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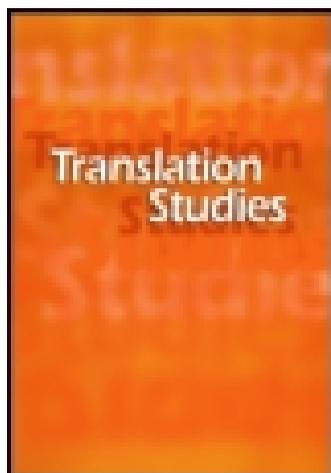
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The outer limits of otherness: Ideologies of human translation in speculative fiction

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This work considers the ways in which human translation and human translators are depicted as interacting with unknown languages in classic works of speculative fiction. The objective is to reveal the range of underlying conceptions entertained about language and consciousness. Some of the philosophies on which these linguistic fictions are built are benign, but some use translation for expansionist ends. Almost all the fictional scenarios posit a colonial encounter, hence the potential interest of these works to translators, especially as they form a vexed image of translating, showing translating to be a primary intercultural contact skill on which political realities, and existential identities characterized by ethnocentricity – or, less commonly, ethno-relativity – depend. Resistances to translation – untranslatabilities – emerge as a common denominator of depictions of otherness, whether for reasons of distance, for thought manipulation or as a defense against cultural appropriation from colonizers.

Keywords: science fiction; speculative fiction; translation; linguistics; linguistic science fiction; untranslatability

“Doctor Nelson will be along in a minute. Feel like some breakfast?” ...
[The alien] knew that he was food, but he did not “feel like” food.
Nor had he had any warning that he might be selected for such an honor.
(Heinlein 2003, 11)

If alien language is discovered anywhere across the immensity of space, its translation poses an unavoidable problem. Yet Brian Mossop (1996) argues that the problem of translation in science fiction is too often sidestepped through telepathy, machine translation or a “pancosmic lingua franca” (ibid., 1; see also Cronin 2000; Meyers 1980; Robinson 1999–2000). A fiction of transparency pervades the genre, most notably where the presentation of events occurs in the reader’s language until a metalinguistic disruption shows that speakers are actually conversing in another tongue. As an instance of this convention, consider this passage from Jack Vance’s *The Languages of Pao*, in which a new language for training warriors (devised by adherents to a strong-form Whorfian position) is discussed in Paonese, though we read of it in English:

The new language will be based on the contrast and comparison of strength with a grammar simple and direct. To illustrate, consider the sentence, “The farmer chops

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down a tree.” (Literally rendered from the Paonese in which the two men spoke, the sentence was: “*farmer in state of exertion; axe agency; tree in state of subjection to attack.*”) In the new language the sentence becomes: “The farmer overcomes the inertia of the axe; the axe breaks asunder the resistance of tree.” Or perhaps: “The farmer vanquishes the tree, using the weapon-instrument of the axe.” (Vance 1958, 87)

This article will consider a few representative cases in the genre in which human translation, a retronym, figures as a troubling theme. Rather than cataloguing the works under discussion as science fiction, which has tended to be defined in technological terms, I prefer the broader *speculative fiction* or the more humanistic *linguistic fiction* (Yaguello 1984). Linguistic fiction foregrounds language and linguistics as its central argument, embracing relationships between reality and thought, words and language, and humans and others, and often putting the discipline’s working hypotheses to extreme tests. Naturally, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in its strong and weak forms will underlie many of these fictions, particularly given that many of the texts date from the mid-twentieth century, when support for the theory was stronger than it is now. My overarching purpose is to show how untranslatability is either ideologically dramatized as a first contact with insurmountable or unconquerable otherness, or surmounted and conquered through manipulation or through colonializing assertions of a de facto universality. Unlike the transcoding performed by machines – “*deus ex machina*” translations – translation will be considered in its human dimension – that is, as an inevitably imperfect task – and in its affective dimension, including the traumas of incommensurability. Human translation in these tales illustrates Dirk Delabastita and Rainier Grutman’s (2005) claim that fictional representations of translators, what Beebee (2012, 3) terms *transmesis* (“literary authors’ use of fiction to depict acts of translation”), portray situations of spatial displacement – “travel, exploration, conquest, migration” – and the resultant threats to identity (Delabastita and Grutman 2005, 24). The translator is figured variously as hero or villain, but always as a limitrophic being holding the line between sense and untranslatability, and constituting translation as a site of privilege, beneficence, power or abuse. (Un)translatability and its forms naturally are the leitmotif of much classic linguistic fiction. The paper concentrates mostly on portrayals of written language but will briefly consider deciphering (e.g. cryptolinguistics), interpreting and language acquisition.

The untranslatable as foreign exchange

In our exploration of untranslatability we will draw on Catford’s (1965, 94) distinction between linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability; he notes that “[t]ranslation fails ... when it is impossible to build functionally relevant features of the situation into the contextual meaning of the TL text”. In some works of linguistic fiction, the results are as benign as the early phases of culture shock:

The Man from Mars ... simply waited in a fashion which may be described as “patient” only because human language does not embrace Martian emotions nor attitudes. ... He had no clear idea how long it had been since he had first shared water with this brother; [this place held] experiences new to him and not yet grokked, but also the culture of his nest took a different grasp of time from that which is human. ... The

sentence, “It is later than you think,” could not have been expressed in Martian – nor could “Haste makes waste,” though for a different reason: the first notion was inconceivable while the latter was an unexpressed Martian basic, as unnecessary as telling a fish to bathe. But the quotation, “As it was in the Beginning, is now and ever shall be,” was so Martian in mood that it could be translated more easily than “two plus two makes four” – which was not a truism on Mars. (Heinlein 2003, 57)

The use of *grokking* as an untranslated borrowing in the novel demonstrates the context-specificity of a term that the reader must link to concept clusters in order to begin to map it. Its untranslatedness signals a polysemous chain – drinking, communion, empathic comprehension – that threatens not only human individuality, but the polarities, and uniquenesses, we ascribe to emotions:

It means “fear”, it means “love”, it means “hate” – proper hate, for by the Martian “map” you cannot hate anything unless you grok it, understand it so thoroughly that you merge with it and it merges with you – then you can hate. ... “This hurts me more than it does you” has a Martian flavor. “Grok” means to understand so thoroughly that the observer becomes a part of the observed – to merge, blend, intermarry, lose identity in group experience. (Ibid., 213)

In the description of the term as “the observer becomes a part of the observed”, we see a framework of a Western scientific orientation (standing in for that of Earth), a twentieth-century quantum mechanics perspective. And yet, despite occasional alignments of thought, the character who explains *grokking* describes it intellectually, not experientially: “We don’t think in Martian. We *can’t*” (ibid., original emphasis). Some speculative fiction challenges readers’ bias toward subject–object dualism and scientism in general. In Ursula Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home*, in a translator’s note to the narration of a future inhabitant who “learned arboriculture with his mother’s brother ... and with orchard trees of all kinds” (Le Guin 1986, 275), Le Guin’s narrator recognizes the unusualness of the latter collocation “learning with”. As learning at that point in the future is considered a relationship, and reciprocal, rather than a transference, a more normative translation “seems at hopeless odds with the distinction of subject and object considered essential to science” (ibid.). The character developed a strain of pear tree that was named for him, which the translator reminds us is a symbol of “man’s control over Nature. This phrase, however, could not be translated into Kesh [their local language], which had no word meaning Nature except *she, being*” (ibid.).

The unnecessaryness of translation in given cases – not its impossibility – is borne out in *Stranger in A Strange Land* in the narrator’s musings on “Haste makes waste”. One of the criteria for Sperber and Wilson’s (2009, 270) Presumption of Optimal Relevance is that the utterance must be relevant enough to be worth processing. The communicative principle of relevance would be violated here in that the statement is self-evident, like “telling a fish to bathe” (Heinlein 2003, 57). In the terms of Grice (1961), the phrase in Martian would contravene the principle of informativeness, or Quantity. The narrator’s claim of irrelevance for the phrase in translation relies on the premise of an uncontacted Martian society – the phrase is inconceivable *insofar as that idea does not organically arise in that society*. But it is precisely in the interculturality that translation creates gaps – haste’s “unMartianness” is thrown into relief through the proximity of the two planets’ ways, not as an intrinsic feature of either. In the “two plus two makes four” passage, Heinlein undermines the

universality of a mathematical proposition, upping the stakes of untranslatability by making an immutable law more subject to the vicissitudes of translation than is the line from the Gloria Patri doxology (also known as the “Glory Be” prayer). For the unearthly visitor, what is variously interpretable and even paradoxical – a religious principle – makes a better candidate for translation than a scientific axiom. The text suggests, with this bit of heterodoxy, that science, while ostensibly universal, in fact takes culturally embedded forms.

Science as lingua franca

In H. Beam Piper’s (1957) short novella “Omnilingual” it is the opposite contention – that science is translinguistic – that prevails. Word-to-number equivalencies are the key to deciphering Martian. After the expedition team finds a periodic table in an abandoned building 50,000 years after Mars has been inhabited, one skeptic asks:

“but how can you be so sure that those words really mean things like hydrogen and helium and boron and oxygen? How do you know that their table of elements was anything like ours?”

...

“That isn’t just the Martian table of elements; that’s *the* table of elements.” (Ibid., 45)

The ability to read the aliens’ script – the archeologists have uncovered a library of 50,000 Martian volumes – depends on the key variable of Mars having been a scientific culture. Thus the Martian language is accessible not because it approximates the colonizers’ own, but because its speakers access the same “universal facts” (ibid., 46) of physical science – as one character calls them in the denouement. The principle is established in the story that “Nothing can be translated out of nothing” (35); curiously, the story suggests that empirical reality is the *something*, the *tertium comparationis*, by which languages can mirror each other and which provides the immutable core of all languages, whence the title, “Omnilingual”. Similarly, Gallun’s classic story “Old Faithful” (1934) uses Morse code¹ as a means of communication between Mars and Earth, and Earth scientists simply send mathematics problems until the receiving Martian learns basic communication. The novel *Contact* by Carl Sagan (1985) would also place mathematics at the core of the plot as a universal, one that depends on the receivers’ cultural framework to be interpreted:

You’re telling me there’s a message in eleven dimensions hidden deep inside the number pi? Someone in the universe communicates by... mathematics? ... Mathematics isn’t arbitrary. I mean pi has to have the same value everywhere. How can you hide a message inside pi? It’s built into the fabric of the universe. ... *It’s as if pi has been waiting for billions of years for ten-fingered mathematicians with fast computers to come along.* (1985, 367–368, emphasis added)

These fictional emplotments, like the “universal translator” gadgets of science fiction in general,

reflect the assumption that (verbalized) languages are all reducible to a basic stratum, a pure code capable of infinite varieties of incarnation with no loss of essential information, on the principle that all minds must share certain universal principles

transcending biological and cultural difference. ... These assumptions inevitably hide the ethnocentric worldviews of national languages, *when they are represented unreflectively as the natural ones shared by text and reader*. (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 2008, 34, emphasis added)

Writers in speculative fiction have represented alien communication through other non-verbal means besides numerics, using music, color, tones beyond human perception, radio waves, dance or other contrivances (see Galán Rodríguez 2008). Brinker-Gabler sums up the problem such portrayals perpetuate: “Literary representations of the other in colonialist writing are more often than not characterized by means of attributing restricted and deficient capability of language to the colonized” (1995, 11). Alien tongues may or may not be recognizably language as we understand it. Communicators employing such sensory phenomena as are depicted in this genre, furthermore, may not necessarily be inferior, except to the extent that a given work plays on the unfortunate human tendency to consider unintelligible speech – and insufficient mastery of the imperial human tongue – to be a sign of barbarity or, more perversely, of resistance and thus conquerability.

The leveraging of all of human knowledge, linguistic and extralinguistic, is further emphasized in “Old Faithful” in the excavators’ plan to send their findings and wordlists to Earth (“Terra”) for everyone to work out the rest of the translations. Significantly, this interplanetary crowdsourcing project reflects a model of translation based not on an individual consciousness interacting with a work, but on a collective, diachronic project that transcends any individual’s working knowledge. Postcolonial interrogation may well lead one to wonder why uncontacted civilizations would organize knowledge in the same ontologies as do societies on Earth, and to ponder whether these constructs have the same purpose everywhere, even if we grant the ratiocentric premise that fixed periodical elements would figure in all possible advanced civilizations’ cultural categories. Despite this lack of self-awareness of their own biases, the story’s colonizers have the translational sophistication to know the potential multivalence, and pitfalls, of the pictures paired with words that the team finds, unhelpfully, among the documents on Mars:

Suppose some alien to our culture found a picture of a man with a white beard and mustache sawing a billet from a log. He would think the caption meant, “Man Sawing Wood.” How would he know that it was really “Wilhelm II in Exile at Doorn?” (Gallun 1974, 16)

And more than intersemiotic problems arise here: How would anyone else know if the alien visitor knew what was meant? One clue is action. The functional utterances in which we use language are its meanings, as Wittgenstein reminds us; use and the recognition of utterances as language are coterminous:

Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on? The common behavior of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language. (2001, §206, quoted in Cantor 2008, n.p.)

Quine (1960) argues famously that radical translation – translating a totally unknown language – cannot rely solely on behavior to establish unambiguous,

unique translations. The multiplicity of possible renderings of stimulus meanings, which together can create coherent systems, lead to undetermination (insufficient evidence of what each item means in the natives' language) and the theoretical impossibility of a single correct translation. To assume that any two stimuli are coextensive is, to Quine (*ibid.*, 52), "to take for granted that the native is enough like us" to divide the world exactly as we do, and moreover the assumption confuses meaning and reference.

Imposed meanings are also invoked in a wry metacommentary on translation in "Omnilingual": the underground aqueducts that "everybody called canals in mistranslation of Schiaparelli's Italian word" (Piper 1957, 33).² The assumption of intelligent life on Mars persisted due to our own imposition of the word "canals" for the Italian *canali*, an ideological projection onto the red planet. Canals are a type of man-made construction that presuppose extraterrestrial builders. The playful touch in the story is the premise that there were in fact builders, and thus Earth scientists were not wrong about Martian life except in embracing the wrong technical term for these planetary features.

The untranslatable as conceptual complexity

The dramatic potential of the untranslatability motif in first contact stories is often exploited with a view to creating a parallel; to wit, that just as the alien cultural Other's words are irreconcilable with our own, so too are their practices, the principles on which they are based, their material culture and their thought processes. In other words, language untranslatability in the genre stands for frustrated confrontation with newness, whether a gestalt made up of a thing, concept, linkage of thing to concept, or linkage of multiple concepts in a single term: "No doubt this was all a matter of *shifgrethor* – prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority in Karhide and all civilizations of Gethen" (Le Guin 1969, 10). To "prove" untranslatability the narrator performs, then, a componential analysis in approximating alien ideas. *Shifgrethor* is related to shadow, and its use represents a comment on political intransparency (Meyers 1980, 9). Thus the untranslatability rests not on unavailable meaning but on the naive criterion of the impossibility of re-encoding the term in a single similarly charged term in the visitors' language. Semantic clusters in a language unknown to a given speaker highlight the complexity of even a single noun, the comprehension of which presupposes invisible cultural knowledge. C.J. Cherryh writes:

Now what of truly alien experience? What of lifeforms that may have grown up with different drives (in the biological sense)? The gratification or repression of these drives will be linguistically expressed. Suppose, as in *Hunter of Worlds*, there is a predatory species like the iduve: they will have a word for the hunting-urge, and a cluster of words that depend from that hunting-urge. In them, I linked the hunting and the reproductive urges, and came up with a language in which love/lust and desire-to-kill are indistinguishable, but where desire-to-preserve would have links to a completely different drive: that of self-aggrandizement, or well-being ... [T]rying to explain human romantical urges to an iduve would leave the iduve highly confused. (1978, 8)

To give another example, in proposing a military language to “develop” a passive people, one character in *The Languages of Pao* describes how “key ideas will be synonymous; such as *pleasure* and *overcoming a resistance – relaxation* and *shame – out-worlder* and *rival*” (Vance 1958, 87, emphasis in original). It is just as true, though perhaps less demonstrable for the fiction writer, that culture does not only inhere to concrete nouns, but is implied in the network of world knowledge latent in any text:

Often unfamiliar cultural information does not simply reside in lexical items, but is a more diffuse presence in a source text. A translator may be faced, for example, with a myth, custom or economic condition presupposed by a text, but not located specifically in it. (Tymoczko 1999, 27)

Estrangement emerges not from the nouns but the nounlessness of the language in Jorge Luis Borges’ ([1940] 1962) *ficción*, “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*”, which tells of an imaginary world born of an intellectual conspiracy and that eventually merges into our own reality. In a radical form of Berkeleyan idealism, the inhabitants believe the world to be “not a concurrence of objects in space, but a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is serial and temporal but not spatial” (Borges 1962, 23). The *Ursprache* of *Tlönian* dialects has no nouns, but

there are impersonal verbs qualified by monosyllabic suffixes or prefixes which have the force of adverbs. For example, there is no word corresponding to the noun *moon*, but there is a verb *to moon* or *to moondle*. *The moon rose over the sea* would be written *hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö*, or, to put it in order: *upward beyond the constant flow there was moondling*. (Xul Solar translates it succinctly: *upward, beyond the onstreaming it mooned*.) (Ibid.)

The sequence invites comparison with Miéville’s (2011) *Embassytown*, in which the alien *Ariekans*, or “*Hosts*”, are incapable of abstraction (and thus of dissimulation), and must have a physical homologue of something in order to reference it. Borges’ fabulation in the tale also recalls Edward Sapir’s (1931) analysis of the *Nootka* language spoken on Vancouver Island. Lacking verbs to describe the falling of a stone, *Nootka* particularizes the verb “to fall” as inseparable from the noun: “[it] stones down”. Sapir gives this evidence in support of the relativity lurking behind our speech habits (Deutscher 2010, 139). In the intervening decades since Sapir, the notion of the *de facto* incapacities of a given language has met with more skepticism, perhaps rightly. Facile readings of Sapir-Whorf, certainly, invite an undemocratic ethos; namely, that speakers of other tongues are somehow lesser communicators if their languages do not foreground or already contain words or concepts we prize in our own.

Borges approaches the uncharted planet *Tlön* not through showing two confronted languages at an impasse, but by distorting the natural syntax of Spanish (and English, as the narrator’s gloss includes both in Borges’ original text). Recalling Quine’s theoreticization of objects (“*Rabbithood* is manifesting itself there” [1960, 152–154]) in his famous discussion of the *inscrutability of reference*, the renderings show a foreignizing translation strategy pushing the receiving language to its limits. The distortion is not done in a way that exhausts or captures the alienness, but, through two translations, suggests a defamiliarized world view that, as Kristal

observes, “the reader is in no position to identify” (2002, 90). The horror, or charm, lies not in accessing unmediated otherness, but in witnessing the process of our familiar language being made to perform in “othered” ways. Xul Solar, the Argentinean mystic painter of alternate universes, appears in the excerpt as a translator of the fictional language, and thus Borges pays homage to his compatriot’s quest for a transcendent language in which the local and universal conjoin.

Cultural distance between reader and alien world, or between character and alien, is not the only axis on which authors chart (un)translatability. The other dimension is *temporal* distance. In the prologue to *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin pleads her case through the voice of Pandora, the fictional editor, that the pastness of texts or their futurity – hypotheticality – present the same problem, that of non-presence:

The difficulty of translation from a language that doesn’t yet exist is considerable, but there’s no need to exaggerate it. ... The ancient Chinese book called *Tao teh ching* has been translated into English dozens of times, ... but no translation can give us the book that Lao Tze (who may not have existed) wrote. All we have is the *Tao te ching* that is here, now. And so with translations from a literature of the (or a) future. The fact that it hasn’t yet been written, the mere absence of a text to translate, doesn’t make all that much difference. (1986, xi)

Such speculations on temporality resolve the problem of absence in translation by asserting a presentness that can overcome inaccessible language; the text absent in time and space may be read as the fragmentation inherent in the translator’s task, given that the definitive text, the pure presence of the Other – in essence, a non-existent language – eludes our grasp. By the narrator’s positing of an irreducible *Tao te ching* that is only here, only now, the elusiveness of the source recedes in importance relative to what must be seen as the fully sufficient translation. In one fanciful story, translation competence is rendered present by the translator turning *within himself*. The language access problem is solved with a temporal disruption in Ray Vukceвич’s “The Wages of Syntax”, the premise of which is that an area of the human brain can be stimulated

in such a way that if the person is put in a position where making a translation is extremely important, if there is a precipitating event, that person’s brain looks ahead to a time when they actually do speak the language and makes the translation. (2002, n.p.)

Borrowing our own future competence, the proponent argues, can be likened to what we already do when we read:

Now it turns out this works because our brains are already time traveling all the time. ... We just don’t go as far as the people who experience spontaneous competence in an unknown language. Instead our brains make very tiny jumps ahead in time when we do “word sense disambiguation”. (Ibid.)

Stanislaw Lem’s ([1971] 1974) *The Futurological Congress* explores the idea that the unexpressed remains unknown, and its inverse corollary, a “futurological linguistics” – creating language to predict and bring about material and political change, essentially accessing the future. And *all* time converges in the alien’s language in “Story of Your

Life” by Ted Chiang (1998). The aliens’ written form of speech, Heptapod B, is performative; that is, everything written brings a kind of script into being, and breaks language from a strict chronologically linear plotting. Fermat’s Principle of Least Time is invoked to parallel the principle of knowing the start and end points of the speech act in advance. A certain fluency in this non-sequential alien language leads the linguist protagonist to experience all time simultaneously; thus she recounts the loss of her daughter polychronically. Linguistic determinism infiltrates the translator to the extent that she tells her own intimate, tragic story, her memory of the future having been unlocked through language, in an inescapably alien way. She has been “foreignized”, alien-ated.

An inverse case appears in which the narrator tells an alien story without understanding its implicatures. The “wave-dancing” by which the aliens communicate in “The Dance of the Changer and the Three” (Carr, 1968) presents yet another angle on untranslatability. The story’s narrator understands only dimly what happens, and he undercuts his own telling with uncertainty about what actions *mean*. His account does not quite rise to the status of translation:

So consider this a translation, and don’t bother yourself that when I say “water” I don’t mean our hydrogen-oxygen compound, or that there’s no “sky” as such on [the planet] Loarr, or for that matter that the Loarra weren’t – aren’t – creatures that “think” or “feel” in quite the way we understand. (Ibid., n.p.)

Although he tells his tale in human language, he gives the reader to understand that it can never be told “just as it happened”. The aliens’ folk-hero myth “The Changer and the Three” is clumsily translated by the narrator. The myth, as the narrator retells it within the story, ends with an incomprehensible ritualistic act of destruction. The aliens’ reason for the slaughter of the colonist-miners is simple and inexplicable: “Because”. In pragmatic terms, the narrator-translator has insufficient presuppositional information with which to make a pragmatic inference (terms are from Baker 1992, 259). His is a translation that self-undermines its status as a reliable artifact, and that proclaims its source text’s resistance to translation. The narrator is self-consciously unreliable despite his good faith, a translator who gives linguistic access but cannot culturally frame what he has experienced. A Gricean problem of quantity presents itself:

Their reason for wiping out the mining operation was untranslatable. No, they weren’t mad. No, they didn’t want us to go away. Yes, we were welcome to the stuff we were taking out of the depths of the Loarran ocean.

And, most importantly: No, they couldn’t tell me whether or not they were likely ever to repeat their attack. (Carr 1968, n.p.)

We are reminded that our measure of relevance and pragmatics, the Gricean principles, are markedly Anglocentric. Norms for gauging the proper amount of information, its relevance and manner of expression – as well as the pragmatic implications of norm violations – vary significantly between earthly cultures, not just between earthly and alien ones. As always, translation failure in Carr’s tale leads (or should lead) one to question whether the failure’s cause lies in the particular translator’s pragmatic incompetence (particularly as regards language function), in

the translator-text mismatch or in an absolute unbridgeability between two given languages.

The untranslatable as a resisting target

Translation failure can be engineered. The translator in one story finds a language constructed in such a way as to stave off comprehension and thus invasion. Robert Sheckley's ([1965] 1968) "Shall We Have a Little Talk?" imagines the colonizer as an unscrupulous pitchman, a "contactor" named Jackson who becomes an accidental translator. As the story is set in a more "ethical" future, his job is to provide a legal basis for territorial conquest. Faced with the Hon tongue on the planet Na, Jackson, after a week of intensive study (in science fiction a week or two seem to suffice for language proficiency), goes to a Naian real estate office to acquire property. His prospective broker assures him "the price is no difficulty. But first you'll have to fill out the *ollanbrit* form. It is just a few *sken* questions which *my naga* of everyone" (54). The form read: "Have you, now or at any past time, *elikated mushkies forsically*? State date of all occurrences" (ibid.). When Jackson asks for a clarification, his informant replies that "it means exactly what it says. ...To *elikate muskies* is almost the same as *bifur probishkai*" (ibid.). As time passes, more legal forms, with more procedures the visitor does not understand, are required. Finally their speech is a single repeated sound, *mun*, varied infinitely in meaning through intonation, gesture and patterning. The language on this planet changed with terrible speed, and, even worse, *the translator caused it*:

[A]n observer ... could never hope to fix or isolate even one term out of the dynamic shifting network of terms that composed the Na language. For the observer's action would be gross enough by itself to disrupt and alter the system, causing it to change unpredictably. And so, if the term were isolated, its relationship to the other terms in the system would necessarily be destroyed, and the term itself, by definition, would be false. (Ibid., 67)

This language indeterminacy, this imperviousness to fixed meanings, activated by attempts to master it, served as a defense for the Naians, much as language is weaponized in Samuel R. Delany (2001) *Babel-17*.³ And the linguistic moving target is made Heisenbergian in a cruel irony: the translator cannot comprehend the text that his attempt to comprehend has made incomprehensible. From a translation perspective, the lexical gap creates an instability not for the lacuna it creates, but for its effect on the ecology of global meaning. In some ways, we can read this as a translation parable of contextualization, with the absurdist twist here that context cannot be had without the need for more context, a *regressus ad infinitum*.

The idea, too, of a language or text that conceals deeper truths or otherwise protects something, even another, sacred, text, is not unknown in human history, such as slave and abolitionist communications that included coded language – speech, dance and even quilt patterns conveying secret messages – during the time of the Underground Railroad. And in fiction, Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* trilogy (1984–1994) dramatizes the phenomenon through a language, *Láadan*, created in secret by women, intergalactic interpreter-translators raised in a captive dynasty, to counter the androcentricity of existing languages. Mohr (2009, 244) points out such renderings as "Thou braidest my hair with Thine own hands" for the

line from the 23rd Psalm “Thou anointest my head with oil” (Elgin 1987, 210), a controversion of the masculinist discourse of the Bible.

The untranslatable and the non-human

Much speculative fiction conceives of languages as analogues of one basic human pattern, recalling Noam Chomsky’s observation, as recounted by Steven Pinker (1994, 232) that a hypothetical visitor to Earth would conclude that we all speak dialects of a single language. The case of the planet Solaris presented, in the fictional realm of Stanislaw Lem’s (1970) *Solaris*, a world that defied the efforts of centuries of scholarship to make sense of the theoretically sentient, intelligent ocean, a vast being that created weird, vast formations as well as indestructible “Phi-creations”, human simulacra made from the past traumas deep in visitors’ memories. The narrator notes that the awkward categories one scholar of the planet devised were geocentric, material “symphonies in geometry” (ibid., 130) that were given reductive Earth names such as “tides” (120). Lem himself describes a language that marked unknowability more than it scientifically identified taxonomic properties, and was, we might say, untranslatable to itself:

It neither built nor created anything translatable into our language that could have been “explained in translation.” Hence, a description had to be replaced by analysis – (obviously an impossible task) – of the internal workings of the Ocean’s ego. This gave rise to symmetriads, asymmetriads and mimoids - strange semi-constructions scientists were unable to understand; they could only describe them in a mathematically meticulous manner, and this was the sole purpose of the growing Solarian library – the result of over a hundred years’ efforts to enclose in folios what was not human and beyond human comprehension; what could not have been translated into human language – or into anything else. (2002, n.p.)

The novel holds out tantalizing possibilities for communication between vastly different life forms, but all are thwarted. Even a parallel between “Contact” and religion is drawn in the novel, whereby the divine ways are inscrutable to mere mortals: “incommunicable knowledge ... [t]ransposed into any human language, the values and meanings involved lose all substance; they cannot be brought intact through the barrier” (Lem 1970, 180). There is a meeting around the edges of meaning, we might say, but it is in the generation of the Solarists’ hypotheses, translations in their way, that the planet’s mystery endures. The non-translation of messages, or what human beings in their pattern-seeking zeal believe to be messages, shows in *Solaris* that the desire for translation is the desire for understanding. Fascinated and horrified, the fictional world’s denizens pursue, as do we, what is assumed to be meaningful but cannot be “read”.

The untranslatable as the unthinkable: The future language of Newspeak

Language planning embraces a wide variety of goals: the purification, reform, spread or revival of a language (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997, 61), and even interlingual communication. Thus translation can be a tool in the service of ideologically motivated rulers, a premise that fiction has explored to chilling effect. George Orwell’s ([1948] 1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four* depicts the destructive ends – the

plotting of language death – pursued by a totalitarian society convinced of the determinant link between language and the thought it (dis)allows. Orwell’s invented language, Newspeak, arises from a language policy that associates language purification with thought purification: “The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible” ([1948] 1949, 246). Orwell’s Newspeak turns on its head translation’s representational norm of preserving: “[P]olitical and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless” (ibid., 247). The concept of Newspeak rests on doubly faulty premises: first, that something that does not exist cannot be named – that is, that any given thought needs a name to be a thought (“it was seldom possible to follow a heretical thought further than the perception that it *was* heretical” [ibid., 252]); and second, that a name’s meaning or associations can be willfully delimited. The Newspeak proposal – never realized in the novel – also infringes an implicit translation principle that for any L1 text that is translatable into an L2, L2 is also translatable into L1. Orwell negates bidirectionality with the premise that L1>L2 is intended not to reflect the L1 text but to strip it of unorthodoxy, in effect to erase it. That is, untranslatability not only holds into the new language of the repressive state, but also in the scenario of *translation irreversibility* – one in which translation L2>L1 is impossible, or what Orwell’s narrator calls “illegitimately translating” (ibid., 255).

Two kinds of intralingual translation projects are described in Orwell’s appendix to the work. The first is what I will call imaginational translations, whereby a work is not actually translated but mentioned as an example of the wholesale shift in languages and their potentialities. The opening passages of the Declaration of Independence are cited as translatable by a single target language word, *crimethink*. Of the three Newspeak vocabularies, the “B” words, of which *crimethink* is one, are meant to unconsciously impose the Party’s political philosophy:

Some of the B words [the class of compound words] [were] barely intelligible to anyone who had not mastered the language as a whole. Consider, for example, such a typical sentence ... as *Oldthinkers unbellyfeel Ingsoc*. The shortest rendering that one could make of this in Oldspeak would be: “Those whose ideas were formed before the Revolution cannot have a full emotional understanding of the principles of English Socialism.” But this is not an adequate translation. ... [I]n order to grasp the full meaning of the Newspeak sentence quoted above, one would have to have a clear idea of what is meant by *Ingsoc*. ... [O]nly a person thoroughly grounded in Ingsoc could appreciate the full force of the word *bellyfeel*, which implied a blind, enthusiastic acceptance difficult to imagine today; or of the word *oldthink*, which was inextricably mixed up with the idea of wickedness and decadence. (Ibid., 250)

The second type of translation project are actual works of literature, subjected to what Orwell’s narrator calls *ideological translation*, by which is meant the transformation of propositional content – that is, the abandonment of representationality – in translation. The curiosity from a translation perspective is that literature as we know it is marked by highly personalized forms of expression, though in these translations, translators appear to be *anonymous* and their collective goal is to retain the memory but not the ideas of each writer. Merkle’s tripartite classification of

[c]ensorship refers broadly to the suppression of information in the form of self-censorship, boycotting or official state censorship before the utterance occurs (preventive or prior censorship) or to punishment for having disseminated a message to the public (post-censorship, negative or repressive censorship) (2002, 9).

If we follow this typology, then the prestige value of authorship, the authors' *aura*, is perpetuated indexically with Newspeak, while the content is post-censored:

A good deal of the literature of the past was, indeed, already being transformed [via ideological translation]. Considerations of prestige made it desirable to preserve the memory of certain historical figures, while at the same time bringing their achievements into line with the philosophy of Ingsoc. ... Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Byron, Dickens, and some others were therefore in process of translation: when the task had been completed, their original writings, with all else that survived of the literature of the past, would be destroyed. (Orwell 1949, 256)

Although Newspeak is in part a satire of future English, analogues of the ideology surrounding Newspeak exist in reality, as Choldin (1989, 32) tells us in his description of the Soviet censor's role during Stalinism, which was to "translate, edit, amend and rewrite the foreign work" to the glory of the revolutionary proletariat. Neither is the idea of producing a translation to destroy a text confined to fiction. Fray Francisco Ximénez's *Popol Wuj* at the turn of the eighteenth century sought not to preserve the text but to use it as a missionary tool to eradicate the pagan indigenous origin stories. Or consider Pierre Grange's (1927) insight that "religious translation, with its mission to make originals, threatens the existence of both source text and its author" (quoted in Barnstone 1993, 140).

Translatability and agency

Translatability in speculative fiction need not be related to conquest or censorship, though translation is never divorced from politics, especially when holy texts are involved. The narrator of "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" (Zelazny [1963] 1988), a preternaturally gifted linguist and misanthrope, is allowed into a Martian inner sanctum, first having to learn the aliens' High Tongue. He decides to translate the book of Ecclesiastes into Martian, due to the natural affinity in the spirit of the texts:

They wrote about concrete things: rocks, sand, water, winds; and the tenor couched within these elemental symbols was fiercely pessimistic. It reminded me of some Buddhist texts, but even more so, ... the Book of Ecclesiastes. The sentiment, as well as the vocabulary, was so similar that it would be a perfect exercise. Like putting Poe into French. ... I would show them that an Earthman had once thought the same thoughts, felt similarly. (Ibid., 314)

Given access to the sacred scrolls of Locar, he discovers that their prophecy is one of doom: that there is a plague of sterility on the planet and that the race is fated to die out. The hero-poet translates Ecclesiastes and reads it to the Martian inner circle, the Matriarchs, to inspire them to defy their fate and to show them that people have always endured despite pessimism. The translator, whose text is heretical to their doctrine of resignation, proves unwittingly to be their prophesied hero. He has also impregnated a Martian seductress who had used him to fulfill the prophecy, to his

despair and literal alienation. The traveler, then, enacts a (re)translation in an environment that, in Venuti's words, "subtly overdetermine[s] the translating, which can therefore result in consequences that the translator did not anticipate, especially consequences for reception" (2004, 28–29). The story explores the concept of one finding oneself through the Other, which has a long pedigree in translation theory, as the hero also attempts a "homeopathic translation", we might say, of like rendered into like. Thus the story's colonialism is attenuated: salvation, not destruction, comes from outside a dying ecology. The spirit of the colonized awakens, through translation, to an imported philosophy that was actually native all along. Rather than ruin, the savior-translator brings life (symbolically, he has a hydroponic rose grown on Mars). What he cannot muster for himself – full participation in either planet's society – he is able to facilitate for others. A simultaneous insider and outsider, the translator then is seen as a foreordained sacrifice, a pawn of larger forces, a protagonist with illusory agency despite his heroic acts.

Such ethical binds of the language mediator are illustrated perhaps most poignantly in C.M. Kornbluth's tale "That Share of Glory", which features interpreters trained to be in the service of interstellar merchants, but who uphold their own strict protocol of forging "unifying bonds which one day unite the cosmos into a single humankind" (1967, 258). The hero's linguistic order forbids the use of "any weapon but the truth in furthering cosmic utilitarian civilization" (*ibid.*). One interpreter defends the ideal as long as he can, though he quotes Machiavelli to help guide his own actions; in the end he is forced to kill when his multilingual diplomacy fails. Such texts serve to show that fictional translators and interpreters offer us vicarious proving grounds for our ideals. Neutrality, these works remind the linguist, is everywhere impossible; language, even in other worlds, is bound up with some kind of committed action, and some kind of ethical consequences.

Conclusion

This article has surveyed the translator in new worlds, who must confront the dilemmas of agency, patronage, identity, competence, ideology and untranslatability – all dimensions of human translation. In this way the article expands on previous scholarly work on technoscientific aspects of these genres of fiction, studies which largely concentrated on mechanical translation; classic works of shorter fiction are considered for the first time in this connection, and analysis is extended to self-consciously linguistic novels in speculative fiction that so far have gone unmined from a translation perspective. The limit-experiences of translators at the boundaries of translatability are recounted, and fantasies of humans confronting alternate forms of language are entertained, revealing new quandaries and new incommensurabilities, especially the search for stability underlying the volatile complexities of language difference.

A common denominator in linguistic fiction is that the translator is represented as a decision-making being, and takes part in every possible transaction known and unknown to humankind, including the negotiation of conflicts economic, ideological and cognitive. He or she cannot translate except in a situation, and cannot act alone but always in a network. The intermediate agent is sometimes heroic, sometimes villainous, and is found in ethical hesitation between systems of belief and between opposing loyalties. The hitherto-neglected ethical dimension of the

fictional translator in these genres thus is treated here, and the status of the translation itself – reliable and unreliable – sheds light on the ideological construction of identities in these works.

That a hero-translator or villain-translator can play a part in fiction supports the idea that translators, and language, are bound up in political action. Types of untranslatability appear in linguistic fiction, some of them thought experiments based on now-disputed beliefs (Sapir-Whorf), others showing our ethnocentric or ethno-relativistic tendencies in the face of newness. Untranslatability as an idea, independent of whether given texts are actually untranslatable, is thus a political problem: translators assume privileged positions, and influence the course of events even as they are transformed by their encounters, just as, in the works considered here, translators often remain outcasts, not wholly in either camp but residing in the interface itself. Translation's role in speech acts, with effects in the world (negotiation, exchange, understanding, cooperation, war, conquest), is played out in these texts, as language serves now as a tool, now as a weapon. Contact stories have given us the "scripts" to imagine approaches to the unknown but we must imagine it through the prism of our own experience, and thus the stories will always be contaminated with human language, even when they pretend to translate alien thought. Thus our attempts to enter the "emic" point of view of the radically other may be pseudo-translations, mere projections of uninhabitable consciousnesses. The difference between contact stories and actual human contact through history may pass from one of degree to one of kind: fictions can plausibly create conditions in which untranslatability is no mere figure of speech, where too much difference makes for unknowability.

Human fallibility is ultimately embodied in the translator-ambassador in contemporary speculative fiction, from the repressive translation projects in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to the incommunicado human race in *Solaris* that runs headlong into the illegibility of the universe, to the ambitions of empire in countless pulp fiction tales of conquest in space. Sometimes the matter is not so much ideological as linguistic, pragmatic and cultural: *we just don't understand*. And too, the enemy is not always the "Other" but other humans. Yet moments of redemption, of good will, of communication breakthrough, appear in this fiction, and the vast distances between communicators and between worlds then seem small; these glimpses are gains, however temporary, for the visibility of the translators and for all those who place any hope in them. Gregory Benford (1987, 15) writes in "Effing the Ineffable" that we read these genres because of the "sensation of encounter" with which they provide us; no less may be said of writing translations: *the encounter* motivates real and fictional translators alike.

Notes

1. Beebee (2012, 78–80) notes that Charles Cros proposed in 1869 an interplanetary signaling system using base 3. Gallun was surely aware of this project.
2. In 1877, Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli (1835–1910) described the streaks he saw on the surface of Mars as "*canali*", which, under the ideological sway of canal-building at the time of the Suez Canal, was then translated as "canals" ("All About Mars"). Science fiction writers have seized upon the translation error; in "Old Faithful" (Gallun 1974, 604), the narrator observes: "Twice they crossed deep, twenty-mile-wide artificial gorges, which on Earth have earned the not entirely correct name of 'canals'."

3. *Babel-17* is treated amply in Cronin (2000) and thus my observations here will be brief.

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