

# Philosophy of Translation

## An Interdisciplinary Approach

# Filosofia della traduzione

## Un approccio interdisciplinare

T E O R I A

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fondata da Vittorio Sainati  
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# Making the Unconscious Conscious: A Reflection on the Concept Translation in Freud

Elinor Hållén

Towards the end of the essay *The Unconscious* (1915), Freud presents a new understanding of repression and of what happens when something repressed becomes conscious:

Now, too, we are in a position to state precisely what it is that repression denies to the rejected presentation in the transference neurosis: what it denies to the presentation is translation into words which shall remain attached to the object. A presentation which is not put into words [...], remains thereafter in the Ucs. in a state of repression<sup>1</sup>.

We learn that repression is a denial of putting the unconscious presentation into words and this prevents the presentation from becoming conscious. Conversely, to become conscious of a previously unconscious presentation means translating it into words. Freud writes that psychoanalytic work consists in such a transformation or translation.

How are we to arrive at knowledge of the unconscious? It is of course only as something conscious that we know anything of it, after it has undergone transformation or translation into something conscious. The possibility of such translation is a matter of everyday experience in psychoanalytic work. In order to achieve this, it is necessary that the person analysed should overcome certain resistances, the very same as those which at some earlier time placed the material in question under repression by rejecting it from consciousness<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> S. Freud, *The Unconscious* (1915), in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, vol. 14, The Hogarth Press, London 1978, pp. 161-215, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> *Ivi*, p. 166.

Freud's understanding of repressed mental content expressed in these quotes show something important: becoming conscious means that one can *articulate* the repressed feeling, idea or wish. In this paper I will attempt to enunciate what such articulation amounts to in the setting of the therapeutic conversation and inquire into if the concept translation can do justice to conscious-making as articulation.

### *When Words are not Available*

The concept translation plays a central role in Freud's exposition of what happens when something repressed becomes conscious and when it is precluded from becoming conscious. Freud writes that what repression denies the presentation is translation into words that will be attached to the object. How are we to understand this? Let us first look at how this is not to be understood. Freud is careful to point out that not all that is unconscious is repressed. The unconscious comprises more, that which is not present to memory at this moment and in Freud's theory are called latent states. Freud describes them as having

abundant points of contact with conscious mental processes; with the help of a certain amount of work they can be transformed into, or replaced by, conscious mental processes, and all the categories which we employ to describe conscious mental acts, such as ideas, purposes, resolutions and so on, can be applied to them<sup>3</sup>.

With these latent states contrasts repressed material which has been precluded from consciousness because it stands in conflict with conscious ideas and presentations. This material has not been articulated by their bearer as a certain idea, desire, decision, judgment or intention.

This difference between repressed unconscious material on the one hand, and conscious and latent unconscious material on the other, might seem to make translation a misleading description for what goes on when something repressed becomes conscious, at least if we proceed from a certain understanding of translation which I now will try to articulate.

When we speak of translation, I assume we commonly think of translation from one language to another. We know that translation involves some degree of interpretation. In translations between different natural languages it can be hard to find a word with the same meaning and implications, arousing

<sup>3</sup> *Ivi*, p. 168.



the same associations. We sometimes speak of translations within our own language, from abstract, scientific expressions to ordinary language for example. Such a translation can have different effects. Precision can be lost but it can also, reversely, be the case that when one tries to express oneself in ordinary language it becomes clearer, or a problem inherent in the way of thinking is revealed. Thus, there is no simple and exact correspondence between the two sides in the translation but common to all these cases is that the translation is from one language (natural language, scientific vocabulary, et cetera) to another. In other words, translation takes place within the realm of language, and both sides have a conceptual and logical structure. However, that does not seem to be the case in Freud's interpretation of what happens when something previously unconscious becomes conscious.

The picture Freud presents in *The Unconscious* is that what is repressed, the dynamic unconscious, can only be characterized in terms of thing-presentations that are connected by associative processes, and what happens when an unconscious presentation becomes conscious is that a word-presentation is associated with it. How are we to conceive of the absence of the word in the dynamic unconscious? Does it imply that the unconscious feeling is completely lacking a linguistic structure? That seems wrong. First, we may ask how something could be part of an adult person's (language user's) inner life and remain non-linguistic? Further, Freud describes how associations take place on the level of the unconscious, associations that give rise to reactions; how could these associations take place in absence of language? I want to describe the dynamic unconscious as qualitatively different from the conscious or latent unconscious because it is lacking in conceptual and logical structure. Still the repressed mental content that makes up the dynamic unconscious must, it seems, be linguistically structured to some degree because what would otherwise give rise to the reaction of repression?

What characterizes the unawareness that repression amounts to rather seem to be that no words are available to the subject that can express her feeling, which means that the feeling has not quite taken shape yet. A feeling arises as a certain feeling first when it can be articulated. I understand Freud's description of how something attains a higher level of organization when the word-presentation is attached to the thing-presentation to mean: when one can articulate one's feeling it receives a place among all other feelings that one ascribes to oneself and also among all the other of one's conscious ideas, and this context gives the feeling its form. Repression means a (temporary) mutilation of the feeling since the articulation that is needed to give the feeling its contour by giving it a place in a context is unavailable.

### *Expression and Exclusion*

This addresses the question: if becoming conscious of something means that it receives a place in a conceptual and logical structure, a context in which it can be understood, can conscious-making then be explained as translation? Does the concept translation capture the transformation and continuation of unconscious, vague ideas into well-articulated conscious ones? A thought which is shared by many contemporary philosophers is that the ability to express in words what one feels and wants is what being conscious consists in, but exactly how this is to be understood is a question of interpretation and debate. The discussions sometimes take the therapeutic situation as starting-point, as we will later see exemplified, and it is made clear that to be able to express oneself in words is not the same as accepting someone else's (e.g. the therapist's) interpretation of one's own behaviour. To repeat and admit to another's interpretation is not to express what one feels but first when one *experiences* the feeling – for example, as a fear of something specific that occurs in certain situations – can one give *expression* to this feeling. Thus articulation is seen as being necessarily connected to experiencing. To become conscious of something repressed implies recapturing first-person access to one's feelings and beliefs.

Looking at other explanations and images that Freud uses, apart from that of thing- and word-presentation, can help us better understand what it means to become conscious of something previously repressed. In his later writings, when Freud has introduced his structural model, he develops an understanding of the ego as an organization which includes and excludes. When the ego is strong it is united with the superego and the id but when there is tension or conflict, a division takes place. Repression, says Freud in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1926), reveals that «the decisive fact is that the ego is an organization and the id is not [...] “[t]he ego is indeed, the organized portion of the id [...] As a rule the instinctual part which is to be repressed remains isolated»<sup>4</sup>.

This image overlaps with the one we are already acquainted with, because as the ego is an *organization* on the structural model, that which is conscious form a *structure* in *The Unconscious*. The ego as organization is a unity where different perceptions, values, opinions and feelings are inter-twined in a

<sup>4</sup> S. Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, vol. 20, editore, luogo 1926, pp. 7-179, p. 97.

coherent whole. That which belongs to Consciousness is, in contrast to that which is unconscious, that which has been put to words. When one is able to articulate one's feeling, idea or fear it receives a place in a logical and conceptual structure and in one's life since one then understands it as a certain feeling, idea et cetera related in certain ways to one's other conscious ideas.

### *Capturing the Unconscious*

We have seen Freud describe the transition from unconscious representations to conscious in terms of translation, suggesting that what repression denies the presentation is translation into words that remains attached to the object. This characterization is problematic if one thinks of translation as requiring a high degree of articulative structure on both sides, that is also in the unconscious. How are we then to understand the important difference between consciousness and the dynamic unconscious?

In *The Unconscious* Freud presents a metapsychological understanding of repression and unconscious mental content. This theoretical understanding is complemented by writings emanating from Freud's therapeutic practice, such as the case studies. We will be better able to understand the role that language plays in our inner life and the role linguistic articulation plays in conscious-making if we look at Freud's case study of Ernst Lanzer, the Ratman<sup>5</sup> as Freud called him, together with the critical reflections of it that philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear makes in *Restlessness, Phantasy and the Concept of the Mind* (1999)<sup>6</sup>. The fact that this is a pathological case, Lanzer suffered from obsessional neurosis, I believe not to be of importance for what we are looking at here. The case displays characteristic elements of repression, whether that occurs in an otherwise "normal" person or one suffering from a mental condition, and that is what I attend to below.

The Ratman is trying to understand his own behaviour: why he, at certain moments of therapy, cringes before Freud. He says that he is afraid of Freud, and he justifies his fear with the belief that Freud is going to give him a beating. Realizing that he has no reason to fear Freud, he comes up with the thought that Freud reminds him of his violent father. Lear points out that

<sup>5</sup> S. Freud, *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis (The Ratman)*, in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, vol. 10, editore, luogo 1909, pp. 155-249.

<sup>6</sup> J. Lear, *Restlessness, Phantasy and the Concept of the Mind*, in J. Lear, *Open Minded. Working out the Logic of the Soul*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1999.

what the Ratman does here is to rationalize his reaction so that it takes the form of a conscious action. The Ratman is trying to understand a reaction the motivation of which he is unconscious, and in doing so he presents the reaction as a specific, motivated fear. That is, like an ordinary feeling of fear – one that one senses and understands – but still unconscious: the fear that his father is going to give him a beating but projected upon Freud. The fear is backed up by beliefs and soon the unconscious takes the shape of a second mind as rationally structured as the conscious. In rationalizing his behaviour and making it appear as a motivated action, the Ratman distorts what it is. Instead, what the Ratman did was to act something out – anxiety or fright – without himself knowing what was bringing this feeling about.

Lear emphasizes the challenge involved in trying to describe the dynamic unconscious. One must account both for the sense and the unclarity that it there. There is no transparent and easily accessible meaning, yet there *is* meaning in associations that are made on this level and in the behaviours in which they are revealed. Lear asks how mind can make an understanding out of that which it does not understand? Being sense making, even the dynamically unconscious part of consciousness must be able to make associations between ideas. At the same time these associations appear obscure and ambiguous for the person making them. Lear uses Freud's concepts displacement, condensation and phantasy to describe the form of mental activity required for the unconscious to make these leaps and associations, which from a rational perspective may seem strange.

Displacement and condensation stand for the capacities to be able to associate by connecting one idea to another and to tie different ideas together into one. The dream is a good example: in a dream something that happened to one yesterday can connect with a scene in a film and, in an obscure way, include something reminding one of an experience from childhood. These concepts are helpful in trying to understand the Ratman's behaviour. It is characteristic of the fearfulness he feels that it changes between objects according to principles of association. First he is afraid of Freud, then it is a projected fear with the father as the real object of the fear. In the quote I presented at the beginning of this paper, Freud speaks of transference neuroses. Transference signify just that exchange of object of a fear (belief, desire et cetera) that is common in therapy where fear is directed at the therapist rather than at someone in the analysand's past.

Lear describes the Ratman's acting out as a phantasy to distinguish it from an intentional action. A phantasy, in contrast to a fantasy, displays unconscious aspects of our mental life. While the fantasy has a conceptual

content that does not stand in need of interpretation and deciphering in order to be understood and is directed towards a goal with a desire to have that goal fulfilled, the phantasy displays a meaning that the person himself cannot understand or express. It is a mental capacity that makes use of language in associations and of mental capacities such as rationalizations, but at the same time it is shielded from the understanding and judgment that a full blown conceptual and logical capacity makes possible. In Lear's words:

What the cringe lacks is, in the literal sense of the term, information. It has not yet been fully formed, because it has not been taken up into *logos* and embedded in the web of beliefs, expectations, and desire which would help constitute it as fear<sup>7</sup>.

Lear captures what it means for something not to have become conscious. The Ratman does not know what his cringe is an expression of. He is searching for a good explanation to his behaviour which he does not understand. The Ratman gives seemingly plausible explanations for his behaviour, but he cannot yet experience his behaviour in the context of beliefs, expectations, and desires where it could take form and become conscious, as an expression of fear for something specific.

In his interpretation of the Ratman, Lear looks to modify the image that Freud sometimes presents: that the unconscious feeling is just like the conscious the only difference being that it is not yet conscious. He uses the word fearful to point to that the Ratman, who harbours an unconscious fear, does not know what he fears nor why he fears it. We expect that a person should be rational and transparent to himself – to able to express why he does as he does and feels as he feels without interpretation and with first-person authority – but this is what the Ratman cannot do. (And what many of us sometimes cannot do, we sometimes fail in rationality and transparency.) The cringe is not a rational action based on a belief that Freud is going to beat him with the only difference that the belief is unconscious. Instead the cringe is an instinctive reaction the motivation of which can be grasped only later, when the context which gave rise to it has been reconstructed with the aim of understanding the reaction. The thought that becoming conscious of something means that one uncovers or recollects something that has been there all along is thus misleading. The Ratman may later experience fear of something specific, and it may be clear that his anxiety and reaction of cringing were primitive expressions for what would later develop into a well-articulated fear, but this should not be understood as an unveiling of a fear.

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, p. 94.

It would be truer to say that the feeling hadn't quite taken shape before.

Freud says that what happens when something becomes conscious is that the word is added to the thing-representation. If this would only mean that a wordless presentation, which did not in other respects differ from a conscious presentation, was dressed in words, Freud's account would be poor. That would not capture much of what becoming conscious of something means. When that which is unconscious is only sensed, for example by giving rise to vague feelings and associations too obscure to form a whole, it distinguishes that of which we are conscious that it is understood *as* something and as distinct from something else. It implies certain things and it excludes other, it is desirable in certain ways and undesirable in other. That which is conscious has a place in a linguistically meaningful context and in other meaningful contexts (emotional, rational, ethical) while that which is unconscious lacks such a place because it has not taken form as a certain feeling, thought or suspicion yet. Thus, it lacks a clear meaning and content. Rather than being understood as a certain feeling or judgment open for reflection and modification, it crops up in behaviours and mood swings that one does not understand the import of oneself.

### *The Feeling Completed in Language*

In another context where Lear is trying to capture the role that verbal expression plays in the information of a feeling, he suggests that we can understand the key-role that expression plays in the transformation of an unconscious feeling to conscious if we understand expression as *replacement* of a non-verbal expression for a verbal expression. Lear turns to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), where Wittgenstein discusses how words that express pain relate to the cry, the primitive, natural expression of pain. Wittgenstein says that the verbal expression *replaces* the cry<sup>8</sup>. He describes how words come to express sensations and is attentive to the difference between expressions (of pain, joy, disappointment) and descriptions. In this context he asks: how can we learn verbal expressions for sensations when sensations cannot be demonstrated? In his attempt to dissolve this difficulty, Wittgenstein aims to show that sensations are manifest, the pain as a cry for example, and that the linguistically formulated expres-

<sup>8</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. by G.E.M. Anscombe, Blackwell Publishing, London 2001<sup>3</sup>, §244.

sion should be viewed as a continuation of such natural expressions.

The philosopher Richard Moran, however, is doubtful of Lear's application of Wittgenstein's remark that the verbal expression replaces the primitive expression:

The idea of 'replacing' one mode of expression for another is not perfectly clear to me, particularly in the therapeutic context where Lear is importing the idea. [...] we might ask, if the two modes of expression are really doing the same work, then what is the point of 'replacing' one with the other<sup>9</sup>?

Moran expresses scepticism against bringing together what he sees as two radically different things: a person's own self-understanding and the experience of pain. Initially this remark seems relevant and important. Is the reflection that the verbal expression for pain grows out of the natural illustrative in understanding what it means to become conscious of something, as the ability to express one's feeling in words? Wittgenstein's discussion is clearly illustrative for how we learn to express pain in words when we learn to speak. But Lear makes use of these passages in Wittgenstein to express coming to consciousness of something repressed as regain of the capacity that one normally possesses, that is: to be able to express one's feelings in words instead of acting them out and, later, try to disclose what it was one felt and why through intellectual reasoning. Moran objects, if the two modes of expression do the same job, what is the point of replacing the one with the other? But the question I will pose is if the verbal expression really performs the same job as the cry which it replaces. Sure, they both express pain. But "Ouch, it hurts so bad!" expresses something more than "Aaaa!!". The verbal expression makes evident that the person who expresses herself has a concept of pain. A person who yells "Aaaa!!" does not have to have a concept of pain, nor does she have to understand what caused the sensation. Thus, replacing the cry with a verbal expression does not imply that the latter is *the same* as the cry. The verbal expression is not interchangeable with the natural, rather it is a manifestation of pain that reveals more.

Here I want to return to Freud's statement that what distinguishes the conscious presentation from the unconscious is that the former is the translation into words of the latter. I believe that the parallel which Lear makes, and that Moran objects to – of expressing one's pain in words and being able to express a previously repressed feeling in words – enable a more fruitful

<sup>9</sup> R. Moran, *Psychoanalysis and the Limits of Reflection*, in J. Lear, *A Case for Irony*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2011, pp. 103-114, p. 113.

interpretation of Freud's use of translation to account for the transition from the unconscious to the conscious.

The use that Lear makes of Wittgenstein's statement that word replaces the natural expression can be understood in terms of transformation and development. In his analysis of the Ratman case study Lear talks of the Ratman's cringe as an expression, though one where the Ratman does not know what it is an expression for. In a case such as this, where first-person authority is lacking, the person must start with the natural expression, the reaction, in his strive to regain first-person awareness and authority. Thus, as I understand it, it cannot be Lear's view that the two expressions do the same job (as Moran implies) – the primitive cringe and the verbalization of the fear that the Ratman might be able to accomplish at the end of the therapeutic work. If they were identical articulation, the verbal expression, could not play the decisive role that Lear, in Freud's aftermath, takes it to play in therapy, of being that moment when something becomes conscious. For something to be an articulation of a previously unconscious feeling, the articulation must *get it right*; it must be an expression of that feeling, and a continuation of it.

That the verbal expression replaces the primitive, natural expression thus does not imply that the expressions are interchangeable or the same. Still, replacement articulates something important in Wittgenstein's analysis as well as in Lear's analysis of the situation of therapy, namely how strongly connected the natural and the verbal expressions are. They are part of the same process and the verbal expression is a continuation of the natural. Both expressions display the person's inner life but the natural expression is not necessarily comprehended by the person whose expression it is.

I have argued that replacement, in the meaning it is given in the context above, describes well what goes on when we learn to express our pain in words and when something unconscious is transformed into something conscious. But the question remains, can the discussion of Wittgenstein's and Lear's use of replacement illumine what the concept translation may signify in the process when something becomes conscious?

### *Translation as transference*

The German expression *etwas zu übersetzen* has the literal meaning of carrying something across. The English word translate is related to the Latin *transfere*, to transfer something, and thus bear a similar meaning. What is



it that one puts across when one translates? In the translation of a sentence formulated in one language to another language it seems right to say that it is the sense or meaning that one puts across to the other language. In a broad sense, comprising connotation, denotation the musicality of language et cetera, in the cases where it is important and to the extent that this is possible.

Freud speaks of conscious-making as translation and I have reflected upon how this use can, misleadingly, suggest that the unconscious feeling has the same form or structure as the conscious feeling. In *The Unconscious* Freud speaks of the presentation becoming conscious when the word is added to the object, as exemplified in the second quote on the first page of this paper. In Freud's formulations "translation into words" and "translation into something conscious", the object, the presentation or idea, can seem to be the same conscious as well as unconscious and this would not make sense of the transformation and continuation. And still, in some way or to some extent it must be the same because the unconscious, still undeveloped feeling is *a primitive form* of the conscious and well-articulated feeling. For an utterance to be an expression of the previous unconscious feeling it must, so to say, hit the spot. Something remains and something separates the two. Lear's and Moran's discussion of the use of replacement illuminated this but did not discuss translation. Can we imagine a use in which the concept translation can capture this?

The philosopher and psychoanalyst Johan Eriksson writes of a development in Freud's thinking. In his early years Freud was using hypnosis to treat cases of psychosomatic distress. Hypnosis put resistance out of play so that the patient could recollect (*erinnern*) earlier experiences with ease. An underlying assumption here was that there was a memory of the experience there to recollect.<sup>10</sup> In *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through*<sup>11</sup> Freud presents another understanding, where coming to awareness of repressed and unconscious mental content requires not mere recollection but structuring. Unconscious aspects of a person's character are thought of as undeveloped and lacking affective organization and orientation (this is what we have seen Lear describe). Thus, what is repressed must be articulated and integrated into the analysand's self-understanding in a transformative process described by the theory of psychoanalysis as working-through. While the method of recollection is a searching for and a callback of the

<sup>10</sup> J. Eriksson, *Att minnas – om erinring, upprepning och genomarbetning*, in «Tidskriften Divan», 3-4 (2014), pp. 74-85, pp. 78.

<sup>11</sup> S. Freud, *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through*, in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, vol. 12, editore, luogo 1911, pp. 145-156.

past, working-through, Eriksson writes, is an activity in which remembering involves a *formation* of the past. It is a creation, development and transformation. While Freud and Breuer in the early years were trying to avoid defensive strategies, working through means that analyst and analysand together start to modify the defensive, rigid and libidinally loaded character structures that have been formed to prevent unconscious impulses and processes to develop and take form<sup>12</sup>.

Freud says that in practicing psychoanalysis one experiences on an everyday basis that translation from the unconscious to conscious is possible, and that it requires that the patient overcomes the resistances that once led to that something was rejected from consciousness. Psychoanalytic work is successful when the therapist finds ways to help the analysand to get hold of repressed feelings and thoughts and to articulate them so that they can become part of her conscious inner life. As we have seen, that means helping her to pass from primitive expressions and associations to verbalising her feelings and be able to reflect upon them. The therapeutic conversation, when it succeeds, is the context in which vague and wandering associations can be articulated and understood as part of a conceptual, rational, emotional and moral whole. If we allow ourselves a metaphorical description, we can see the successful therapeutic conversation as a bridge between the unconscious and the conscious, since it can help the patient to articulate previously unconscious feelings, wishes or ideas and thereby make them conscious.

If we understand Freud's use of translation as bridging, carrying something across – as transference – from a state of being unconscious to a state of being conscious, the problems that first arouse is no longer there. That is, that the concept translation does not sufficiently well make visible the development that a feeling (wish, idea, et cetera) undergo when it becomes conscious. Translation into words now means that what was not possible to express verbally because it was held apart from the context in which it could be experienced as a certain feeling, takes shape as a full-blown feeling when resistance has been overcome and the feeling can gain a place in a meaningful context.

I see the interpretation that I have just presented as an opening towards a sense in which the concept translation can contribute to an understanding of conscious-making in a way that complement the other descriptions. We can understand the process through which something becomes conscious as translation if we understand translation not first and foremost as *mediating* meaning but as *creation, development* and *transformation*.

<sup>12</sup> J. Eriksson, *Att minnas – om erinring, upprepning och genomarbetning*, cit., p. 84.

The transition from a therapy of recollection to a therapy of working-through has implications for the psychoanalytic conversation. Since remembering the repressed no longer means recollection of an experience in the past but involves a forming of the past, the interplay between the patient and the analyst takes center stage. Eriksson writes that the past must now be present here and now and we have seen that it is in the process of working-through. This is particularly true in the so-called object transference, where the analyst ascribes feelings and attitudes associated with a person in her past (and perhaps present) to the therapist and directs her own responses to the person in the past to the therapist. Therapy is a recurrence of the problems of the past in the present and this makes it possible for the therapist to, as Eriksson puts it, work with the past as a force in the present<sup>13</sup>. In the therapeutic conversation frustration, disappointment, anger, self-reproaches stemming from relations and episodes from the past are acted out impulsively and directed at the therapist. This allows the therapist not only to experience, interpret and talk about these manifestations with the analysand but to play an active part in these “scenes” in which a memory is about to be articulated, a past is beginning to form, and a self-understanding is beginning to grow.

### *The task of the translator*

I wrote earlier that we can understand the process through which something becomes conscious as translation if we understand translation not first and foremost as mediating meaning but as creation, development, and transformation. In the last part of the paper I want to turn our gaze to translation as we best know it, from one language to another. I have chosen a piece of writing that can help us see similarities between translation in this sense and translation in the Freudian context, from non-verbal expression to verbal, Walter Benjamin’s classic piece *The Task of the Translator* (1923)<sup>14</sup>. This, I hope, will not only be of help in understanding Freud’s use of translation but can also open our eyes to simplifications in a conventional understanding of translation.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator* (1923), in M. Bullock, M.W. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2002, pp. 253-263.

At the beginning of the essay, Benjamin asks what a translation of a literary work is meant to do. Is it to communicate what the original text says? This at once gives rise to the question: what does a literary work “say”? Its essential quality, writes Benjamin, lies not in “telling” us something. Benjamin adds that thinking of the literary work and the translation as imparting information is wrong-headed because this is not the essential quality of these texts. Benjamin does not articulate what the essential quality would be but he describes the intention of the poet as “spontaneous, primary, manifest”<sup>15</sup>. These descriptions suggest, I think, that the literary work should be understood as an *expression* of the poet. An expression through language but spontaneous and primary nonetheless.

What about the translation, what should it be like? We have seen that a translation of a literary work is not meant to transmit information and reproduce meaning. Fidelity in translation is something else. Benjamin expresses it beautifully, «a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language».<sup>16</sup> A translation should not strive for likeness to the original, it is rather a continuation of the original, its afterlife as Benjamin puts it. This implies limits as well as openness. The first translation and later to come are parts of the afterlife of a literary work and Benjamin describes the translation as a transformation and renewal of the original. The original is not something static and permanent. No, it is something living and changing.

It is the translator who is giving the literary work its afterlife. Benjamin writes that the laws governing the translation lie within the original and must be derived from it. The originality of a translation is thus different than the originality of a literary work, as the description of the latter as a spontaneous and primary expression signals. Benjamin further characterizes the intention of the translator as ideational as opposed to the poet’s manifest intention. The poet gives expression to the sensual, while the translator pertains to the formation of ideas of objects not immediately present to the senses. While the original is a spontaneous and primary literary expression of that which is perceived, the translation interprets and forms ideas of the literary expression. The translation of the literary work involves interpreting the meaning of its words in the context of the given language, culture and time.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, p. 259.

<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*, p. 260.

*Psychotherapeutic work as translation*

Although Benjamin writes of translation from one articulate linguistic form to another, he carefully and vividly portrays the differences in form of a literary work and a translation of it. This helps us see that there are close similarities between what Benjamin writes about a good translation of a literary work and the work of the analyst and analysand in attempting to understand “the spontaneous, primary and manifest” expressions of the analysand. These expressions, although spontaneous and primary, carry meaning which because of the patient’s situatedness is culturally and historically bound and the interpretation must grow out of the meaning already expressed in these primary expressions, however incomplete this meaning may appear. In other words, what is just sensed needs to be inquired into, continued and articulated as a certain thought, feeling, memory, idea, etc. This is what the psychoanalytic conversation aims at.

Benjamin’s essay offers a fruitful context for contemplating psychotherapeutic work as translation. First it is clear that translation cannot mean transmission of content or information since if there is a distinguishing mark of what within psychoanalysis is called the dynamic or repressed unconscious, it is that it does not contain any defined content or piece of information. There is behavior, utterances, resistance, reactions but we who are standing by, as well as the person who behaves, resists et cetera, are initially at loss in grasping the meaning or knowing how to interpret these actions. Lear says of the repressed unconscious that what it lacks is information. What he refers to is that it has not yet taken shape *as* a certain belief, emotion, wish etc. The Ratman’s cringe before Freud is not a response to a certain fear he has and can articulate. The fear has not yet been in-formed. It is not yet a fear because a fear is a fear of something, and the Ratman does not know what he fears. This is also explicative for what information is; information already has a form, it has taken shape.

The literary work is an expression in words, but we saw Benjamin reject the idea that a translation of a literary work would be imparting information. It has content and possibly expresses information, but the literary text is very different from an informative text, it has other qualities and they are primary. Benjamin does not define these and he doesn’t have to. Take the ability of a literary work to move us as an example. This is why a translation that intends to perform a transmitting function doesn’t touch the essence of the literary work. There is a close parallel to this in Freud’s work expressed in a section of his *Introductory Lectures* (1916-17) that gets right to the heart of repression and the psychotherapeutic practice.

Knowledge is not always the same as knowledge: there are different sorts of knowledge, which are far from equivalent psychologically [...] The doctor's knowledge is not the same as the patient's and cannot produce the same effects. If the doctor transfers his knowledge to his patient as a piece of information, it has no result. [...] The patient knows after this what he did not know before – the sense of his symptom, yet he knows it just as little as he did. Thus we learn that there is more than one kind of ignorance<sup>17</sup>.

In plainly presenting his interpretation to the patient the doctor transfers it as a piece of information. The patient understands what the doctor says and he might even adhere to this interpretation on a conscious level, accepting it as knowledge. But this knowledge doesn't remove his symptoms, it doesn't make him feel better. This passage shows well what repression is like and it points to what is peculiar about the psychotherapeutic conversation. A statement, a transmission of knowledge, of information, might provoke the patient but it does not help him to understand what troubles him or what plays out in his reactions and symptoms. It does not bring about the "internal change in the patient" that is needed to bring about the kind of knowledge that matters. Another way of putting this is to say that the doctor's statement doesn't affect the patient's inner dialogue, because dynamically unconscious mental life is not primarily rational and responsive to evidence or reasoning. Thus, in order to bring about internal change in the patient, the doctor's talk must have other qualities. It must, to start with, help create a room for the inner life of the patient to express itself, in behavior and unreflective verbal language as well as in therapeutic relations (e.g. transference). And in this dialogue the doctor can help the patient explore his inner life by, for example, encouraging and triggering associations.

The psychoanalyst and writer Thomas Ogden writes about the openness, uncertainty and productive fragility of therapeutic discourse in the paper *How I Talk With My Patients* (2018), with particular emphasis on the importance of creating a space for the patient to be creative in the act of communicating since this can be an essential part of «his coming into being in a way that is uniquely his own»<sup>18</sup>. Ogden is trying not to interrogate his patient, for example by asking him how he feels, since he has found that this invites the patient to move to the surface level of his experience, «to think and speak

<sup>17</sup> S. Freud, *Introductory Lectures* (part III), in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, vol. 16, editore, luogo 1916-17, p. 281.

<sup>18</sup> T. Ogden, *How I Talk With My Patients*, in «The Psychoanalytic Quarterly», 87, 3 (2018), pp. 399-413, p. 400.

[...] in conscious, logical, sequential, chronological, cause-and-effect (secondary process) modes of thinking»<sup>19</sup> and that this can prevent the patient from exploring his feelings rather than taking him closer to them.

This reminds us of the rationalizations that Lear pointed out in the Ratman's self-interpretation, how they played a part in upholding the resistance rather than in trying to overcome it. We also see that therapy for Ogden is not about mediating meaning but about allowing for and encouraging creation and development of meaning, similarly to how Benjamin describes the translation of a literary work. Benjamin describes the translation as the afterlife of the literary work and in Ogden's as well as in Eriksson's account is the past seen as imbuing the present and as taking shape through the cause of therapy.

### *The therapeutic conversation*

The psychotherapist's task is to make room for the "spontaneous, primary, manifest" to show itself and to be translated in the psychotherapeutic conversation into a reflective, reasoned and conceptual discourse without losing the meaning and deep significance of these primary manifestations. If that is lost, translation is lost; there will be no carrying over from unconscious mental states to conscious. Here I want to use Benjamin's words «Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability»<sup>20</sup>. What the psychotherapeutic conversation gives room for are spontaneous and primary expressions, expressions that the expressing subject does not yet understand. The translation must be a translation into another form of expression. Not into a statement, a piece of information, or a knowledge claim. This is just what Benjamin brings out in his text, though here the object of the translation is a literary text, a poet's expression. Benjamin says that a translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something, from rendering the sense. Instead, the translation must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language.

As seen in the context of psychotherapeutic practice, Benjamin's words

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401.

<sup>20</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*, cit., p. 253.

express the ideal outcome of therapy. If the patient can lovingly and in detail remember and affirm the strong primary feelings which gave rise to repression while bringing them into his reflective, evaluative and verbally expressive discourse, he will have reached greater self-awareness and harmony. In writing of the relation of the translation to the literary work, Benjamin uses that word: the translation should give «voice to the *intentio* of the original not as a reproduction but as a harmony [...] A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows its pure language [...] to shine upon the original all the more fully»<sup>21</sup>. This can also be heard in Ogden's articulation of how he talks, or aims to talk, with his patients. Similarly, a life-affirming and truthful self-understanding acknowledges and grows out of the insights gained in tracing the reaction back to its roots, letting the feelings manifest in the reactions reveal the meaning of the traumatic experience.

### *Epilogue*

If we now return to the question that I posed at the beginning of the paper, can the concept translation do justice to conscious-making as articulation, where have we ended up? I ended the first part of the paper with the suggestion that we can metaphorically see the successful therapeutic conversation as a bridge between the unconscious and the conscious, since it can help the patient to articulate previously unconscious feelings, wishes or ideas and thereby make them conscious. Translation into words could not, in my interpretation, imply that what was repressed stands outside of language but that the repressed is cut off from a conceptual and logical whole and that is why it cannot be articulated or put into words. When resistance has been overcome and the feeling can gain a place in a meaningful context and be articulated, it takes shape as a full-blown feeling. I concluded that the concept translation can contribute to an understanding of conscious-making if we understand translation not first and foremost as mediating meaning but as creation, development, and transformation.

In attending to Benjamin's essay, we have seen that a translation of a literary work, when it is good, is a further articulation or continuation of the original. It is not an imparting of information, a saying "the same thing" all over again. Expressed differently, it is not a mere mediation of mean-

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*, p. 260.



ing. The translation is, as Benjamin writes, the afterlife of the original. This describes very well the relation between the repressed idea or feeling and the articulation of it that marks the way out of repression. It is an articulation of the repressed, thus a *continuation* of it in being a replacement of a verbal expression for a primitive. And in being an articulation it is already the afterlife of the repressed because with the articulation the repression is lifted. The articulation gives meaning to the behaviour that repression gave rise to, the “symptom”, the fearful cringe, because articulation of ones’ fear implies knowing what it is a fear of and why one fears it. Even if it is an irrational or unmotivated fear, the person who expresses or articulates it now relates to it as hers.

## Abstract

*In The Unconscious Freud uses the concept translation alongside transformation and replacement to describe the process in which dynamically unconscious mental content takes conscious form. This paper inquires into how translation should be understood in the psychoanalytic context and if translation can capture conscious-making. Intuitively there seems to be a problem: translation is typically used for translations from a language with an articulative structure to another while it is distinctive of the repressed unconscious that it is lacking in conceptual and logical structure. Can translation account both for the meaning that is there and what is lacking? In dialogue with contemporary psychoanalytic writers, philosophers in the Wittgensteinian tradition and Benjamin’s The task of the translator the author presents a reading in which translation as used to describe the therapeutic work of making the unconscious conscious is understood not as as mediating meaning but as creation and development.*

Keywords: Articulation; Translation; Replacement; Becoming conscious; Psychotherapeutic conversation.

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Una riflessione critica sull'attualità della traduzione e delle sue molteplici declinazioni appare un tema di primo piano nell'ambito della ricerca filosofica contemporanea. Questo fascicolo di «Teoria» pubblica gli interventi tenuti al convegno *Homo translator. Traditions in translation*, organizzato presso la Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan, e alcuni saggi selezionati, che estendono la prospettiva dell'indagine agli ambiti della letteratura, delle tecnologie, della psicanalisi, della politica.

A critical reflection about the relevance of translation and its many variations seems to be a priority in contemporary philosophic research. This issue of «Teoria» features the talks held at *Homo translator. Traditions in translation*, a meeting organised at the Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan, and other selected papers, which broaden the horizon of the survey to the spheres of literature, technology, psychoanalysis and politics.

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