THE PROBLEM OF THE ADEQUACY OF TRANSLATION AS CONCEPTUALIZED BY PAUL RICŒUR

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1. Introduction

The problems of the philosophy of language, of the explanation and understanding, of the translation andinterpretation of texts,stand at the forefront ofthe philosophical works of the great theoretician from the field of phenomenological hermeneutics Paul Ricœur. The philosopher takes the opportunity to present his viewpoint on these issues in the book *On Translation*[1], which is precisely concerned with the problems recounted above. Thevolume consists of three essays written in the 1990s: «Translation as Challenge and Source of Happiness», «The Paradigm of Translation», «A Passage: Translating the Untranslatable». The authorhimself is experienced in translation, having produced a French version of the principal work of E. Husserl *Ideas*, Volume 1 while imprisoned in Germany during World War II. Unlike a simplereproduction of a text in a different language, for Ricœur translation is a mission topromotea cultural dialogue,a mission that demandsfrom the translator readiness to «immerse into the foreign language»[2]and an aptitude for «linguistic sensitivity»[3]. In his interview, following the publication of the book *History and Truth* in Russian, the philosopher stresses that

> translation has a deep spiritual meaning, because it promotes the transformation of diverseethnicities into a cohesive civilization, whichis comprised of the languages and cultures of different people. Translation serves the purpose of uniting mankind[4].

2. The principal issue of theory of translation

The practice of translation has been around since the ancient times,going back tothe period when newly formed ethnic groups, speaking distinctive languages,begin to interact with one another. A well-known theoreticianof translation H. van Hoof rightly points out that «the study of the translation theory is equivalent to the study of the world history, of the history of civilization»[5].Cicero's commentary accompanying the translated speeches of Greek orators and the work of Horace *The Art of Poetry (ArtPoetica)* are some of the first preserved written primary sources in the field of translation. Translation of the Bible and exegetical discussions on the interpretation of the Scripture by Christian theologians such as Tertullian, Augustine, Abelard, Thomas Aquinas may be considered some of the most significant achievements in the field of translation in the Middle Ages. Earlywritings concerning specifically the theory of translation appear during the Renaissance

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[1]P. Ricœur, *Sur la traduction*, Bayard, Paris 2004.
[2]ID, *History and truth*, (ed.russaИсторияиистина,СПБ, 2002, p.9).
[3]*Ibid.*
[4]*Ibid.*
[5]Cit. da N.K. Garbovsky, *Translation theory*, (ed.russa, Теорияперевода,М., 2004, p. 19).

era. Of particular note are the treatises of the Italian humanist Leonardo Bruni*De interpretatione recta* (1420);of the French writer and translator Étienne Dolet*The Manner of Translating Well from one language to another, and the Punctuation of the French language and its accents* (1540); of the French poet and theoretician, a member of the Pleiades, Joachim du Bellay *Defense and Illustration of the French Language*(1549). A turning point in the development of the theory of translation were thehermeneutical explorationsof Friedrich Schleiermacher, who can be regarded as one of the founders of the field of hermeneutics and who has written the essay *On the different methods of translation*(1818), where he formulatesa method of text presentation on the basis of the general principles of interpretation and understanding. In the twentieth century, which marked an advent of theera of a global information exchange,an enormous expansion of translation practicetakes place and the interest in research in the field of translation grows accordingly. Intensive research is conducted currentlywithin the fields of linguistics, philosophy of language, analytic philosophy, and hermeneutics. New philosophical frameworksarebeing formulated: linguistic analysis, structuralism. New disciplines are emerging: sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, ethnolinguistics, machine translation technology. The progress in the study of language is linked to the names of such prominent theoreticians like F. de Saussure, J. Lacan, C. Lévi-Strauss, R. Barthes, R. Jakobson, N. Trubetzkoy, M.Bakhtin. The study of translation is also emerging as a scientific discipline personified by such noteworthy representatives like M. Balyar, J.Delille, E. Kari, M. Lederer, G. Mounin, A.Neubert, E.Nida, H. van Hoof, D. Steiner.

Centuries-old history of the scholarshipof translation covers a wide range of questionsinthe study of language as the means of communication, the analytical approach to the process oftext understanding and interpretation, the exploration of the cognitive laws and methods of expression in verbal communication, the development of practical methods of transformation of the source text into the equivalent text in another language. If we summarize this vast experience of philosophical thought, we can attempt to articulatethe fundamental question of the theory of translation. It is the question of the probability of an absolutely equivalent or, at the minimum,of an adequate translation of a text that would sufficientlyconvey the semantic content of the original while preserving the core elements of its structural and linguistic expression and fully reproducingits functional purpose.

A number of researchers, among whom–R.Jakobson, C.Hagege, W.Benjamin –uphold the idea of the potential feasibility of the adequate translationbecause theoretically «the totality of learning experience […] can be expressed in any existing language»[6].According to their view the potential scopeof any language is broad enough. Semantic insufficiency oftranslation could be explained by the occurrence of mostly solvable problemsof finding an equivalent means of expression of the original content in the target language.

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[6]R. Jakobson, *On linguistic aspects of translation. - Selected Works*, (ed. russaОлингвистическихаспектахперевода. – Избранныеработы. М., 1985, p. 364).

Other scholars such as G. Mounin, D. Steiner, B. Lee Whorf, E.Sapir, V.Komissarov, are inclined to be more skeptical and maintain an initial «presumption of untranslatability»and the inevitable loss of content in translation due to anirrevocablelinguistic asymmetry. G. Mounin, one of the leading French researchers on translation and interpretation, notes in his book *Les Problèmesthéoriques de la traduction* that if lexical, morphological and syntactic structuresof distinct languages coincide only in minor aspectsthen theequivalent translation is impossible in theory, and in this respect, «it can be argued that the very existence of translation is a scandal for the modern linguistics»[7].

3. «Resistance»to translation

Paul Ricœurtakes a critical look at the claim that textual meaning is completely accessible and thus an absolutely equivalent translationis possible. He calls for «the abandonmentof the dream of the perfect translation»[8].The philosopher comes to the conclusion that thereexistsan unavoidable «resistance to translation»[9]in the process of the interaction between languages and cultures. Turning to the work of A. Berman *The Experience of the Foreign,* Ricœur describes two modes of such resistance: 1) resistance to translation from the source text and 2) resistance from the target language. Likewise, Ricœur stresses that there existsan inherent to humanity, an inescapable desire to translate, which is dictated by the thirst for knowledge and spiritual exchange.

The theoretician of hermeneutics comprehensively analyses the causes of difficulties in translation, both, in terms of linguistics, as well as in philosophical terms. Following W. von Humboldt, heargues that the primary cause of translational difficulties is the inexorable heterogeneity of languagesof the distinctive, shaped through various historical processes, ethnicities and nations. According to Ricœur this original linguistic diversity manifests in the following way. There are phonetic and articulatory variations thatimpedeunderstanding.Morphological and syntactic systems are heterogeneous. Grammatical structure is uniquely specific to each language. For example,the philosopher explains thatthe system of verb tenses is formed differently in each language. In some of them the temporal location of the action is not specified, the emphasis is made only on its completion or incompletion. In other languagesthe system of verb tensesis absent altogether, and the sequence of events is indicated via the temporal circumstances. Grammatical structure of alanguage canshape the worldview. Ricœurrelies ona widespread opinion among the researchers that the orientation of Greek philosophy towards the problems of ontology (reflection and contemplation of the nature of existence and the origins of life) can be explained by the dual function of the verb 'to be' in the Greek language: on the one hand, this verb performs a role of linking the subject and the predicate, on the other hand, - it conveys the concept of existence. All of the abovedemands a significant

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[7] G. Mounin, *Les problèmes théoriques de la traduction*, 1963, p. 8.

[8] P. Ricœur, *On Translation*, (trad.di Eileen Brennan), Routledge, 2006, p. 35. (ed. or.*Sur la traduction*, cit., p. 16.)

[9] Ivi, p. 4-5. (Ivi, p. 11).

structural transformation of the verbal communication duringthe process of translation. Conceptual structure is also uniquely specific to each language. Similarly, semantic systems that constitutethe lexical wealth of one or the other language are not identical either, and furthermore, because their semantic fields do not overlap the synonymic groups are alsodistinct, and the contexts diverge. Hence, alinguistic polysemy arises. Consequently, «the meaning each time is thus defined through usage. […]It is the context each time, which, as we say, determines the meaning that the word has acquired in such-and-such a circumstance of discourse»[10].

Ricœur uses a French word 'le bois' to illustrate his point. In French language the word has several meanings: a small forest or a grove, and at the same time it can refer toawood as a building material or to the wood as in firewood. In other languages these meanings can be conveyed not by one but by a number ofdifferent words,whichbelong todistinct semantic lines.

According to Ricœurduringthe process of translation, besides the expected linguistic difficulties, complications also arise in regards to the aim to preserve the conceptual content of the text. The author of the source has a particular meaning in mind that demands an adequate understanding from those on the receiving end of the written communication. As a result the translator faces a dilemma, articulated by F. Schleiermacher in the 19th century in his essay*Onthe different methods of translating.* As the German philosopher elucidates, in order for the readers to fully comprehend the meaning of the translated text «they must comprehend the spirit of the language that was native to the writer, and they must be able to see his peculiar way of thinking and feeling»[11].In a situation like that we are facing a difficult choice. As he wrote:

> Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader. Both paths are so completely different from one another that one of them must definitely be adhered to as strictly as possible, since a highly unreliable result would emerge from mixing them and it is likely that author and reader would not come together at all[12].

Either the translator strives to reproduce the original in the target language with maximal accuracy, thus leaving it opaque for the reader, or she recreates the original work in the context of her time period and her native culture to the detriment of the equivalence between the translation and the source. From Ricœur's perspectivethe work of a translatorprimarily ought to be based on the

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[10]Ivi, p. 26, (ivi, p. 47).

[11]F. Schleiermacher, «On the Different Methods of Translating», trad. diWaltraudBartscht, in *Theories of Translation,* a cura di Rainer Schulte e John Biguenet,University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, p. 47, (ed. or.*Ueber die verschiedenenMethoden des Uebersezens,*bilingue tedesco-francese, 1999, p.44).

[12]Ivi, p. 47, (ivi, p. 48).

methods of hermeneutical analysis of the worldviews of different nations, cultures, historical eras, and social groups. Thus, he concludes:

> the work of the translator does not move from the word to the sentence, to the text, to the cultural group, but conversely: absorbing vast interpretations of the spirit of a culture, the translator comes down again from the text, to the sentence and to the word[13].

Thehermeneutics theoretician pays particular attention to the problem of translation of philosophical texts. In his interview accompanyingthe publication of the Russian translation of *Memory, history, forgetting*, he describesthat area of translation in the following way:

> Translation of philosophical work is accompanied by a number of particular problems, which further complicates the work of a translator. In philosophy each words is put undera tremendous semantic pressure. Philosophical terms possessspecificmeaningsthat developed historically. I will use as an illustration the word 'logos', which is a fundamental concept in global philosophy. That word was used by a great number of authors, butits meaning has never been unambiguous. In this case the problem does not lie in the equivalency of the terms in different contexts, but it is in the retrospective historical evolution of the meaning represented by that word[14].

Moreover, Ricœurthinks thatphilosophical terms,as a rule,have not been newly formulated but have been borrowed from the language of literature. Words that came from the common use withinthe philosophical context acquire a specific meaning. The theoretician elaborates:

> Take, for example, a very common French word 'être'. The word 'être' means 'to be', 'to exist', 'to occur', 'to be present' and at the same time – 'existence', 'being', 'thing', 'object', 'subject'. Ordinary words become philosophical terms when the authors formulate philosophical problems utilizing those words. It is extremely difficult to restore the theoretical framework of numerous conceptsin spite of their seemingly straightforward, at a first glance, meaning. Words such as 'idea' ('l'idée'), 'phenomenon' ('le phénomène'), 'representation' ('la représentation'), 'appearance' ('l'apparence'), are of particular importance in different philosophical traditions[15].

4. Absolute translation: Is it possible?

On those grounds Ricœur argues that philosophy and linguistics facea fundamental problem: isabsolute translationpossible at all? If we proceed from the fact that an insurmountable discrepancy exists between the languages of

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[13]P. Ricœur, *op. cit.*, p. 31, (ed. fr., p. 56.)

[14]ID., *Memory, history, forgetting*, (ed.russa Память, история, забвение, М., 2004, p. 10-11).

[15]*Ibid.*

differentsocieties, and furthermore «the set of human relationships of the speakers of a given language that turns out to be non-superimposable on the set of such relationships through which the speaker of another language is himself understood as he understands his relationship to the world»[16], then we can only state the fact that «misunderstanding is a right, that translation is theoretically impossible»[17]. Thus we are looking at a contradiction. On the one hand, the goal of achievingan absolutely accurate translation cannot be realized, on the other hand, translation endures regardless. History reveals centuries-old traditionof theinter-linguistic and inter-cultural communication via translation.

Ricœur proposes his own original solution to the problem: hepostulatesa possibility of translation. Similar to Kant, who defendedmorality on the basis of the practical confirmation of the existence of free morally autonomous actions, thetheoretician of hermeneutics proclaims the existence of the practical confirmation of the feasibility of translation:

> since there is such a thing as translation, it certainly has to be possible. And if it is possible, it means that, beneath the diversity of languages, there are hidden structures that either bear the trace of a lost original language that we must rediscover or consist of a priori codes, of universal structures or, as we say, transcendentals that we must manage to reconstruct[18].

In the worldculture a number of attempts have been made to create a universal, comprehensive, andunderstandableto all people language thatcould becomeaninstrumentofglobal communication. Proponents of that ideaadvocated either toreturn to the primogenialsharedproto-language of humanity, thetraces of whichcan be found in most modern languages, or to identifythe common structures of transcendental character evident in the concordance of the languages that formed naturally through history, and on the basis of such structures to create a new universal language. Leibniz was among the first to express that idea and he called for the development of aunified lexical system for all languages and of the ontology of constructive grammar rules. Other philosophers, such as F.Schleiermacher, W.Benjamin, U. Eco, followed a similar route, striving to cleanse the active languages of the inherent logical and linguistic flaws and design a comprehensive, unitary, precise and expressive language. In the field oflogic,A.N.Chomsky and his followershave been working on thedevelopment of an artificial effective formalized language. InRicœur's opinionthat task has remainsunfinished for two reasons. Firstly, the construction of a lexical database of the universal language involvesa totalequivalence between the symbol and the object, and in a broader sense, between the language and the worldview of different people, which is impossible. Secondly, the universal language should be comprehensive and self-sufficient for all the carriers of diversenatural languages. However, it is

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[16]ID.,*On Translation*, cit., pp. 15-16. (ed. fr., p. 28-29).
[17]*Ibid.*
[18]Ivi, p. 16, (ivi, p. 29).

unrealistic to expect to be able to formalize and regulatean inexhaustible wealth of human thought, which isexpressed in a multitude of constantly evolving languages.

Accordingly, the philosopher arrives to the following conclusion. The absolutely equivalent translation that would reproduce the source text fully and without distortions is practically impossible. Perfect translationimplies a maximally accurate, but non-identical transduction of a source message intothe target language. However, in order to validate the hermeneutical concept of translation it is necessary to postulate the principle of the feasibility of the equivalent translation. The mission of the spiritual exchange between different cultures requirestheoretical assumption of thepossibility of the absolute translation. Moreover,«absolutetranslation necessarily presupposes total equivalence»[19]. The concept of equivalence in this case does not imply the existence of the correspondence in formbetween the original and the translation. On the contrary, a literal reconstruction of anauthor's text in a foreign language actually distorts the content of the message and therefore is inadequate. The absolute translation - is «equivalence without adequacy»[20]– Ricœur explains. «… there is no absolute criterion ... absolute translation ...»[21]. If, however, we theoretically assume the existence of such a criterionthen it ought to be the «identity of meaning»[22].Consequently, the philosopher concludes that we should abandon

> these theoretical alternatives, translatable versus untranslatable, and to replace them with new practical alternatives, stemming from the very exercise of translation, the faithfulness versus betrayal alternatives[23].

He proposesthat we follow D. Davidson's conceptualization of the problem of the possibility of translation: «hard – easy». According to the American philosopher-analytic, if in theorytranslation appears to be an unfeasiblydifficult task, then in practicethat work is carried out successfullywhile doubts concerning the accuracy of the translation inevitably persist.

Ricœur's ideas on that issue are in agreement with the basic principles of modern linguistics. Most researchers highlight the complexity and ambiguity of the concept of linguistic equivalence. Theoreticiansof translation proposemultidimensional models of equivalence that allowemphasizingthe structural, semantic, functional, pragmatic, aesthetic and other facetsof concordance between the original and the translation. Some authors introduce particular terms to define the potential criteria of equivalence. Among them arethe notion of formal equivalence as preserving the form and content of the source text, and thenotion of the dynamic equivalence in terms of therecreation of the dynamic link between the author and the recipient of the message (E. Nida). Other concepts includethe idea of semantic-stylistic

[19]Ivi, p. 17, (ivi, p. 60).
[20]Ivi, p. 10, (ivi, p. 40).
[21]Ivi, p. 22, (ivi, p. 60).
[22]*Ibid.*
[23]Ivi, p. 14, (ivi, p. 26).

equivalence as preserving the content, and the idea of the functional-pragmatic equivalence as appropriate for achieving a particulargoal (G.Eger). Many scientists insist it is necessarytodistinguishbetween the equivalence,meant as a similaritybetweenthe original and the translated texts,and the adequacy,meant here as a comprehensive translation (R. Jakobson, G.Mounin, D. Steiner). Overall,there is a consensus among the researchers that the main criterion for a comprehensive translation is its adequacy, that is the exhaustive transmission of the semantic content of the original via the reproduction of its characteristic featuresin the target language, or, through the means of the foreign language,arecreation of an equivalent text that performs an analogous communicative task.

5. Understanding and interpretation.Ethical meaning of translation.

Ricœur recognizes the inevitable «gap between equivalence and total adequacy»[24] and warns of the dangers of «equivalence without adequacy»[25].Due to the fact that «there is no absolute criterion for a good translation»[26], we ought to «aim only at a supposed equivalence to the source»[27],search and experiment, striving towards the goal throughpersistent work. The philosopher introduces the concepts of theinternal and theexternal translation. The external translation involves transformation of aforeign source into thetext in translated language. By the internal translation hemeans a reflection onthe text within the framework of its native language. In this aspect translation should be regarded as «the language's work on itself»[28],as the language striving towards self-understanding[29]. Accordingly,Ricœur often turns to Hölderlin's words that callfor thelearning ofall that is one's own as well as that which is foreign. It is because of translation that we are able to not only master the world of a foreign language, but we are also able to discover additional resources within our native language, translation allows us to «broaden the horizons of our own language»[30].

The originality ofthe French philosopher's approach stemsfrom the fact that he proposes his own theory of translation withinthe framework of the theory of interpretation. If the question of possibility of the adequate translation is essentialfor the researchers-linguists, then for Ricœur such question is the starting point for the construction, within the context of hermeneutics, of the fundamental philosophical framework within which translation is considered one of the stages in a general process of communication. Translation represents movement in two directions. On the one hand, it is a linguistic effort of transforming a verbal message expressed in one language into an expression in another language. On the other hand, it is

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[24]Ivi, p.10, (ivi, p. 19).
[25]*Ibid.*
[26]Ivi, p. 22. (ivi, p. 40).
[27]*Ibid.*
[28]Ivi, p. 24. (ivi, p. 52).
[29]N.S.Avtonomova substantiates the concept of translation as a particular form of neo-classical reflection of language and culture in the book *Knowledge and translation. Experience in the philosophy of language*, M., 2008.
[30]P. Ricouer, *On Translation*, cit., p. 21. (ed. or., p. 39.)

arealization of the processes of understanding and interpretation of texts. The French philosopher often refers back to the main thesis of the book *After Babel* by Steiner, who claims that to understand is to translate. The principal tasks of hermeneutics include the study of the problem of understanding, and the development of methodology of text interpretation in the conditions of the great diversity of languages, cultures and interpretations. Understanding, as an art of comprehension of the meaning of the signs transmitted by one consciousness and perceived by another consciousness via its external expression, aims to discern the primary meaning of the sign. The process of understanding happens through the reproduction of the creative process on the basis of the signs that are fixed in their written form. In reality the semantic meanings are relatively autonomous, and the position of a subject at the receiving end of the discourse is characterized by their own dynamic and personal qualities. Besides, a text is not simply a linear sequence of phrases, but it has a constructed integrity, which generally can be crafted in several different ways. The philosopher elucidates that

> In this sense, the multiplicity of interpretations and even the conflict between interpretations is not a deficiency or a flaw but an advantage of understanding that forms the essence of interpretation; Here we can talk about textual polysemy as we talk about the lexical polysemy[31].

Such theoreticians of text perception as Saussure, Jakobson, Jauss demonstrate that the question of the interpretation of discourse remains open at all times. Ricœur stresses that among the world's living languages any text can be read and perceived in a multitude of ways. The author's intention can be somewhat elusive to the readers, who offer their own interpretations of the reading, and the text itself possesses a kind of semantic autonomy. Mastering the art of understanding of discourse is the mission of philosophy. It is essential to «explain further in order to understand better»[32] - he declares.

According to Ricœur's perspective translation does not just perform a maintenance function, but it plays a significant role in the process of communication. Translation and immersion into another culture aid the formation of the image of the «other», the necessity of which was justified by both, Plato and Husserl. The existence of the «other» is not only an essential factor in communication, but it is also a condition of its inter-subjective and creative quality. It is for the sake of the others, the audience, that a speaker gives an explanation, offers new definitions, attempts to rephrase the same message. Plato demonstrates that concept by utilizing an image of a sophist, having shown that it is necessary not only being able to express the same thing in a different way, but it is also essential to say something different in regards to what is expressed already. It is because of translation that a text can take on a new life, and one culture can get an opportunity to observe the work created by its carriers from the point of view of another culture. Therefore, translation

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[31] ID., *Hermeneutics. Ethics. Politics*, (ed.russa, Герменевтика. Этика. Политика. М., 1995, p. 8).
[32] Ivi, p. 18.

is a «creative appropriation […]by the reception language»[33]of the source text, which is conducive to theconstructivereconsideration of the intellectual assets and enrichment of the human spiritual potential.

The work of translation, according to Ricœur, carries a profound ethical meaning. In addition toa superior linguistic competence and a comprehensive knowledge of the subject ofthesource text, an open mind and tolerance towards the alienare required of the translator, as well as an ability to immerse themselvesinto the foreign culture for the purpose of the spiritual exchange. The translator must possess a special gift, which the philosophercalls «linguistic hospitality»[34], which means that «the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming house»[35]. Translation isan essential condition for the mutual respect and recognition of different cultures. The process of recognition allows the actors involved in the communicationto evaluate the qualities of the otherculture, to realize their own talents and accomplishments, which increase self-esteem and moral responsibility of individual communities and the humankind as a whole. «Starting from this fact of life, let us translate!»[36]–Ricœur concludes.

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[33]ID.,*On Translation*, cit., p. 37, (ed. or., p. 66).
[34]Ivi, p. 10, (ivi, p. 20).
[35]*Ibid.*
[36]Ivi, p. 20, (ivi, p. 37).