary, unwritten or sacred laws to the commonplace much like Freud would re-suture the Polynesian word 'taboo' (and its analogues in Hebrew, Greek and Latin) to the notion of prohibition in psychoanalysis and the anthropology of the sacred. Freud reminds us (following Wundt) that

‘taboo’ functions as a premier Untranslatable referring to ‘the oldest human unwritten code of law’:

‘Taboo’ is a Polynesian word. It is difficult for us to find a translation for it, since the concept connoted by it is one which we no longer possess. It was still current among the ancient Romans whose ‘sacer’ was the same as the Polynesian ‘taboo’. So, too, the ‘äyos’ of the Greeks and the ‘kadesh’ of the Hebrews must have had the same meaning as is expressed in ‘taboo’ by the Polynesians and in analogous terms by many other races in America, Africa (Madagascar) and North and Central Asia.¹⁹

The irony, of course, is that post-Freud or post-Bataille ‘taboo’ will experience much the same fate as *lieu commun*; losing its vital connection to the unnameable power of the sacred within the law, and becoming a cliché or piece of jargon for anything whatever that is sanctioned, off-limits or repressed. The word ‘taboo’, in this context of banalized circulation, acquires the status of a *faux ami*. It is the same word, has the same vocables, but it no longer embodies the full force of bodily perclusion or the moral terrorism of the categorical imperative. The *faux ami* is a maladjusted friend, a cheater, a figure of fraudulent phratry, a friend lacking in justice, not righted, wanting in rectitude and exactitude, deficient in moral merit. It is a so-called friend who miscalculates the terms of the friendship, who behaves in an untrustworthy manner, who gets others into trouble.

In an anecdote included in *Zižek’s Jokes* the *faux ami* assumes its full identity as a *frenemy*, a Schmittian friend–enemy who entraps the translator by seducing him into hearing (treacherously) what he wants to hear. The ‘snobbish idiot’ who is the subject of the joke not only comes off as clueless and laughably the victim of his own class pretensions, he typifies what happens to the lexilalian who, unable to resist the compulsion to repeat, stumbles into the quagmire of untranslatability. We watch him sink deeper and deeper the more he tries to keep on (not) translating, to borrow Cassin’s formula:

A snobbish idiot goes to an expensive restaurant and, when asked by the waiter: ‘*Hors d’oeuvre?*’, he replies: ‘No, I am not out of work, I earn enough to be able to afford to eat here!’ The waiter then explains he means the appetizer and proposes raw ham: ‘*Du jambon cru?*’ The idiot replies: ‘No, I don’t believe it was ham I had the last time here. But OK, let’s have it now — and quickly, please!’ The waiter reassures him: ‘*J’ai hâte de vous servir!*’ to which the idiot snaps back: ‘Why should you hate to serve me? I will give you a good tip!’ And so on, till finally the idiot gets the point that his knowledge of French is limited; to repair his reputation and prove that he is a man of culture, he decides, upon his departure late in the

evening, to wish the waiter good night not in French — ‘*Bonne nuit!*’ — afraid that something might go wrong again, but in Latin: ‘*Nota bene!*’

Do most of the dialogues in philosophy not function in a similar way, especially when a philosopher endeavors to criticize another philosopher? Is not Aristotle’s critique of Plato a series of ‘*Nota bene!*’ not to mention Marx’s critique of Hegel, etc., etc.?²⁰

Žižek treats the homonym as the condition of philosophy as such. ‘*Nota bene!*’, much like ‘*Bardadrac!*’, serves as both warning and watchword to all those smug philosophers who would turn philosophical precedent on its head yet remain fundamentally clueless about what they have said or done. It also demonstrates the treacherous structure of chiasmus embedded in the homonym, which inevitably produces bad mirroring or the pitfalls of the false syllogism. *Bonne nuit* may well correlate to *nota bene* if one obeys the logic of aligned aural cues, but the semantic equation is null and void.

It is the chiasmus structure that also governs the operations of the *contresens* which, as Littré’s dictionary definition demonstrates, lends itself to high comedy almost as naturally as the *faux ami*: ‘Manière de lire, de déclamer, en désaccord avec le sens des paroles’ (A way of reading, of declaiming, at odds with the meaning of the words). The *contresens* spins out easily into the *coup de théâtre*, the deflationary let-down after the display of philosophical schtick. It literally articulates the active posture of being ‘against sense’, à *contre-pied* (off-on-the-wrong-footing, pushing into walls or the feat of *parkours*), the habit of being à *rebours* (against the grain, contrarian, in recoil). Recoil is the translation that answers best for Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship* to Aristotle’s dictum: ‘O my friend, there is no friend!’ The ‘recoil’ version of this version — often taken as the weak meaning — takes off from the Latin translation *Cui amici, amicus nemo*, and rendered in the English translation preferred by Derrida as ‘He who has friends can have no true friend.’²¹ What Derrida labels the ‘recoil manoeuvre’ is a quieter, smaller edition of the dramatic *contournement* delivered by the *faux ami cum contresens*. ‘Recoil’ is characterized as ‘craft-like and painstaking, it restrains the provocation, it adds or suppresses a coil, it counts the coils, attempting to flatten out the phrase, and above all, with this additional or withdrawn coil, it reopens the question of multiplicity the question of the one and that of the “more than one.”’ Derrida’s premier Aristotelian example of a phrase signifying unfiable friendship cannot be separated from acts of translation, themselves illustrative of the recoil manoeuvre. This

returns us to the phenomenon of lexilalia in translation. Lexilalia implies a constant recoiling from ‘the one’ (or the nominal form of the concept) and a coincident opening to the multiple, whether in the guise of sophistic, slapstick syntax, bad mirroring, or the politics of frenemies. Second, lexilalia implies acts of translating in perpetuity, in a process whereby meanings go round and round until they rejoin their opposites: if you translate, in other words, you will eventually rejoin or traverse the antipode and keep on curling backward for eternity. Lexilalia, in essence then, is about the infinitization of concepts, about the endless plea or prayer for philological transfinitude. Above all, it describes the subject’s cathexis to revolving ‘terms’ which leads to repetition compulsion and anxiogenic models of symptomatic reading.

It would take another occasion, and a considered reading of *Cassin avec Lacan* (focusing on her book *Jacques le Sophiste*), to elaborate a full-on symptomology of lexilalia. Suffice it to say, by way of conclusion, that its early onset occurred when I realized that a straightforward conversion of the *Vocabulaire* from French into English simply would not work. Every aspect of the translation had to be rethought, starting with the entry terms themselves. Which ones should remain in their original language? Which should be rendered in English? LUMIÈRE/LUMIÈRES with its French Enlightenment frame of reference, would obviously remain in French as the port of entry, but BONHEUR — which also carries so much French Enlightenment freight — was converted to HAPPINESS. It is difficult to reconstruct the rationale for all these decisions. Let me just say, we had our reasons, even if they fell short of being airtight justifications. Another extremely thorny issue concerned how entries should be revised to reflect an anglophone orientation without reverting to rank Anglocentricity. To give but one example, under the entry MOT we discovered that the English term ‘word’ never appeared. We would have to rectify this absence in the English edition either by adding material on *word*, or by reframing the entry to emphasize why the word *mot* was a French untranslatable. A term like *Willkür* presented another kind of problem. The entry by Pierre Osmo focused on a tension, essentially grounded in Kant’s reworking of a Cartesian legacy, between *libre arbitre* and *Willkür* understood as ‘free will’ (itself qualified as a variant of the rationalist categorical imperative). As it turns out, the standard English translation of Kant’s *Willkür* was ‘choice’ or ‘free choice’, which essentially nullified Osmo’s philosophical point. This was ‘meta’ untranslatability rearing its head, which is to say, an interference at the level of translating unforeseen by the article’s author and at odds with

her or his argument about a given term's untranslatability in a specific linguistic context. This was, as Genette would say, pure 'Bardadrac!'

NOTES

- 1 Gérard Genette, *Bardadrac* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 25. Translation my own. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated *B*.
- 2 Ross Perlin, 'Philosophers of Babel', *The New Inquiry*, thenewinquiry.com/essays/philosophers-of-babel-2/
- 3 Félix Guattari, 'Microphysics of Power/Micropolitics of Desire', translated by John Caruana in *The Guattari Reader*, edited by Gary Genosko (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 178.
- 4 Barbara Cassin, 'Philosophising in Languages', translated by Yves Gilonne, *Nottingham French Studies* 49:2 (Summer 2010), 18.
- 5 For an overview of her writings in English, see Barbara Cassin, *Sophistical Practice: Toward a Consistent Relativism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).
- 6 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Specimen calculi universalis* as cited by Alain de Libera in his entry TERM in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, edited by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1120. Original French text: Barbara Cassin, *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Seuil/Le Robert, 2004). Further references to the English edition of the *Vocabulaire* will appear in the text abbreviated *DU*.
- 7 Werner Hamacher, '95 Theses on Philology', translated by Catherine Diehl, *diacritics* 39:1 (Spring 2009), 25–44 (26).
- 8 Hamacher, '95 Theses on Philology', 27.
- 9 See Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel, entry on TATSACHE, TATHANDLUNG and Philippe Quesne, insert in that entry on FAKTUM, FAKTISCH, FAKTZITÄT (*DU*, 1113–17).
- 10 Adi Ophir, 'Concept', *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* (New School for Social Research), v. 2, online at <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/>.
- 11 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press), 11. As cited by Ophir, 'Concept'.
- 12 See Barbara Cassin, *Jacques le Sophiste: Lacan, logos et psychanalyse* (Paris: EPEL, 2012).
- 13 Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondence*, edited by Jean Bruneau, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1973–2007), 2:135.
- 14 Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 12.
- 15 Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, translated by Mark Polizzotti (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 280. Further references to this

- work will be to this edition and will appear in the text abbreviated *BP*. For French original, see Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, édition critique précédée de scénarios inédits (Naples: Alberto Cento, 1964), 14 and 116.
- 16 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 39.
 - 17 Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 219.
 - 18 Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Language: Much Ado about What?' in *Lacan and the Subject of Language*, edited by Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Bracher (New York: Routledge, 1991), 25. Abbreviated hereafter as *M*.
 - 19 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey, vol. XIII (London: The Hogarth Press, 1995), 18.
 - 20 Slavoj Žižek, *Žižek's Jokes* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 7.
 - 21 Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, translated by George Collins (London: Verso Books, 2005), 209.

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