A Translator’s Reflections on Translation and “Untranslatability”

By Christelle Maginot

The only certainty is that one cannot question untranslatability without questioning translatability.

Untranslatability: An Arguable Reality

According to Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, “some degree of partial untranslatability marks the relationship of every language to every other.” Total untranslatability, however, is believed to be rare. In fact, it is generally agreed that the areas that most nearly approach it are poetry, puns, and other word-

There inevitably comes a time in a translator’s life when he or she starts to challenge translation/translatability as a concept. More often than not, this occurs as a result of finding oneself confronted with a term that is deemed untranslatable and questioning not only the meaning of the word itself, but also the reality of the concept. In doing so, the translator joins the ranks of the thousands who have reflected and debated on the subject throughout the history of translation. Indeed, the notion of untranslatability has been argued by the best minds for centuries, including translation theorists, philosophers, linguists, writers, and poets. Therefore, no article can pretend to even introduce the subject, let alone offer any new and startling revelation. But humor me, as I reflect on the topic and attempt to demonstrate that when it comes to untranslatability, everything may be a question of definition, that using the term lightly may backfire, and that the answer to the translatability/untranslatability conundrum is as elusive as ever.

Untranslatable Text: Myth, Reality, or Something Else?
plays. This is because of their connection to sound, images, rhythm, and sense, which are often (if not always) difficult/impossible to render into another language without losing some essential components of the original text. Yet, the term untranslatable seems to find its way into everyday speech effortlessly. But are we always using the term correctly?

To find out, let’s start with a simple definition. Simple, you say? Not so much, as no two dictionaries agree fully on how to define the term untranslatable. Definitions range from the one-dimensional “Impossible to translate” (MacMillan) to the basic “Not able to be expressed or written down in another language or dialect” (Collins) to the less theoretical “Of a word or, phrase, or text not able to have its sense satisfactorily expressed in another language” [emphasis mine] (Oxford). While all true, no definition seems to convey fully the reality of the concept of the term as we translators know it. We must turn to more comprehensive works to find a balanced, complete definition with which we can relate. From these sources we learn that:

- Untranslatability is a property of a text, or of any utterance, in one language, for which no equivalent text or utterance can be found in another language when translated.

- Terms are neither exclusively translatable nor exclusively untranslatable; rather, the degree of difficulty of translation depends on their nature, as well as on the translator’s knowledge of the languages in question.

- Quite often, a text or utterance that is considered to be “untranslatable” is actually a lacuna, or lexical gap. That is, there is no one-to-one equivalence between the word, expression, or turn of phrase in the source language and another word, expression, or turn of phrase in the target language. A translator can, however, resort to a number of translation procedures to compensate for this. Therefore, untranslatability or difficulty of translation does not always carry deep linguistic relativity implications; denotation can virtually always be translated, given enough circumlocution, although connotation may be ineffable or inefficient to convey. [...]2

In other words, the term untranslatable is most often used to refer to lexical gaps (i.e., terms or expressions that do not exist in another language) or cultural gaps (i.e., concepts that do not exist in another culture). However, it is not necessarily because a language doesn’t have a direct lexical or cultural equivalent for a term/expression/concept that there is absolutely no way to express it in another language.

Translators have many methods at their disposal to do so (think: adaptation, borrowing, calque, loanwords, compensation, paraphrase, translator’s notes, etc.). Does this mean that all words, expressions, verbal forms, honorifics, etc., can be translated precisely? No. But it is generally agreed that most, if not all, texts can be exported into another language, even though all elements of those texts (e.g., cultural connotations, rhymes, rhythms, puns, etc.) may not always be exported alongside successfully. So, in essence, no text would be truly untranslatable, but the translation of culturally irreconcilable texts would inevitably result in some degree of loss. It is that loss that validates the notion of untranslatability, even though the text itself can be translated.

In truth, our world is home to so much cultural diversity, so many languages, and so many disparities among them that there are bound to be terms/expressions/concepts that fall so deeply into the lexical and cultural voids that they are labeled untranslatable. Indeed, who could argue that some notions are so incredibly specific to a culture that no other culture has a direct equivalent for them?

Take the word mamihipapinatapai, for example, which is Yahgan for “a look shared by two people, each wishing that the other will offer something that they both desire but are unwilling to suggest or offer themselves.” Not surprisingly, it appears in the Guinness Book of World Records as the “most succinct word,” but it is also considered one of the most difficult words to translate. Would you say that “an expressive, meaningful look between two people wishing to initiate something but reluctant to do so” is a translation (versus a definition or an interpretation)? The answers to those questions depend on your definition of translation.

Translation/Translatability: A Less-Than-Absolute Truth

Translation as a concept is subject to many interpretations, and countless definitions have been put forth by translation theorists over time. The American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti, for example, defines translation as “a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language, which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation.” Venuti’s argument

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supports the deconstructionist ideas that everything is about context, that any text may have more than one interpretation, and that all forms of reading a text (including translating it) are forms of interpretation.

Like many, when it comes to certain types of translation, I find it difficult not to agree with the deconstructionists. In fact, I often find that in order to reach the intended goal (e.g., a text that reads smoothly, elicits an emotional response, convinces, etc.), I have to take “interpretive liberties” that prioritize sense over words. More times than not, I feel that the boundaries between translating and rewriting/transcreating are rather blurry. But without getting into the debate of whether translation is a creation or “regurgitation” process, or arguing over the merit of fidelity over transparency (or vice versa), we can all agree safely on the fact that translation is an elaborate deconstruction-reconstruction process that involves a great deal of creativity and “stretching” of the target language.

While translation always captures the meaning of a text, the way and form in which the message is communicated may depend as much on personal interpretation as on lexical interpretation and lexical choices. The more idiomatic or culturally laden the text, the more room for interpretation of both sorts, and the more creative the result.

In truth, when words/concepts such as “good and evil” (in the way we relate to them today) find their way into time-honored religious texts and become embedded so deeply into our collective cultural heritage, even when they are said to have had no equivalent in the language(s) in which they were originally written, isn’t it possible that everything is a question of interpretation? Isn’t this also implying that translation is always the subjective expression of an idea, which is itself rooted in a specific cultural, historical, and linguistic context? Going further, isn’t it possible that translatability is not so much an absolute truth as a relative notion—at least as relative as untranslatability? The only certainty is that one cannot question untranslatability without questioning translatability, and that both concepts are two sides of the same coin with one thing in common: loss, or at least some degree of it.

Because language is a cultural phenomenon, loss is ever present in translation. Some connotations are bound to elude target-language readers who are unfamiliar with the cultural context behind them, or don’t associate them with the same emotion as source-language readers—even when a text is deemed translatable. Because translators typically have one foot in each culture and are accustomed to bridging the gap between the source and target cultures, they will most likely always understand the text and its connotation, but may not always be able to export the latter across cultures. However, as long as the message (i.e., the meaning of the text) makes it through gracefully, a text will generally be deemed adequately translated. The question is what happens when the message cannot make it through? Can we then talk of untranslatability? Or rather, should we?

The Everyday Untranslatable Text

Translators often come across texts whose idiomatic nature makes it necessary to rethink their definition of untranslatability and to stretch the target language to its very limit. (All of us know how much flexibility, creativity, and innovative thinking are required in the process!) In some instances, a translator will come up with a culturally appropriate equivalent (albeit distant from the original idea). Where choices are limited by factors that cannot be controlled, the translator may substitute the text with something else altogether. In rare instances where a concept is completely unknown to a culture, the translator’s work will go even further to make up for the conceptual void. In all cases, the text will be deemed adequately (albeit creatively) translated and, by extension, translatable.

However, there are instances when translators simply cannot make the decision to stretch the language, substitute text, or explain an alien concept, because that decision is simply not theirs to make. These are instances in which translators may find themselves using the word untranslatable to refer to something else altogether.

When Untranslatable = Does Not Translate Effectively

One such occurrence of a text that is often labeled untranslatable is “must-translate” text that may not translate effectively. We’ve all been there. In order to avoid a simple (to us) explanation that will confuse our monolingual client, we might refer to that text as untranslatable. But should we? Let’s use a simple case of marketing translation gone wrong to illustrate that particular dilemma.

We’ve all heard of the Braniff Airlines’ “Fly in Leather” campaign that sought to highlight the airline’s luxury leather seats, but was a fiasco in some parts of Latin America, where the slogan “Vuela en cuero” was interpreted as “fly naked/in the nude/topless.” Braniff’s misstep has become a classic example of unfortunate translation choices, but it might as well have been a case of unheeded warning. Consider the following scenario (with which more than a few marketing translators may be familiar).

Regardless of the road we choose, staying away from the word untranslatable and adjectives like it will save a lot of time and effort.
Untranslatable Text: Myth, Reality, or Something Else? A Translator’s Reflections on Translation and “Untranslatability” Continued

Translator: The copy is untranslatable to a degree. If translated literally, it will miss the mark with the target audience because of XYZ.

Client: We’d like to keep it as is. It worked well here.

Translator: To readers from another culture, the text has a different connotation. I’ve taken the liberty of coming up with a few alternatives and their back translations to give you an idea of what would make sense to your target audience.

Client: We don’t like how any of those sound.

Translator: They sound better in the language. The back-translations are only aimed at giving you an idea of what the text means.

Client: We would rather use our original copy.

Translator: You may want to consider retaining an in-country consultant who could advise you further as to how to market your brand/product effectively.

Client: We’ve taken your advice under consideration, but we really feel our original copy is the best way to go. We’ve asked our bilingual employees and they think it sounds good, so please translate the copy as is.

Obviously, if a client trusts the translator’s expertise and already appreciates the fact that cultural differences make it necessary to adapt copy rather than translate it verbatim, the above scenario is unlikely. But clients new to intercultural communication, ignorant of the intricate differences between languages/cultures, or overly confident in the global effectiveness of their copy/message may not understand why writing copy for a specific market is preferable to translating copy written for another. To these clients, words and expressions such as “untranslatable,” “not translatable,” “not translating well/effectively,” and the like often equate to “failure to understand [the copy because of its idiomatic nature]” and “failure to translate,” so using them to avoid a likely ineffectual explanation rarely leads to the desired outcome. On the contrary, it often leads to a situation where translators find themselves trying to prove that they understood the copy and can translate it “as is.” However, it’s not in the client’s best interest to do so (so back to square one).

A better approach might be to avoid all explanations having to do with translation (and especially the word untranslatable). State simply that target readers will not relate to the message because of a cultural gap and request a more culturally neutral text. If trained as a marketing writer, for example, one may go as far as to ask the client what other directions they may consider taking and offer to come up with alternative copy based on those. Recommending that the client seek the advice of a target-language writer is another option. Regardless of the road we choose to take, staying away from the word untranslatable and adjectives like it will save a lot of time and effort.

When Untranslatable = Incomprehensible

Another case of text that a translator might refer to as untranslatable is one that is so unintelligible or inarticulate that the translator cannot commit to a translation. At least not without first attaining a reasonable degree of certainty about its meaning as it was intended originally. Bible translators know this dilemma well, as religious texts are fertile grounds for impenetrable copy (which more and more translators are now choosing not to translate). For example, the new Swedish Bible reportedly features some 67 such instances! In the January 2007 issue of The Bible Translator, published by The United Bible Societies, Christer Åsberg, a professor of Swedish language and literature, explains:

Those who read Ps 141.6b in a sample of modern Bible translations may wonder why the verse is translated in so many different ways.

- **RSV** [Revised Standard Version]: Then they shall learn that the word of the LORD is true.
- **CEV** [Contemporary English Version]: Everyone will admit that I was right.
- **NAB** [New American Bible]: and they heard how pleasant were my words.
- **NJPSV** [New Jewish Publication Society Version]: but let my words be heard, for they are sweet.
- **EHS** [Evangelical Homiletics Society]: sie sollen hören, daß mein Wort für sie freundlich ist (they will hear that my word is favorable for them)
- **TOB** [Ecumenical Translation]: eux qui s’était régalés de m’entendre dire: (those who were invited to hear me say:)
- **DB** [Die Boodskap]: og man skal erfare, at mine ord var gode (and people will find, that my words were good ones)

In the 2000 Swedish translation (SB/Svenskbibeln), the verse is not translated at all; it is indicated with three hyphens inside square brackets, [—].

But translators don’t have to specialize in ancient texts or languages to face that particular dilemma, and the challenges that the situation creates are not any less exacting. Indeed, when translating current texts, leaving the copy blank is not an option, and dealing with actual writers/clients may at times be even more challenging than translating texts from the ancient ones who are no longer around to explain them.
When confronted with texts so incoherent that they cannot be trans- 
lated in a way that makes sense, a 
translator’s first reaction might be to 
inform the client that the copy in 
question is untranslatable. Honestly, 
this sounds better than a candid truth 
that may alienate the client. However, 
by doing so we may be doing our- 
selves (and our client) a disservice. 
Not only might the client equate 
“untranslatable” with “failure to 
understand/translate” (something that 
sounds perfectly comprehensible to 
them), but they might also get defen- 
sive, thereby lessening the chance of 
getting the text edited for both trans- 
lation and publication purposes.

A better approach might be to 
imform the client that you are having 
trouble understanding the copy and 
asking them to explain it. Most 
clients will realize while verbalizing 
their thoughts that the copy is in 
need of editing/rewriting and thank 
you for your careful reading of their 
text. (If not, you may at least use 
your newly-found understanding of 
the copy to make sure that the trans- 
lation is intelligible.)

If previous or subsequent content 
allows you to ascertain without a 
doubt what the text should say, then 
you may also take it upon yourself to 
rewrite the copy. Whether you should 
and the consequences of such an 
action are another matter entirely. 
(See “The Translator as an Editor” in 
the March 2014 edition of The ATA 
Chronicle). As to how to deal with 
clients who think their carelessly 
written text makes enough sense to 
be translated and insist that you 
translate it “as is,” the best approach 
may be simply to stay away. After 
all, a translator’s ethics and reputa- 
tion are worth more than the number 
of clients on a list.

Regardless of the translation chal- 

lenges we face and how we choose to 
respond to them, reserving the term untranslatable to actual instances of 
untranslatability will go a long way. 
In everyday translation scenarios, 
most of the challenges that present 
themselves to us (besides lexical 
gaps, which can generally be man-

aged without much fuss or client 
input) are typically either oversights 
in the source text or cultural discrep- 
ancies. Presenting them as such may 
serve us and our clients well.

Which leaves us with one big 
question. If texts deemed untranslat- 
able can be translated and texts that 
cannot be translated are not untranslat- 
able, what are we to make of 
untranslatability as a concept? 

**Myth or Something Else?**

Although much has been said and 
written about the “myth of untrans- 
latability,” the concept defies black-and-white categorization. Both 
rare and commonplace, real and not, 
and certainly as difficult to prove as 
to disprove, untranslatability may 
masquerade as a paradox. However, 
it is, more than anything else, a rela- 
tive notion linked to the very defini- 
tion of translation/translatability, and 
the extent to which text and meaning 
can be exported across languages 
satisfactorily—if ever.

There is no question that terms, 
expressions, and concepts that have 
no direct equivalents or do not exist 
in another language pose great 
difficulties to the translator, regard- 
less of how many compensation 
methods may be used to render the 
translation. There is also no question 
that a certain amount of loss (both 
lexical and non-lexical) is inevitable 
as a result of circumventing the chal- 
lenges that lexical and cultural gaps 
present, and that the more culturally- 
bound the text, the greater that loss. 
The question is to know whether 
texts that have no equivalents should 
be labeled as untranslatable, and 
whether “non-equivalent transla- 
tions” are less or more accurate 
translations than equivalent ones. 
When non-equivalent translations 
yield better results than equivalent 
ones, couldn’t it simply suggest that 
untranslatability is inherent to lan- 
guage itself and that the myth is actu- 
ally translatability?

Finding the answer to that ques- 
tion seems as elusive as ever. After 
all, there is a reason translation theo- 
rists, philosophers, and linguists have 
been debating the subject for cen- 
turies. So let’s leave it as that. As 
Friedrich Nietzsche said: “Words are 
but symbols for the relations of 
things to one another and to us; 
nowhere do they touch upon the 
absolute truth.” And neither does 
there seem to be any absolute truth 
in the notion of untranslatability (or 
translatability, for that matter).

**Notes**

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