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## Reflected Words: Meaning and Silence in Language and Translation

*Melanie Sard*

What role does translation play in philosophy of language? Recent development in the field has drawn parallels between theories of translation and theories of meaning, evident primarily in the work of Davidson and Quine. Communication has often been viewed as an act of translation or interpretation between speakers, particularly by Davidson in later writings.<sup>1</sup> I think it is equally useful to view translation as an act of communication, and this approach is particularly valuable because it leads us to the conclusion that meaning is created through dialectic processes.<sup>2</sup> Although translation studies has recently emerged as a new and promising academic field,<sup>3</sup> it usually separates philosophical analysis from literary criticism. Quine's work is typical of the philosophical approach, which concerns itself with hypothetical translation situations. What is of importance in these cases is the general process of translation, separate from any specific language. Quine's radical translation thought experiment involves an imagined language of which we had no "prior understanding."<sup>4</sup> Davidson considers this situation as well, but does not restrict himself to it. He is

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," *Truth, Language, and History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Roughly, I intend to use "dialectic" as it is used in the Hegelian tradition, to mean "the process of thought by which contradictions are seen to merge themselves in a higher truth that comprehends them" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> See *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti New York: Routledge, 2001. See also George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Johann Glock, "The Indispensability of Translation in Quine and Davidson," *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 43, No. 171 (April 1993) pp 194-209.

also interested in the actual problems of interpretation that occur between speakers, even if they are speakers of the same language. However, neither Quine nor Davidson deal with actual translation techniques for literary works, which are usually discussed only within the context of literary criticism. It is my contention that the philosophical significance of literary translation has for the most part been overlooked, and I hope to show that literary translation has something to contribute to the more general discussion of translation and meaning within philosophy of language.

In order to argue this, I want to make clear the distinctions I am drawing between different types of translation. Hypothetical translation refers to a situation that does not involve translating between specific, actually known languages (English, French, Russian, for example). Quine's thought experiment features the imaginary word "gavagai," a piece of language arbitrarily invented by him.<sup>5</sup> It is important that this choice be arbitrary, since Quine wants to make claims about language and translation in general, not just one particular language. While hypothetical translation may certainly be a useful tool for building a theory of meaning, I think we are missing valuable insight if we consider *only* this type of translation. Most translation does occur in the context of specific languages, and therefore I want to differentiate it by calling it actual translation.

Within the general category of actual translation, I will use the term "literary" with respect to any translation, between specific languages, of creative poetry or prose. A large amount of translation activity does not fit this description, however: instruction manuals, brochures, formal and informal dialogue, for example. This kind of translation can be problematic as well, even if the topic is relatively straightforward. It is possible to mistranslate apparently simple pieces of language, and many texts that fall into the category of non-literary translation are far from simple. In this paper I want to focus on literary translation to highlight the difficulties that accompany *all* translation, hypothetical or actual.

My analysis of literary translation leads to the view that language and meaning are contingent human creations, a view which is supported by Heidegger and Wittgenstein's work in philosophy of language. One of the consequences of this view is that the failure of language, in the form of silence, takes on unique significance. By failure of language I am referring to situations where, for whatever reason, we

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<sup>5</sup> W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1960, p. 29

are unable to articulate a clearly existing thought, emotion, or experience. In this case, silence itself is what is meaningful, since it indicates that experience even as it fails to express it. Wittgenstein famously said, at the conclusion of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”<sup>6</sup> Regardless of whether meaning is fixed or contingent, it may be true that there *are* no right words to express the experience. In particular, however, a contingent view of meaning (one in which the meaning of a word or words is subject to change) lends itself to circumstances where language and meaning do not perfectly line up. I believe such situations are inherent in language and our use of it.

What are the repercussions of this conclusion? It emphasizes the role of silence as an important aspect of language, and loss as an important component of meaning. These issues become particularly apparent when we study literary translation, especially difficult or controversial cases. As an example of this, I want to discuss Nabokov’s work on translating the famous Russian poem *Eugene Onegin* and his subsequent reflections on the endeavor. This philosophical approach to literary translation results in a complex but valuable conception of meaning, which functions both within and across languages. I believe this conception of meaning is consistent with the theories of meaning Quine and Davidson have developed from hypothetical translation. This conclusion emphasizes that translation, both hypothetical and actual, is capable of providing valuable insight in questions of language and meaning.

The idea of “radical translation” was first posited by Quine in a 1959 essay on meaning and translation, later to become part of a larger work entitled *Word and Object*.<sup>7</sup> The problem that Quine encountered was that it seemed logically possible to attribute different meanings to a sentence based on its stimulus conditions (the conditions under which we would utter it), and no amount of analysis could definitively fix one particular meaning as correct. Furthermore, Quine claimed that the stimulus conditions for language as a whole were insufficient to determine a single set of meanings. In a hypothetical translation scenario, a linguist attempting to learn an unknown language would begin by observing the stimulus conditions of certain sentences. In Quine’s

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<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D.F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961. p. 151 (*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*)

<sup>7</sup> Quine, “Meaning and Translation,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*

example, the stimulus condition is a rabbit running by and the sentence offered by the native speaker is “gavagai.”<sup>8</sup> Of course more work is required to determine whether the meaning of “gavagai” is really “rabbit,” for it might simply mean “white,” or “animal,” and still be responsive to the same stimulus conditions. Through further inquiry, the linguist will probably be able to narrow down the possibilities, and if the stimulus conditions that cause the native speaker to assent to the sentence “gavagai” are the same as the stimulus conditions that cause the linguist to assent to the sentence “rabbit,” then we might reasonably conclude that “gavagai” is an accurate translation for “rabbit.”<sup>9</sup>

The problem, as Quine sees it, is that we can never narrow down *all* the possibilities, and a certain indeterminacy about what sentences mean is inevitable. Perhaps “gavagai” merely refers to a temporal stage of a rabbit, for example, and not a whole enduring rabbit.<sup>10</sup> Such differentiation is beyond the capacity of the linguist to identify through observation, since the stimulus conditions of the two meanings are exactly overlapping. If there is an indeterminacy of translation for sentences, it follows that the words of the sentence must be indeterminate, too. Quine calls this dilemma the inscrutability of reference.<sup>11</sup> While this particular example may seem nonsensical, I think Quine’s point is a valid one. In order to choose a determinate meaning for “gavagai,” we would have to presuppose that the native conceptual scheme of reality is the same as ours.<sup>12</sup> Our conceptual scheme might adequately fit all the stimulus conditions of the word in the native language, yet still differ from the native conceptual scheme. The basic argument here is that it is logically possible for multiple meanings to satisfy the same stimulus conditions.

Since Quine’s view of language is holistic, simple sentences such as “rabbit” or “gavagai” are necessarily situated in a larger network of interlocking sentences, such that the unit of analysis must become the totality of the language(s).<sup>13</sup> Therefore the indeterminacy of meaning holds for whole languages, resulting in the conclusion that “manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways,

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<sup>8</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, p. 29

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40

<sup>10</sup> Quine, “Meaning and Translation,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, p. 98

<sup>11</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, p. 80. Although he does not use the specific phrase until later writings (see Davidson, “The Inscrutability of Reference,” *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001. p. 227), the basis for the theory is clear in *Word and Object*.

<sup>12</sup> Quine, “Meaning and Translation,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, p. 99

<sup>13</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, pp 34-35

all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with another.”<sup>14</sup> Quine wants to extend this thesis to apply within the languages themselves as well. In the same way that meaning is underdetermined by stimulus conditions in radical translation, our beliefs are underdetermined by the available sensory evidence in the world around us.<sup>15</sup> We could, in fact, rearrange our system of beliefs to be completely different yet still consistent with observable facts; this is the claim that Quine earlier defended in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” one of his most influential essays.<sup>16</sup> In both of these cases, what is pertinent to my project is the way in which Quine unfixes meaning. It is not that we cannot be sure about what the right meaning is, he wants to argue, but that the “right” meaning is an empty concept: there *is* no objective fact of the matter.<sup>17</sup> This leaves us with the view that meaning is changeable, rather than static, and furthermore we as human beings are the ones capable of changing it.

There are certain restraints on this, of course. Individuals cannot manipulate the meanings of words in whatever way they want. For example, if you were to suddenly go around calling a rabbit a “gavagai,” you would be ridiculed. It would be an idiosyncratic and arbitrary creation of meaning that would have no significance in the larger language community. I do not want to imply, when I claim that meaning is created, that we can do whatever we want with words – that all meanings have equal weight. Language is clearly a social phenomenon, and the meanings of words function more or less consistently within a community. Furthermore, Quine would want to say that the meanings of words fundamentally function in connection with the empirical evidence of stimulus conditions. In his discussion of radical translation he writes: “There is less basis of comparison – less sense in saying what is good translation and what is bad – the fatter we get away from sentences with visibly direct conditioning to non-verbal stimuli.”<sup>18</sup> This is what sometimes makes literary translation so controversial and difficult; poetic language tends to be abstract and far from simple stimulus conditions. Although meaning is contingent, it is created within the framework of already existing language practices and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 27

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 78

<sup>16</sup> Quine, *From a Logical Point of View: Logico-Philosophical Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1953. pp 20-46

<sup>17</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, p. 73

<sup>18</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, p. 78

observable stimulus conditions; new meanings emerge in shapes and directions that are governed by existing meanings.

But what, exactly, is the process by which we get from an old meaning to a new meaning? This is a question that preoccupies Davidson in several essays, including “What Metaphors Mean” and “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs.” In the first, he explores how metaphors create different meanings for ordinary pieces of language; the new meaning succeeds by virtue of its surprising deviation from the old.<sup>19</sup> However on the subject of interpretation, Davidson does not, “except in matters of degree, distinguish metaphor from more routine linguistic transactions: all communication by speech assumes the interplay of inventive construction and inventive construal.”<sup>20</sup> The second essay is concerned with how speakers interpret and understand each other in everyday language situations. Traditionally, language has been characterized as a finite system of rule-based relationships. But linguistic ability, Davidson believes, cannot be explained by appeal to such prior conventions, because they are neither sufficient nor necessary to describe the process of communication.<sup>21</sup>

This is not to say that Davidson sees linguistic convention as entirely irrelevant, rather, he wants to place it alongside other resources for interpretation. He posits that communication consists of two parts: a prior theory and a passing theory. Prior theory is a person’s background knowledge of linguistic conventions, or what we normally refer to when we say we “know how to speak” a language. This includes information about grammar, vocabulary, syntax, semantics, and the like. It also includes cultural information; making sense of someone’s speech may involve placing it in cultural or socio-political context. However, we often tinker with these linguistic conventions in order to accommodate the phrases that we hear, which may be grammatically incorrect or semantically unclear. We formulate passing theories (derived from prior theories) in order to cope with the language that we encounter. Davidson suggests that this is something that occurs every time we talk to another person. When we have effectively communicated, it is due to the fact that our passing theories have converged.<sup>22</sup> But a passing theory can never be duplicated, since the information it contains is in each case particular to that case. The

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<sup>19</sup> Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 247

<sup>20</sup> Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 245

<sup>21</sup> Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” *Truth, Meaning, and History*, p. 107

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100, 107

success of a passing theory is what communication *really* depends on, Davidson argues, but it cannot be made into a linguistic standard, and hence undermines the traditional conception of language as a rule-governed activity.

From here, it is easy to see how Davidson comes to the conclusion that “all understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation.”<sup>23</sup> He uses the term radical interpretation, rather than Quine’s radical translation, because he wants to cover a broader range of activities which include non-linguistic behavior. He claims that “general knowledge of the world, and awareness of human interests and attitudes,” are also important resources that we bring to the project of communication.<sup>24</sup> Although Davidson’s concern is with actual communication, his treatment of translation or interpretation is still hypothetical. He only requires a *potential* account, at least as a first step; he wants the explanation to be logically possible. The account “does not [...] concern the actual history of language acquisition.”<sup>25</sup> What Davidson is establishing here is a scheme where translation operates as a metaphor for communication. Implicit in this analysis is the assumption that if we can state the conditions under which we could successfully translate the language, we will have a key to understanding *how* we accomplished the translation and indeed to how language works in general. Davidson’s answer is that we accomplish translation, and communication, by an adaptive mechanism that is flexible according to the situations it encounters. As I see it, passing theory results from an oscillation between two points: the prior theory and the actual utterance. If the latter two do not contradict each other, then the passing theory requires no adjustment from the prior theory. But if they are at odds with each other, the passing theory must bridge the gap, so to speak, between two points. It is only through this process that the passing theory, as new meaning, can emerge. As interpreted this way, I think Davidson’s work is an important part of my attempt to characterize meaning as a dialectic process.

Another writer relevant to the discussion is George Steiner. His book *After Babel*, first published in 1975, is in many ways sympathetic to the view of translation I am trying to develop. He, too, follows the communication as translation metaphor, claiming:

Translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in *every* act of communication [...] The essential structure and executive means and problems of the act of translation are fully

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<sup>23</sup> Davidson, “Radical Interpretation” *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 125

<sup>24</sup> Davidson, “The Social Aspect of Language,” *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 110

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125



present in acts of speech, of writing, of pictorial encoding inside any given language. Translation between languages is a particular application of a configuration and model fundamental to human speech.<sup>26</sup>

This is a strongly stated thesis and one could, perhaps, object to it. Critics would point out that there is a vast difference between the difficulties encountered while speaking your own language and those encountered while trying to speak another one. When I say “I don’t understand you” to someone who is speaking my native language, it is not that same thing as saying “I don’t understand you” to someone who is talking to me in a language I don’t know. What Steiner would argue, though, is that this is a difference of degree and not kind. It is not a separate sort of difficulty that is encountered when trying to speak another language; it is just a much greater difficulty. Davidson, I think, would agree, since his view of language is a holistic one that is concerned with “knowing our way around in the world generally.”<sup>27</sup> Different languages are just instances of the challenges we face in trying to find our way around the world, including the challenge of trying to communicating in particular language itself.

What is helpful about Steiner’s work, especially in comparison to Quine, is that it incorporates the notion of actual translation. In Davidson’s analysis, if a theory concerning how language works cannot explain certain pertinent aspects of the language, then it is an unacceptable theory, since it results in an “unlearnable” language.<sup>28</sup> I think we might reasonably expect a theory to account for actual translation as well as hypothetical translation. Davidson does, to a certain extent, discuss actual translation situations, both interlingual and intralingual.<sup>29</sup> Steiner emphasizes that actual translation is a pertinent aspect of language, and indeed an intriguing one; he correctly points out that “a genuine philosophy of language [...] must grapple with the phenomenon and rationale of the human ‘invention’ and retention of anywhere between five and ten thousand distinct tongues,” and the problems of translation that such a situation entails.<sup>30</sup> His explanation is

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<sup>26</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, p. xxi

<sup>27</sup> Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 107

<sup>28</sup> Davidson, “Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages,” *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*

<sup>29</sup> Roman Jakobson makes a distinction between “intralingual” translation as an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language and “interlingual” translation as an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language (Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” *The Translation Studies Reader*, p. 114). Characterizing both of these acts as translation reinforces the metaphor that communication *is* translation, in both a literary and non-literary sense.

<sup>30</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 54

a pseudo-evolutionary one, arguing that the immense plurality of languages affords us an infinite number of ways of conceptualizing our world which help us “endure creatively,” though they do not actually seem to offer distinct survival advantages.<sup>31</sup> Here evolution is treated more as metaphor than science, though it is a powerful metaphor. In any case Steiner’s account further highlights the importance of using actual translation as a tool for understanding language, and it is this basic premise that I agree with.

Translation is not always problematic; some expressions do not appear to present us with conflicting concepts of meaning. Simple words or sentences often seem to be quite transparent between languages, and indeed we are grateful that they are. If we considered Quine’s dilemma anytime we tried to render the word “rabbit” into another language, cross-cultural communication would be an endlessly frustrating endeavor. Fortunately, I think it is fair to assume that no one engaged in actual translation spends much time worrying about the inscrutability of reference. However, a certain degree of indeterminacy remains even in translating prosaic expressions. This indeterminacy increases, as Quine pointed out, the farther we move away from words and sentences that are directly tied to stimulus conditions. Translators, and especially literary translators, must be aware that it is possible to conceive of a word having multiple (perhaps incompatible) meanings.

For more specific examples of how this might occur in literary translation, I will now turn to Nabokov and *Eugene Onegin*. Originally published in 1833 by Alexander Pushkin, Russia’s most famous poet, *Eugene Onegin* is a novel in verse consisting of 5,551 lines. The vast majority of these lines are in rhymed iambic tetrameter, resembling a sonnet.<sup>32</sup> Historically, it has been the source of extensive disagreement among translators; at least ten published English versions of it exist, if not more. Traditional attempts at translation have sought to render the poem in the same iambic tetrameter as the Russian original. The problem inherent in this project is clear: since the words were picked to rhyme in Russian, a direct translation does not guarantee that they will rhyme at all in English (or any other language). Manipulation of meaning is necessary to replicate the rhyme scheme.<sup>33</sup>

This situation places the translator in a unique dilemma, however, because it seems that at least some literary elements must be sacrificed

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. xiv

<sup>32</sup> Nabokov, “‘Onegin’ in English,” *The Translation Studies Reader*, pp 72-73.

<sup>33</sup> This is true of all rhymed poems in translation, of course; *Eugene Onegin* is just one example.

for others. Nabokov offers, as an example of this dilemma, stanza XXXIII in Chapter One, rendered in unrhymed English and transliterated Russian:<sup>34</sup>

I recollect the sea before a storm:	Ya pómnyu móre pred grozóyu:
O how I envied	kak ya zavídoval volnám
The waves that ran in turbulent succession	begúshchim búrnoy cheredóyu
To lie down at her feet with love!	S lyukóv'yu lech k eyó nogám!

According to Nabokov, “Russian readers discern in the original two sets of beautifully onomatopoeic alliterations: *begúshchim búrnoy*... which render the turbulent rush of the surf, and *s lyukóv'yu lech* – the liquid lisp of the waves dying in adoration at the lady’s feet.”<sup>35</sup> A non-native speaker can, I think, experience an approximation of the rhyme and rhyme by sounding out the Russian words, even without knowing their meaning, and see that Nabokov is correct. He is also correct in observing that, “Without various changes, there is no possibility whatsoever to make Pushkin’s four lines an alternately-rhymed tetrametric quatrain in English [...] one concession would involve us in a number of other changes completely breaking up the original sense and all its literary associations.”<sup>36</sup>

We get a sense of how difficult such a project is when we realize that Nabokov translates “búrnoy” as “turbulent,” but alternate dictionary definitions include “stormy,” “rapid,” and “energetic.”<sup>37</sup> A choice of any of these other words would make different options available for the attempted tetrametric quatrain. Is there really any way to determine which is the “right” translation of “búrnoy”? For literary translators, every move involves a decision amongst many choices, none of them inherently more correct than the other.<sup>38</sup> Nabokov deviated quite shockingly from the traditional strategy by abandoning all attempts to preserve the rhyme and rhythm of the original poem and furthermore, condemning those who did. In the introduction to his version of *Eugene Onegin* he says, point blank, that “some paraphrases may possess the charm of stylish diction and idiomatic conciseness, but no scholar should succumb to stylishness and no reader be fooled by it.”<sup>39</sup> For

<sup>34</sup> Nabokov, “Onegin in English,” *The Translation Studies Reader*, p. 82

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 82

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Oxford Russian Dictionary, comp. Della Thompson. Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>38</sup> See also Levy, “Translation as a Decision Process,” *The Translation Studies Reader*, pp 149-159

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*. Trans. and commentary Vladimir Nabokov. Princeton, NJ: The Bollingen Foundation, Princeton University Press, 1981. p. vii

Nabokov the best way to deal with the change in form that translation entails is to face it head on – do not try to hide it or fix it. In his opinion the only real way to do this (for a rhymed poem) is a literal prose translation.

He may have a valid criticism of the traditional approach, but I think he is also too quick to dismiss “stylishness” as a legitimate goal. A paraphrase is simply one way of dealing with a rhymed poem in a foreign language, and chooses to focus on a different aspect of the text. Although it may be “mathematically impossible,” as Nabokov points out, to reproduce the rhymes accurately *and* translate the text literally, the latter option is not intrinsically more valuable than the former. Most translators champion the opposite strategy, some quite strongly: “Rhythm, rhyme, sense, and tone – all of them together are what *Eugene Onegin* is about, and not just literal meaning. To throw any of these overboard is to destroy the poem utterly,” writes Douglas Hofstadter in the introduction to *his* version of *Eugene Onegin*.<sup>40</sup>

How are we to reconcile these two views? No matter which strategy is employed, the one thing that remains sure is that Pushkin’s poem gets fundamentally *changed*. Can our philosophy of language offer us any criterion of evaluation for differing translations? If we insist on extralinguistic meaning, i.e. one that depends upon the author’s intentions separate from either language, we will have a hard time resolving the debate. The question then becomes, “who has greater insight into Pushkin’s mind, Nabokov or Hofstadter?” and this is of course an impossible question to answer. A similar problem is encountered in Davidson’s work on metaphor. On some views what gives a metaphor meaning are the intentions of the author. However Davidson points out, quite correctly I think, that this cannot be right because these are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for a successful metaphor.<sup>41</sup> I think this is true for translation as well. At the same time the intentions (or perceived intentions) of the author are not negligible; Nabokov’s attempt to do justice to what Pushkin’s words literally indicate is an admirable project. The problem is precisely that, as mentioned earlier, no translation has an intrinsic value over another. We could say that Nabokov’s translation is more literal than Hofstadter’s, and Nabokov would probably want to say that this makes it more accurate, but I think accuracy would incorporate the other

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<sup>40</sup> Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*. Trans. Douglas Hofstadter. New York: Basic Books, 1999. p. xxxiv

<sup>41</sup> Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*

elements of the poem as well – the rhythm, rhyme, and tone that Hofstadter emphasizes. So true accuracy is, as Nabokov notes, impossible. And neither version of *Eugene Onegin*, Hofstadter's or Nabokov's (or any of the others) can lay claim to the "true meaning" of the original.

We would want to preserve the right to judge these different translations, of course; some may in fact be better than others. My argument is merely that it is problematic to view this judgment in terms of meaning. Is there a way to clarify the notion of meaning, given competing translations? I think what is missing from the account (and what could potentially enrich it) is a consideration of the varying translations *together*, and not just separately. When considered in isolation from each other, I believe there is no plausible criterion of evaluation for different translations. When analyzed alongside each other, however, a particular type of evaluation may be possible. Hofstadter realizes this possibility when he describes the experience of simultaneously reading two versions of *Eugene Onegin* (translated by Charles Johnston and James Falen) out loud with his wife: "We even felt we could get a slight taste of the Russian poetry itself, for between the two translators' ways of phrasing things, details of the original in a certain sense showed through."<sup>42</sup> In this case, it is the relationship of each translation to the other, and not just to the original work, that is critical. What Hofstadter describes, and what I think may be the key to a good philosophy of translation in the literary sense, is an experience of dialectic understanding. In going back and forth between translations, an idea of what gets left out, what gets "lost in translation," becomes apparent; from that sense, a more comprehensive understanding of the text is possible. The tension between differing, yet equally plausible, translations is what is capable of creating meaning in literary texts.

The idea that meaning is created, rather than discovered, is a logical implication of the Wittgensteinian doctrine that "meaning is use." We do not use a word because it is connected to a deep, unchanging meaning that determines its use; we use a word in a certain way because it works to get us around the world, and if we find another word that works just as well (as language inevitably changes) we will start using the other word – consequently it will *acquire* a new or different meaning. But, as Richard Rorty points out: "The world does not provide us with any criterion of choice between alternative metaphors [...] we can only

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<sup>42</sup> Hofstadter, *Eugene Onegin*, p. xiii

compare languages or metaphors with one another, not with something beyond language called ‘fact.’”<sup>43</sup> I would argue, as an extension of this, that we should compare literary translations with each other, in addition to the “original,” which is of course in itself just another layer of language and metaphor we use to get around in the world. This requires that we develop a philosophy of language that sees meaning, both within and across languages, as a contingent creation. It is not an arbitrary creation, however, but one deeply rooted in the history of the surrounding language-games. Another quote from Hofstadter supports this point: “...I looked each [Russian word] up and knew its rough meaning [...] but any time a word appeared in two or three different stanzas, in quite different contexts, it started picking up its own flavor and started being imbued with more of a true meaning.”<sup>44</sup> The emergence of meaning, in this case, is only possible in context, in a richly detailed surrounding environment. Although I am skeptical about Hofstadter’s characterization of this as the “true” meaning (because I think the notion of truth it is too easily associated with non-contingent, objective “facts” such as the ones Rorty objects to), I think it is fair to say that it is a more comprehensive and thus more valuable meaning.

What happens, however, when this quest for meaning runs aground? Surely not all literary translation is achieved with the smooth success of Hofstadter’s example. A particularly relevant text on this topic, I believe, is a poem Nabokov wrote during his translation work on *Eugene Onegin*. I will quote it in its entirety, since I think it powerfully expresses the tragic element of translation and can offer insight into how we think of literary translation:

What is translation? On a platter  
 A poet’s pale and glaring head,  
 A parrot’s screech, a monkey’s chatter,  
 And profanation of the dead.  
 The parasites you were so hard on  
 Are pardoned if I have your pardon,  
 O, Pushkin, for my stratagem:  
 I traveled down your secret stem,  
 And reached the root, and fed upon it;  
 Then, in a language newly learned,  
 I grew another stalk and turned  
 Your stanza patterned on a sonnet,  
 Into my honest roadside prose –  
 All thorn, but cousin to your rose.

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<sup>43</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 20

<sup>44</sup> Hofstadter, *Eugene Onegin*, p. xv

Reflected words can only shiver  
 Like elongated lights that twist  
 In the black mirror of a river  
 Between the city and the mist.  
 Elusive Pushkin! Persevering,  
 I still pick up Tatiana's earring,  
 Still travel with your sullen rake.  
 I find another man's mistake,  
 I analyze alliterations  
 That grace your feasts and haunt the great  
 Fourth stanza of your Canto Eight.  
 This is my task — a poet's patience  
 And scholastic passion blent:  
 Dove-droppings on your monument.<sup>45</sup>

Nabokov's vivid imagery implies that translation is a fundamentally intrusive act. Why should this be so? As has been argued by many modern writers, the form and content of a piece of literature (or any other linguistic expression) cannot be separated and are mutually reinforcing.<sup>46</sup> To change the form is also, to some extent, to change the content. Which language is used is a fundamental aspect of form; translation, then, is unavoidably a process of change. In Nabokov's eyes, it is a negative process, because it denigrates the original author. One can certainly sympathize with this concern, especially given that Nabokov was an author himself. We don't have to look far to find countless examples of things that get "lost in translation," either in a colloquial or a literary sense. Often it proves nearly impossible to render a writer into a language not their own without feeling as if something critical has been sacrificed, or at the very least compromised.<sup>47</sup> In Davidson's terms, this would be a case in which passing theories simply cannot converge.

If meaning were in fact a trustworthy medium through which we could pass in the effort to translate between languages, then we could put the difficulty in terms of incomplete access to meaning. A poor translation would be, in Steiner's words, "full of apparently similar saying, but misses the bond of meaning."<sup>48</sup> In an attempt to retain a pragmatic sense of meaning, however (in the tradition of Wittgenstein,

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<sup>45</sup> Nabokov, *Engene Onegin*, p. 9

<sup>46</sup> See Eichenbaum, Boris. "The Theory of the 'Formal Method.'" *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Ed. and trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. p. 119, 130; See also Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. chapter 1

<sup>47</sup> For example, see David Remnick, "The Translation Wars: Fighting over Tolstoy and Dostoevsky." *The New Yorker*. November 7, 2005. pp. 98-109.

<sup>48</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 67

Davidson, and Quine), we cannot resort to the latter explanation. All that meaning consists in, under the latter view, is “apparently similar saying,” so the distinction is not useful. We must admit that it is actual translation itself that inherently complicates the situation, and that it does so always. That some translations seem less problematic than others is simply luck; we are fortunate, in some cases, to be able to move with relative ease between languages – that is to say, with relative lack of disagreement. It is not that it is easier to translate instruction manuals than it is to translate poetry; it is simply that there are fewer conflicting opinions about the former. As we move from concrete to abstract language, the criterion for evaluating translation becomes more and more complex, since meaning is farther removed from its stimulus conditions. Additionally, poetry is often concerned with the verbal qualities of language itself, such as alliteration, rhythm, and rhyme, which operates differently within each particular language, making translation more difficult.

Most importantly, though, I think Nabokov’s poem is a testimony to the sense of loss we must sometimes encounter in literary translation, whether we are authors or readers. Heidegger understood that loss and characterized it as silence, and he accorded it a central place in his philosophy of language. What Nabokov describes is what Heidegger would call an “experience with language.” We can *use* language by speaking it, and we can gather information *about* language via linguistics or analytic philosophy, but to undergo an experience with language is something else entirely: it is to “become mindful of language and our relation to it.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, “A poet might even come to the point where he is compelled – in his own way, that is, poetically – to put into language the experience he undergoes with language.”<sup>50</sup> As I see it, this is exactly what has happened to Nabokov. Translating Pushkin’s masterpiece has brought the difficulties of meaning into sharp focus for him. Nabokov’s final lines imply that “reflected words” are always tragically insufficient to convey the power of the original work.

In a broader sense, though, if we follow Wittgenstein and Rorty and Davidson, we realize that *all* words are merely reflected. They are not a reflection of truth or meaning in an objective sense, but a reflection of each other, in a dynamic interaction that shapes what we

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, Trans. Peter Hertz. New York: Harper & Row, 1971, p. 58

<sup>50</sup> Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 59



consider truth and meaning to be. And an intrinsic part of that interaction is a sense of incompleteness, or loss. It is this foundation that language and meaning are built upon; in the struggle to articulate what we cannot say, we discover what we *can* say. And in the presence of something inarticulable, we are even more acutely aware of language than ever. As Heidegger puts it, "...language speaks itself as language [...] when we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away, oppresses or encourages us. Then we leave unspoken what we have in mind, and, without rightly giving it thought, undergo moments in which language itself has distantly and fleetingly touched us with its essential being."<sup>51</sup>

There are aspects of Heidegger's views of meaning and truth that are incompatible with the one I have been arguing for,<sup>52</sup> but I feel his contribution to this discussion is too valuable to overlook. More explicitly than any other writer, he develops the idea that the absence of language is vital to its presence; that by delineating the boundaries of what cannot be put into words we might eventually come to a greater understanding of our language and our world. This is a process marked by continuing dialogue, and indeed much of Heidegger's writing on the subject of language is structured as an actual dialogue. Wittgenstein, in the previously mentioned *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, also believed there were some things in the world that eluded language; in the face of this dilemma, he implied that the only possible course of action was to remain silent.

Initially, this sentiment might seem at odds with a project that sees silence as a source of dialectic tension within language. It is more in line with a Nabokovian view that perhaps, in light of our repeated failure to make words mean what we desire them to, we should just stop trying. But I think neither Nabokov nor Wittgenstein really wanted to stop at silence. What is remarkable about language is its ability to take us past the limits we thought we had identified, to redefine and change those limits. Also in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says that although "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words [...] they make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical."<sup>53</sup> Perhaps if we pay close enough attention to the silence, and if we approach it as a tool for understanding rather than evidence of failure, we will in fact bring

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<sup>51</sup> Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 59

<sup>52</sup> Most notably, I suspect his emphasis on truth as "unconcealment," as something that is revealed to us, is at odds with the metaphor of meaning as an act of creation.

<sup>53</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. 151 (*Es gibt allerdings Unausprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische*)

ourselves closer to those things that make themselves manifest without words. What is important here is silence as a relational concept, insofar as it interacts with language. There are different types of silence, after all, and not all of them have the significance that I am arguing for. Looking at the particular kind of silence we encounter as we struggle to articulate our experiences can help us figure out *why* certain things can or cannot be expressed by language, and also shed light on the concept of meaning that operates within a language (or between two languages).

If nothing else, to succeed in characterizing the experience of inarticulate silence is to reaffirm the power of language and the rich and satisfying ways we are capable of describing the world in – even if what we are describing is, paradoxically, our frustration at the failure of our ability to describe. I believe this crisis is what is at the heart of Nabokov's poem. It is also an issue that our philosophy of language must incorporate in order to do justice to the immense complexity and difficulty of translation. If we accept the premise that meaning is created – by ourselves, our words, and our actions – we must also accept a certain amount of responsibility. Successful communication is not a case of making sure our words correlate to the right meaning, but rather of manipulating meaning so as to arrive at coherent understanding with another person or people. This is the view of language that Davidson ultimately comes up with when claims: “this characterisation of linguistic ability is so nearly circular that it cannot be wrong: it comes down to saying that the ability to communicate by speech consists in the ability to make oneself understood, and to understand.”<sup>54</sup> This, however, puts us in a different role than traditional philosophy of language does. We must be aware of the ways in which our use of language shapes meaning and truth, both on an individual and a collective level. We must also realize that conflicting uses of language provide the critical tension that helps create, maintain, and clarify meaning.

The ability of conflict to generate meaning in a dialectic fashion is what makes the notion of dialogue so critical, especially for Heidegger. Literary translation can be seen as a kind of dialogue as well – simply a larger one that occurs between entire languages rather than within them. In this dialogue, what is lost in translation is also the foundation for what is *found* in translation. And I think there are several things we can find in translation. One is an opportunity to experience

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<sup>54</sup> Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 107

literature (as well as culture and history) that we might not otherwise have access to. Hofstadter writes, in critique of Nabokov, that he has a fanatical attitude towards originals and translation – namely, that a work can be appreciated only in its original language, and that no attempt should be made to reproduce the *feel* of the work in any other language. Those [...] who are ignorant of the original tongue are simply doomed to remain deprived of that experience.<sup>55</sup>

I think this is an excellent point, and I find it very personally compelling. It would seem a tragedy rather than a victory to restrict works of literature to their own language. It is true that the experience that the reader has with a translated work is different than with the original, but it is still a valid and valuable experience with language.

A translator does have an enormous amount of responsibility, however, both to translate to the best of their faith and ability to make that process sufficiently transparent to their readers. If a reader is unaware of the difficulties encountered when translating the text they are reading, or unaware that it is translated at all, I think their ability to fully understand the text is compromised. The act of translation, if done well, must take these considerations into account. This means the translator is deeply engaged both with the original text and the translations that have come before him – prior theory and passing theory are both essential to achieving a successful translation. Furthermore, out of the tension implicit in these relationships another kind of experience with language is possible, such as that depicted in Nabokov's poem. Finally, "poetry in translation is either poetry born anew or it is nothing at all," according to Burton Raffel.<sup>56</sup> This sentiment emphasizes that translation, as well as language itself, is ultimately an act of human artistic creation. Thus, I would argue, it is an inherently valuable endeavor. This endeavor is something else that is found, rather than lost, in translation.

It is only by developing a holistic view of language, meaning, and truth – one that is committed to contingency and dialectic understanding – that we can hope to satisfactorily describe and do justice to literary translation. In return, a study that considers translated works in comparison with each other can offer insight into how meaning is created within and across languages. When we only consider hypothetical acts of translation in philosophy, we deprive ourselves of one of our richest resources for understanding language. Literary trans-

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<sup>55</sup> Hofstadter, *Eugene Onegin*, p. xxiv

<sup>56</sup> Burton Raffel, *The Forked Tongue: A Study of the Translation Process*. The Hague: Mouton & Co. N.V., Publishers, 1971. p. 115

lation, as I have attempted to show, is philosophically significant and rewarding topic that deserves a place in any comprehensive philosophy of language. It focuses our sense of what gets left out in language, but in doing so also reminds us that language sometimes *can* succeed in capturing what the world around us is like, and powerfully so.

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