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# Linguistic Hospitality—The Risk of Translation

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## Abstract

This essay examines the recent critical debate on the hermeneutics of hospitality. It explores the philosophical and ethical implications of Paul Ricoeur's notion of linguistic hospitality as a translation between host and guest, enemy and friend, and compares it to Derrida's notion of impossible hospitality.

## Keywords

translation – hospitality – hermeneutics – deconstruction – narrative imagination

Translation serves as a paradigm for linguistic hospitality in so far as it involves a mediation between host and guest languages. There is a double duty here: to remain faithful to one's own language while remaining attentive to the novelty of the foreigner's. One can fail in this duty by succumbing to either of the following temptations: First, the impulse to assimilate and absorb the Other into the Same, reducing the singularity of the guest to the totalizing norms of one's native speech. This makes for bad translation, and at a political level can lead to various forms of linguistic chauvinism. Second, there is the contrary temptation to evacuate one's own linguistic dwelling altogether, surrendering one's speech to the in-coming Other, even to the point where there is no longer a host at home to receive a guest at all. In this case, one may be so seduced or overwhelmed by the Other that one succumbs to supine servility. To avoid these extremes of linguistic hegemony or humiliation, one is best advised to take a middle road of "linguistic hospitality" where one honors both host and guest languages equally while resisting the take-over of one by the other. The good translator is neither master nor slave.

In *On Translation*, Ricoeur spells out important implications of this paradigm of linguistic hospitality:

Translation sets us not only intellectual work ... but also an ethical problem. Bringing the reader to the author, bringing the author to the reader, at the risk of serving and of betraying two masters: this is to practice what I like to call linguistic hospitality. It is this which serves as a model for other forms of hospitality that I think resemble it: confessions, religions, are they not like languages that are foreign to one another, with their lexicon, their grammar, their rhetoric, their stylistic which we must learn in order to make our way into them? And is Eucharistic hospitality not to be taken up with the same risks of translation-betrayal, but also with the same renunciation of the perfect translation.<sup>1</sup>

A crucial step in resisting the lure of the Perfect Translation is to honor a dialectical balance between proximity (welcoming the stranger into our midst) and distance (acknowledging that something is always lost in translation: the other's meanings can never be completely mine). A "hospitable" translator is one who aims at approximate correspondences between tongues without ever assuming these to be final or adequate. Which is why translation is always an endless task. It is work which is also a *working through*, in the psychoanalytic sense of *Durcharbeitung*—a difficult and demanding labor of mediation between one linguistic mind/culture/world and another. Such mediation involves a process of mourning and letting go—and in particular the renunciation of the egocentric drive to reduce the alterities of the guest to one's own will for total adequation. As if, in translation, there were only one true language: my own. Our own. In politics we call this tribalism or imperialism. As Ricoeur insists: there is no such thing as language, only languages.

But it is not simple. *Traditore, tradutore*: to translate is always in some sense to betray; for one can never do one's guest true justice. And this means accepting that we all live East of Eden and after Babel—and this is a good thing. Our linguistic fallenness is also our linguistic finitude: a reminder of human limits that saves us from the delusion of sufficiency, the fantasy of restoring some prelapsarian *logos* (where we play God speaking a single divine language with a perfect word for each perfect thing). We also need to abandon the illusion of a perfect *logos* of the future—such as the enlightenment dream of a *caratteristica universalis* or the more contemporary delusion of a pan-European Esperanto. Indeed the translation model of hospitality stands, politically, as

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 23.

an indictment of all historical attempts to impose a single language on diverse peoples—Greek, Latin, French, Spanish or today English (sometimes known as ‘Globish’). Imperial campaigns have always sought to impose a normative *lingua franca* on the multiplicity of vernaculars. But it is the right of every living tongue to speak itself and, moreover, to be translated into other tongues while retaining a certain reservoir of irreducible, untranslatable intimacy. Each dialect has its secrets. Whence the legitimate double injunction of every guest language when faced with its host: “Translate me! Don’t translate me!” Take me but not all of me. Take me in, incorporate me, get me, but leave something of me to myself. Good translation is transfusion not fusion. It signals a mutual transaction between worlds, never a subsuming of two into one.

Hospitable translation thus renounces all claim to absolute sovereignty acknowledging that we share words as we share clothes. Or to paraphrase Ricoeur, we should let our language try on the garments of strangers at the same time as we invite them to step into the fabric of our own speech. Translation is transvestitude. And it begins from the word *go*. In the beginning was hermeneutics—meaning the interpretation of different meanings, tongues, intentions, lexicons. *In principio fuit interpretis*. There is no pure pristine *logos*, unless it is God’s. And we are not God. To be human is to interpret and to interpret is to translate. Language is finitude, marked by gaps of time and space: scars of separation and otherness. There never was a self without an other, a host without a guest. From the start was hospitality—and, as we shall see, its twin shadow, hostility.

As such, translation involves a certain humble recognition of our fragility and fallibility, keeping us always open to the never-ending task of *more* translation, *better* translation, *alternative* translation, again and again. The only criterion of a good translation is another translation. Which is why the great classics are both untranslatable and infinitely translatable at once. There are never enough renditions of Homer, Shakespeare or the Bible. (Again, the truth of the Bible is Babel). We are dealing thus with a drama of fragile hospitality. Ricoeur puts it well:

Despite the conflictual character which renders the task of the translator dramatic, he or she will find satisfaction in what I would like to call *linguistic hospitality*. Its predicament is that of a correspondence without complete adhesion. This is a fragile condition, which admits of no verification other than a new translation ... to translate afresh after the translator ... Just as in a narration it is always possible to tell the story in a different way, likewise in translation it is always possible to translate otherwise, without ever hoping to bridge the gap between equivalence and

perfect adhesion. Linguistic hospitality is the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own home, one's own dwelling.<sup>2</sup>

But the host can never “capture” the guest in his/her own house, without some degree of violence and violation. And sometimes “the guest must leave the host in order to remain a guest,” as the poet Fanny Howe reminds us. There is an “untranslatable kernel” in every linguistic transaction which reminds us that host and guest languages are never the same—and never should be.

While this acknowledgment of irreducible difference involves a therapeutic mourning of the dream of fusion, it also heralds the challenge of plurality and novelty. It is precisely when two distinct tongues cross that a third can be born. And this natality can be multiple, as mentioned, in the countless and in principle endless translations of the great classics—Greek, Sanskrit, Latin, Hebrew—rendered differently each time into numerous versions of vernacular speech. We do not lament the serial renditions of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Proust. *Au contraire!* And the same goes for the Bible, from the Septuagint translation from Hebrew into Greek, St. Jerome's translation into Latin, and the many subsequent vernacular versions in English (St. James), German (Luther, Buber, Rosenzweig), or French (Chouraqui), etc. With each rendition a new “semantic surplus” is triggered by the creative collision of separate tongues—something mutually enhancing for both cultures. Think for example of how, in the Septuagint translation of Exodus 3:15 (“I am who may be”), the Greek ontological notion of being (*ontos on*), understood as formal and material substance, is radically transformed by its encounter with the Hebrew notion of God's becoming as historical and eschatological promise. And vice versa. By the time Maimonides is writing his Hebraic-Hellenic metaphysics in *Guide for the Perplexed*, both Greeks and Jews have re-interpreted their respective notions of what it means to be in the world—and that twin revision informs new ways of thinking the person, time, relation and finitude. After the biblical translation into Greek we can agree with Joyce that ‘Greekjew is Jewgreek’. Athens and Jerusalem are never the same.

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2 *Ibid.*, 10 (*Sur la traduction* [Bayard, Paris, 2004], 19–20; cited, xvi). See also here Walter Benjamin's notion of the “untranslatable kernel” in “The Task of the Translator” (*Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1 [Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1996]) and Marc Crépon's work on the relation between linguistic singularity, translation and hospitality, *Les Promesses du langage: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 2001) and *Langues sans demeure* (Paris: Galilée, 2005) where he considers the foreignness even of the mother tongue. I am grateful to Sarah Horton for the Crépon reference.

But careful: translation is not always on the side of the angels. And each transition between linguistic host and guest involves the possibility of betrayal as well as rebirth. Hostility to the Other is as real as hospitality. As Emile Benveniste famously observed in *Language and Indo-European Society*, hospitality and hostility share the same root, *hostis*, which can mean both host and guest, both friend and enemy.<sup>3</sup> Hence the notion of translation as a dramatic human action—a task, a labor, a wager between hostility (reducing host and guest to the same) and hospitality (rightly acknowledging a gap or separation between them). Which is why Antoine Berman speaks of translation as “*l’épreuve de l’étranger*”—an existential testing or trial of the stranger.<sup>4</sup> This notion of *épreuve* calls in turn for a kind of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). The ability to discern between varying calls and demands of the stranger—as foreigner or immigrant, as alien or refugee, as adversary or invader. Hence the constant dialectical wagering between hostility and hospitality, between vigilance and welcome. A wagering that invites a critical capacity to navigate between diverse perspectives which operates not just *inter*-linguistically (between a native and foreign tongue) but also *intra*-linguistically (between speaking beings within a single language—the mother tongue has many children! And one might also add, with psychoanalysis in mind, a capacity to mediate between one’s own conscious and unconscious selves. We can find ourselves aliens within our own *langue maternelle* and within the depths of our own minds. We are, deep down, as Kristeva reminds us, always strangers to ourselves.

It might be noted that Jacques Derrida makes a radical point here about the “impossibility” of any pure or absolute hospitality to the stranger. Every translation risks some degree of hostility towards the other in so far as it asks the Other to render itself in terms of the same (*my* language, life-world, culture, horizon). As soon as I, qua host, ask my guest, “who are you?” I am asking a stranger to reply in terms which I can recognize and identify. All hermeneutics in practice involves some mixture of hospitality and hostility—what Derrida calls “hostipitality”—welcoming the other at the same time as one translates its alterity into something “*like me*.” Though Ricoeur interprets this “like” in term of someone similar (*semblable*) rather than the same (*même*), Derrida holds to the strict deconstructive line that any need for similarity is already a compromise on the strangeness of the Stranger (a radicalization of Husserl’s phenomenological analysis of knowing others in the Fifth *Cartesian Meditation*).

3 Emile Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des Institutions Indo-Européennes* (Paris: Minuit, 1969) / *Indo-European Language and Society*, trans. Jean Lallot (London: Faber and Faber, 1973).

4 Antoine Berman, *L’épreuve de l’étranger: Culture et Traduction dans l’Allemagne Romantique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

So here is the difference. A hermeneutics of translation, à la Ricoeur, involves *conditional* hospitality (which in effect means some measure of interpretive judgment regarding mixed bags of “hostipitality”), whereas deconstruction invokes a notion of *unconditional* hospitality where one accepts the Other regardless of its origin or identity—human, animal or divine! Pure hospitality does not ask for IDs or passports; it is not concerned with border controls or contracts but demands pure exposure to alterity, welcoming the stranger “without why.” If there is a knock at the door you open it without asking in advance if it is a messiah or monster. Once you put hospitality into laws, rules or norms you take the daring out of it, the radical risk of undecidability, the yes to all that comes. “Let us say yes to whom or what turns up,” writes Derrida in *Of Hospitality*, “before any determination, or anticipation, whether or not it is to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an uninvited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female.”<sup>5</sup> In short, absolute hospitality welcomes the stranger independently of all legal, political or epistemological conventions; it calls for an impossible leap of faith towards the “absolutely Other”—or as Derrida puts it in his typically hyperbolic way: “every other is absolutely other” (*tout autre est tout autre*). The stranger is always, at bottom, absolutely strange. And no stranger is too strange to be included.

Such pure hospitality is, of course, not actually possible in terms of everyday practice—where the only feasible form of welcome is always contingent upon this or that condition (and thus never “pure”). Absolute hospitality is impossible, but if it did exist it could only do so, Derrida admits, as a blind, mad, mystical dream. All attempts—which occur daily—to make the impossible possible are already a matter of betrayal, compromise and contagion. Where hermeneutic hospitality speaks of *conversion* between host and guest, deconstructive hospitality speaks of *contamination*. Which perhaps goes some way to explaining Ricoeur’s claim that the difference between him and Derrida is that between the terms “difficult” and “impossible.”<sup>6</sup>

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5 Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 77. See also Derrida’s discussion of language, translation and cultural identity in *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre ou la Prothèse d’origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). For a very illuminating analysis of Derrida’s complex reading of hospitality, see François Raffoul, “Chez Lui, Chez L’autre” in *Les Temps Modernes* on “L’événement déconstruction,” (669–670: July–October, 2012).

6 Paul Ricoeur, “Difficult Pardon” in *Memory, History and Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

But a last word about the implications of linguistic hospitality for narrative exchange. In an important and oft neglected text, “Reflections on a new Ethos for Europe” (1996 in French/2004 in English), Ricoeur applies his model of linguistic hospitality to what he calls, more specifically, “narrative hospitality.”<sup>7</sup> He describes this as “taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other.”<sup>8</sup> In the case of memorials and testimonials, this takes the form of exchanges between different peoples’s histories so that we may practice an art of transference allowing us to welcome the story of one’s neighbor, opponent, adversary or forgotten one. For one nation’s narrative of glory is often another’s narrative of suffering and defeat. Victors and victims need to exchange places by exchanging stories. And exchanging stories is already an invitation to change history: to reanimate forgotten stories out of our debt to the dead.

As I have already explored Ricoeur’s ethics of narrative hospitality elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> I will confine myself here to a mention of three main characteristics:

- 1) *narrative flexibility*: every story can be told and retold from a plurality of perspectives;
- 2) *narrative transfiguration*: the historical past can be revisited in terms of unexperienced or unexplored “possibilities,” thereby giving a future to the past. Or as Ricoeur aptly puts it, the past is a cemetery of promises which have not been kept and narrative hospitality is a way of retelling untold stories so as to realize such promissory notes, “bringing them back to life, like the dry bones in the valley described in the prophecy of Ezekiel.”<sup>10</sup>
- 3) *narrative pardon*: by empathizing with others through the exchange of stories we can work-through and mourn the wounds of the past so as to open a space of charity and gift.<sup>11</sup> This involves moving beyond a reciprocity of exchange to a difficult, almost impossible, order of charity—a leap which transcends the rules and laws of justice in the name of something “more”: namely, forgiving the enemy and “shattering the debt.” Here law is supplemented by love. The humanely possible is surpassed by a possibility beyond the impossible. And in this step towards a higher

7 Paul Ricoeur, “Reflections on a new Ethos for Europe,” in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 3–14. / “Quel éthos pour l’Europe?,” in *Imaginer l’Europe*, ed. P. Koslowski (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1992), 107–118.

8 *Ibid.*, 7.

9 Richard Kearney, “The Ethics of Memory” in *Difficulties of Ethical Life*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Dennis Schmidt (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

10 Ricoeur, “Reflections” 9.

11 Richard Kearney, “Memory in Irish Culture,” in *Memory Ireland, Vol 3: The Famine and the Troubles*, ed. Oona Frawley (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 148–150.

poetics of pardon there comes a point where narrative exchange—of histories, memories, testimonies—often needs to be supplemented by a leap of empathic imagination. Here linguistic hospitality finds its limit and calls for something more. A gift beyond words.