

Justice as Transcendence in Translation: Singularity and Experience in Derrida

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*This paper starts with a sentence about translation that is a citation in the latter work of Derrida, *Donner la mort*, which comes from Kierkegaard. It says that speech translates singularity to universality. By following Derrida's analysis of the absolute responsibility in contrast with the human ethics in Kierkegaard, I will show that how translation is the key for these two concepts with its negative connotation. But I will find a positive connotation in associating this interpretation with the analysis of the justice in Derrida, in which the relationship between the justice and the law has the same structure of the absolute responsibility and the human ethics. In the end, combining these two analyses into the autobiographical work of Derrida, we will see the positive aspect of translation that is the emancipation of the solitude of ourselves.*

Toute décision devrait ainsi, en son fond, rester à la fois solitaire, secrète et silencieuse. La parole nous apaise, note Kierkegaard, parce qu'elle « traduit » dans l'universel (Derrida, 1999, p. 87).

In his later work "*Donner la mort*," Derrida gives us a short passage talking about translation and language by drawing a passage from *Crainte et tremblement*. Derrida emphasizes the word "translate". This part about translation does not particularly stand out in the whole book. But it is very powerful for us to think of translation, which cannot be limited to an interlingual phenomenon but rather has some essential relationship with singularity and language. In this paper, I will follow this direction in order to reconsider translation.

TRANSLATION BETWEEN SINGULARITY AND GENERALITY

In order to understand what Derrida says about the singularity and language in "*Donner la mort*," we should pay attention to the difference between "responsibility" and "ethics," which are usually taken to be the same thing. But they will be opposite to each other in an extreme situation. Abraham was in such situation when he was ordered by god to sacrifice his son Isaac to prove his faithfulness. According to Derrida's analysis, if Abraham follows god's commands he would be a murderer—that means a failure to fulfill ethical obligations. But at the same time, saving his son's life would be the failure to answer god's request and failure to prove his faithfulness. Though it seems to be an extremely religious situation that is unfamiliar to us, it is much more familiar to us than it seems—albeit in another way—if only we pay some attention to the fact that we can find countless scenes of such a kind in films, in which the main character has to choose between sacrificing his own family and letting many unknown people die. As many of those characters do, Abraham chooses to go beyond the limit of ethics to sacrifice his son. This is what Derrida calls "sacrifice of the ethical" (p. 98).

The conflict between what he calls the “ethical” and what he calls “responsibility” shows that there is a limit in the ethical that belongs to the element of generality (following Kierkegaard’s definition). According to Derrida’s explanation, we are called to explain and justify our acts to other people, to be responsible in a general sense (p. 88). But this idea of responsibility, which is quite familiar to us, is a stumbling block for Abraham in his case. It is an essential problem for Derrida to explain why Abraham does not explain anything to his family. While it seems that what he does is against common idea of responsibility, Derrida thinks that the normal idea of responsibility fails to define the word “responsibility:” the “ethical” comes to its own limit. Therefore it is not the case that Abraham refuses to explain anything but rather he could not do so because if he did so he would fail to take his responsibility before god. Derrida writes,

Or que nous enseignerait Abraham, dans cette approche du sacrifice? Que loin d’assurer la responsabilité, la généralité de l’éthique pousse à l’irresponsabilité. Elle entraîne à parler, à répondre, à rendre compte, donc à dissoudre ma singularité dans l’élément du concept (ibid.).

If we keep making excuses about our actions we will be irresponsible in such a situation. The ethical is unavailable or even harmful in this case. It requires something more than the generality of ethics. This is what Derrida calls *singularity*.

Ethics, in its generality, is based on the possibility of substitution. “Anyone” will do in such a situation from wherein the question of “who” is strictly excluded. The exclusion makes responsibility impossible in this case. This case is not a particular one that we could meet “sometimes,” but one that fundamentally discloses what responsibility is. But Derrida does not suggest that we should simply give up generalized ethics to be responsible; if we just simply give up ethics then we fall into mere irresponsibility.

Le devoir absolu exige qu’on se conduise de façon irresponsable (perfidie ou parjure) tout en reconnaissant, confirmant, réaffirmant cela même qu’on sacrifie, à savoir l’ordre de l’éthique et de la responsabilité humaines. En un mot, l’éthique doit être sacrifiée au nom du devoir (p. 96).

Just as Abraham loves his son until last moment of the sacrifice, we need to maintain our human ethicality, to be a responsible—even though this responsibility is to be betrayed. The difference between absolute duty (responsibility) and general ethics is the singularity of oneself. It keeps one in secret, solitude and silence, as it is referred to in the beginning of this paper. There is a movement here in which generality, which is the element of language, comes to its limit to be negated. It is the place where translation functions. This sense of translation has a close relationship with justice, which is what we shall examine next.

JUSTICE IN TRANSLATION

At the beginning of *Force de loi*, Derrida refers to translation as the center of the issue of justice (Derrida, 1994, pp. 16-17). The issue of translation appears again soon in a clear assertion.

S’adresser à l’autre dans la langue de l’autre, c’est à la fois la condition de toute justice

possible, semble-t-il, mais cela paraît non seulement impossible en toute rigueur (puisque je ne peux parler la langue de l'autre que dans la mesure où je me l'approprie et l'assimile selon la loi d'un tiers implicite) mais même exclu par la justice comme droit en tant qu'elle semble impliquer un élément d'universalité, le recours au tiers qui suspend l'unilatéralité ou la singularité des idiomes (p. 40).

One's own singularity cannot merely be strictly subjected to the generalities of law, but at the same time, this is necessary for justice. Derrida points out that here, translation begins to function across impossibility, of which justice is the experience (p. 37).

Justice has the same structure as responsibility, which I have just mentioned above. It is different from the law (general rules) because justice has to deal with singularity, which the general rule does not encounter or expect. In addition, it is important to emphasize that justice requires its realization, or better to say that justice has to be *done*, just as Abraham is required to. But such realization cannot be justice itself as well as the translation always remains impossible in strict sense. Realization is the translation of justice.

Justice here works just as Benjamin's idea of "pure language" does, and which Derrida refers to in *Des tours de Babel*. For Benjamin, pure language is to be achieved in the process of translation, just like fragments of a vessel coming together (Benjamin, 2004, p. 260). Resisting the teleological character of this idea, Derrida writes it in another way.

... c'est l'être-langue de la langue, la langue ou le langage en tant que tels, cette unité sans aucune identité à soi qui fait qu'il y a des langues, et que ce sont de langues (Derrida, 1985, p. 245).

He shifts the pure language from the telos of various languages to the very being of languages: the possibility of languages and translation. The distance of the various languages and pure language cannot be overcome (p. 246). God, justice, and pure language—these are all in the same position. They cannot appear or be realized of themselves but require appearance and realization in another way, therefore essentially requiring translation.

Le contrat de traduction, en ce sens transcendantal, serait le contrat lui-même, le contrat absolu, la forme-contrat du contrat, ce qui permet à un contrat d'être ce qu'il est (p. 236).

Instead of delving into such religious motifs, I want put emphasis on the transcendental structure of translation provided by Derrida. The distance maintained in these motifs is that of meaning and literality. According to Derrida, there is no such distance in sacred texts, which are the best example of pure language. The contrast between pure language and languages depends on this distance, which perhaps reminds us of the contrast between "voice" (*parole*) and "writing" (*écriture*) in Derrida's earlier work.

In *De la grammatologie*, "voice" has the same structure of the "absolute erasure of the *signifiant*" as pure language (Derrida, 1967, p. 33). In what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presentation, the distance between meaning and its expression must be deleted in order to achieve the truth; it is the same goal of languages in Walter Benjamin. Such onto-theology whose desire is to exclude the literality is what Derrida aims to resist (p. 21). The distance of the "*signifié*" and the "*signifiant*" cannot be erased. This is the very possibility of translation: it is its

transcendental structure. These two are not even connected in some “natural” way—there is no such “natural” way, a fact discovered by Saussure (p. 68). This explains both the possibility of rewording within one language and the possibility of translation between two languages: we are always already in the translation. To say something is not merely to follow the general rule of language, even though it seems to be. Rather, it is already a translation that requires one’s singularity.

From this point, we can understand why the idea of the “performative,” which comes from J. L. Austin, is so attractive to Derrida (despite Derrida’s criticism of him) (Derrida, 1972, pp. 367-393). For example, in *Force de loi*,

Or l’opération qui revient à fonder, à inaugurer, à justifier le droit, à faire le loi, consisterait en coup de force, en un violence performative et donc interprétative qui en elle-même n’est ni juste ni injuste et qu’aucune justice... (Derrida, 1994, p. 33)

For Derrida, the idea of the “performative” discloses not only the fact that we *can* do something through the use of language but also that we always *do*. An “act” can only be done through one’s singularity. In fact, Derrida refers to acts in connection with silence, which belongs to the element of singularity that I have mentioned in the first part, in the following passage (ibid.). It implies that everyone us speaks the language that is never belongs to him. This experience of the other’s language is the starting point of Derrida’s philosophy, which is also mine of translation as a bilingual.

LANGUAGE OF THE OTHER

In *Le monolinguisme de l’autre*, Derrida writes about his experience of French,

« Je n’ai qu’une langue, ce n’est pas la mienne. » (Derrida, 1996, p. 13)

This sentence may not seem to make any sense. If we imagine someone living a foreign country, it will make sense to say that he speaks a language that is not his own. We can understand it as the particular experience of him as a Jewish Algerian. But it is that Derrida aims to generalize it.

1. On ne parle jamais qu’une seule langue—ou plutôt un seul idiome.
2. On ne parle jamais une seule langue—ou plutôt il n’y a pas d’idiome pur (p. 21).

In saying so, Derrida wants to tell us that every language we speak is not our own, but the language of the other. “There is no natural property of language”, says Derrida, means that what we call mother tongue or natural language is non-natural at all. It is not difficult to understand it, if we just remember that our human beings has an infancy in which we cannot speak and that what so called natural languages have its history through the usage of human being. Especially, we can find such experience of language itself in translation, since we will find that our own language is not the only way to relate us to our world in such experience.

It comes down to that we are alienated form my own language. But this negative tone is just one side of this matter. It has a positive tone of the hospitality of language. We can speak any language without owing it—this is the very possibility of translation. In talking about his own “identity trouble”, Derrida writes,

Il se serait alors formé, ce je, dans Te site d'une situation introuvable, renvoyant toujours ailleurs, à autre chose, à une autre langue, à l'autre en général. Il se serait situé dans une expérience insituable de la langue, de la langue au sens large, donc, de ce mot (p. 55).

The singular "I" is always sent to language of the other, to the other itself. The singularity of oneself is then emancipated from its solitude, silence in such experience of language. It's from this point that we can understand the double function of language.

That's what Derrida says in the following passage just after the citation in the beginning of this paper. I will close this paper by such passage.

Premier effet ou première destination du langage: me priver ou aussi bien me délivrer de ma singularité (Derrida, 1999, p. 87).

NOTE

- * The original version of this paper was presented at Bordeaux-Kyoto Symposium (May 6, 2014, Bordeaux, France).

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