Untranslatables

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As Deleuze states, philosophy is not only to work with concepts, but to create them. That is why studying a great author means a confrontation with a very specific terminology, an acquaintance with certain meanings and, in remarkable yet frequent cases, the encounter of entirely novel concepts. Through the colossal project *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: le dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, Barbara Cassin and the tens of authors under her coordination (to whom we may add the impressive number of Romanian authors and translators) investigated the difficulties that arise when translating certain terms from no fewer than 15 European languages.

Cassin emphasizes that translation sometimes sets up the creation of a neologism or the redefinition of an already existing word. This not only explains the impossibility of a perfect overlapping between words, but between their correspondent conceptual networks as well (p. 21). The translation is hindered more and more as the word participates in a larger number of conceptual networks, so the philologists and philosophers need to find a method of overcoming this problem. Right from the beginning, the authors of the *Vocabulary* had eliminated two rather deceiving solutions to this issue. Both of them imply choosing a dominant language (the two solutions are in fact two criteria to elect the hegemonic language) instead of keeping the rich plurality of languages used in the European countries.

One such solution rejected by the group of authors is to embrace the 'ontological nationalism' (p. 22) and to consider a certain language as being philosophical *par excellence*. Cassin recalls Heidegger's statement that philosophy was born thanks to the Greek language. The genius of Greek comes from the ease with which it creates philosophical concepts and also from the fact that, out of all modern languages, its creativity was inherited by German. Thus, the untranslatable words from these privileged languages are the most imbued with truth and the attempt to move such terms to other languages would only alienate us from the stakes of philosophy. The second solution that the *Vocabulary* casts away is to accept English as the official language of European communities. In scientific discourse, the English language enjoys the transparency gained by refusing jargonization, thus being able to describe the sensory reality with utmost precision. It is governed by *common sense*, and not by esoteric phrases, being characterized by Cassin as 'devoted to puncturing of the windbags of metaphysics' (p. 22/p. xviii in the English Edition). Its clarity however, if not its deliberate banality, make it too sterile of a language for continental philosophy and the abstract ideas that revolve around it.

It should come as no surprise that a group as big and heterogeneous of specialists in history, philology, and philosophy, with expertise in modern European languages as well as Hebrew, Greek and Latin, agreed that proclaiming one language as the medium of all philosophical debate henceforth would not suffice. The group of authors coordinated by Barbara Cassin have chosen to work on a project of great proportion which celebrates the diversity and cultural wealth of different vocabularies. Thus, we prefer the dialogue between the language in which an untranslatable term appears and the attempts of other languages to reproduce that term in their own way. This process, Cassin notices, generates new meanings and, more impressive still, gives birth to new relationships between kindred concepts. In this way, the aim of the *Vocabulary* is to first exhibit an untranslatable word (or even outline the main features that make a language as a whole original), specifying the linguistic elements that confer uniqueness on the word. Afterwards, a conceptual mapping is created that connects the

original term with the most peculiar translations and their respective semantic networks. Cassin herself considers that the *Vocabulary* "plays off geography against history, the semantic network against the isolated concept" (p. 22/p. xix English Ed.). The aim is the construction of a new *Begriffsgeschichte*, where each entry is analysed according to its etymology and its occurrences in a number of historical periods, focusing on the changes in time. The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* studies the multiplicity of meanings of words in regard to the different linguistic and cultural contexts.

Taking a look beyond the promises of scientific researchers and the more than 150 collaborators that made this project possible, we turn our attention towards an example in order to illustrate the power of this ambitious instrument. The article *Fiinţă* (Being)*, Fi (A)* (p. 446) is perhaps the best example to reveal the journey on which the *Vocabulary* takes its reader. The *first verb*, as Schleiermacher considers this *a fi* (to be), is granted a section of half a page in the *Dictionary*, which references a plethora of fully fledged articles or framed sections of related articles (all in the same *Dictionary*, of course). Each of these references tackles a certain aspect of the ample problem of *fiinţă* (being). First, the languages in which *a fi* (to be) embounds specific meanings are taken into account. Such languages are Greek with *esti*, French with the idiom *il y a*, German with *es gibt*, Spanish and Portuguese with their respective particularities. Then there are references to the Greek language as a whole, to articles about *essence*, *Dasein*, *Erlebnis*, *subject*, to name a few. The brevity of the article from page 446 is due to the fact that here *a fi* (to be) is treated as a concept yet unattired in a certain language. The numerous references, however, show the ways in which languages tint its meaning.

The article *Greek (language)* comes with the expected additions to the problem of *being*, including a framed text that it is precisely the term *ousia* that makes Heidegger consider Greek a language that is authentic, profound and fertile for philosophy (p. 528). Hereunder, the relations, or rather, the semantic networks that *ousia* forms with other terms such as *hyparxis* and *hypostasis* are examined, and also the coherency between *ousia*, *esse*, *723ssential* and *substantia* is analysed (pp.

533-534). In the article *esti, einai*, apart from an intricate philological study and the analyses of the derived forms of *esti* in the works of philosophers like Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle, there are three framed texts on the Romanian characteristics of the verb. This way the contributions of our language to the ample subject are being emphasised. The concept of *fire*, for example, conjoins the meanings of *fiinţă* (being) and *existenţă* (existence) through the connection it establishes between the being of *ins* (man/individual) and the modulations of his existence (p. 413). Therefore, the Romanian language creates its own network which brings these terms together. Network in which even *desfiinţare* gains a new meaning: *fiinţa* (being) is no longer annihilated, only stripped of its qualities. It implies an alteration to *fire*, which does not inherit the immutability of *fiinţă* (being).

A work that can pick up the relationships between terms of different languages justifies the decade-long effort necessary for the first edition of the *Vocabulary*, the Romanian edition being not only the result of translating but also of addition of elements specific to the language. The ampleness of the project comes from the will to facilitate a stroll around the terms of more philosophies with the help of a multitude of references and indices (of proper names, of main authors and main cited fragments, of main translators and discussed translations). The stroll is an extremely puzzling one in the European context of eclecticism and change. Which is why *The European Vocabulary of Philosophies: Dictionary of Untranslatables* proves to be such a valuable instrument. It does not try to make acquaintance with a word by registering all its album pictures, but by getting to know the other words that formed friendships with it.

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