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Linguistic journeys

The other day I was reading the book of one of my colleagues from the IWP. I discovered the following sentence: "I think learning the other's language means that you are ready to understand their perspective." This sentence made me think of two things. The first was to ask myself, why? I picked up the phone, called my father and asked him angrily: why?

- Why what? he replied.
- Why have you been so stubborn about me learning English?
- You seem very angry with me, and it's me who doesn't understand why, was his response.

It's incredible how a good sentence in a book can mobilize you to act, can turn your whole mindset upside down. In addition to my mother tongues, Spanish and Italian, I speak French as I went to a French school – it was convenient for my education. I also learned German, so I would have many opportunities if I wanted to find a job as an engineer. At that time, I studied literature and wanted to become an actress. Additionally, I speak English due to the hammering insistence of my father, whom I was now hammering for explanations: "Why have you insisted that I learn English?" He answered, taking his answer for granted: "For your own good, for your future, so that you could have professional opportunities... Don't you think that's enough reason?"

I understand that people find it naïve if someone learns a new language just to enjoy its musicality, to find a new way of feeling, and to understand the rhythm of life. But why not? Is it perhaps better to teach adolescents to learn a language in the unlikely case they will eventually become engineers? Doesn't that kill all the desire to learn for oneself and to have honest communication with others? Why didn't my father tell me that learning a language is good because it implies being open, predisposed, excited, and ready to understand the other's perspective, as I had read in my friend's book? A productive mindset permeates everything: our language, thinking, and actions. And sometimes, the criticism of the system itself seems naïve. I was very angry with my father; I didn't understand why his vision was so corrupted. Languages are like places; they have nooks and crannies, caves, dead ends, places where it is impossible to access, and also luminous places where, as happens with aphorisms, one arrives and understands everything at once. Through these linguistic journeys, one discovers a new way of getting to know the world.

- That is communicating and not just saying words and having their meaning understood! Because look at you and me, dad!
- What?! he yelled.
- Well. We speak the same language!
- Of course, I'm your father!

When I finished my string of reproaches, he said: look, I just want to take a nap. I was about to hang up when he added: I've never understood you.

- Exactly! We speak the same language but don't understand each other.

We hung up, and I kept thinking of languages as cartographies of places. I also thought that in my texts, when I alternated between Spanish and English, the way I used English was associated with the ideas of business, robotics, the unnatural, the inhuman, and the future that produces fear. Also, the times I have

included Italian, the language of my mother, in my texts, the language approach was indeed more intimate but also linked to the problems and gaps I have with my origins.

The second thing I thought of when reading and rereading my colleague's sentence is linked to this first and has to do with the thinker Frédéric Jameson. He said:

Each philosophical language, each national language as well, has a zone of clarity and distinctiveness but there are things it cannot say, and another language has a different zone and there are different things it cannot say. There are things I cannot say in English that I can say in German. Each language has a specific zone of articulation of clarity in which certain realities exist. And it is not that those realities don't exist for the other languages but there are more blurred.

Writing and translating is like playing to put and remove weights on an old scale with two pans. A writer is constantly rewriting until he finds the balance in his work, that pleasing way in which his work expresses what he wants to tell, or at least can express. The Spanish writer Francisco Umbral said that one does not write what one wants but what he can. Of his shortcomings, he made his style. The text swings in translation and loses its original meaning to take on a slightly different one. When the translator arrives, he takes out everything and puts other weights on the scale, and everything goes out of balance again and blurs. When the translation is finished, it is another work, a new equilibrium with different weights. And it is undoubtedly possible that the work loses one meaning to take on another, perhaps only slightly different. It has a lot to do with the historical dialectic between form and content. Since ideology is in form, and I agree with Jameson again when he points out that literature itself is an expression of ideologies, articulation is where the meaning of work emanates. And the translator not only translates words but, above all, translates articulations. That is why the conversations between author and translator are so positive – because in languages, as in love, one continuously learns and loses.

Finally, in my opinion, there is a difficult challenge for the translator to translate the untranslatable. The works that I am most passionate about are those in which I believe the language goes “beyond the world”. Let me explain what I mean by this. In a public lecture in 1930, the philosopher Wittgenstein explores the ethical and religious expressions which, he says, underlie a characteristic misuse of language since they carry nonsense. However, he concludes that these expressions have value precisely to the extent that they are meaningless since they seek to go “beyond the world”. Going beyond the world for Wittgenstein is nothing more than "attacking the limits of language," that is "going beyond meaningful language." And although he says that language is a hopeless cage, the desire to surpass it has value. Adding absolutely nothing to our knowledge, ethics constitutes a "testimony to a tendency of the human spirit" that Wittgenstein profoundly respects. I conceive the function of literature and art similarly: Without the duty of adding absolutely nothing to our knowledge, it constitutes a not insignificant "testimony of a tendency of the human spirit." How does the translator convey that desire to attack language, to go beyond the world? I don't know how to answer, but I think there is always an element of mystery in any writing.