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Dizionario gramsciano / Gramsci Dictionary: Translatability

Abstract

This is an English translation of the Gramsci Dictionary contribution "Translatability". The entry outlines how Gramsci approaches the question of the extent to which natural languages as expressions of national cultures are translatable. In the Notebooks he starts from and elaborated on Marx's position in the Holy Family, namely that specific discourses (e. g. French political literature and German classical philosophy to which Gramsci adds English classical political economy) that characterize the national culture of each of these peoples – all having, it should be noted, a similar degree of social development – reflect their social base. From the historical point of view, then, Gramsci maintains, their civilizations and the specific discourses that arise within them are mutually translatable.

Keywords

Language, translatability, discourse, paradigm, culture

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Derek Boothman

The noun translatability and its adjective “translatable”, appear little more than twenty times in the *Notebooks*, yet Gramsci devotes a separate section of the special Notebook 11 to the subject of the *Translatability of Scientific and Philosophical Languages*, a clear sign of the strategic importance that the notion occupies in his overall discourse. The concept is intimately linked to that of “translation” but the two aspects, the theoretical possibility of translating something and the practical aspect of translating, are taken separately. Translatability involves two interlinked processes: that of translating natural languages (*lingue*) and national cultures (cf. the parallel between Greek and Latin civilizations discussed in Q15§64, pp. 1828-9; in English Gramsci 1995, pp. 314-5) and the translation, introduced above, of “scientific and philosophical languages” (*linguaggi*). Taking first translation between natural languages, on the basis of his formation in linguistics Gramsci observes that neither natural languages nor even single words are exactly translatable since the identity of a word such as “rose” (“Italian ‘rosa’ = Latin ‘rosa’”: Q16§21, p. 1893; Gramsci 1985, p. 384), which at the start of the process of learning another language seems an identity, hides differences in connotations: a “mathematical scheme” of equivalences does not hold, since in a language what prevails are the “historical judgment, the judgment of taste, the nuances, the ‘unique and individual’ expressivity”. Although Gramsci claims that “a great national language with historical richness and complexity [...] can translate any other great culture” (Q11§12, p. 1377; Gramsci 1971, p. 325) sometimes he seems even to deny this possibility (except by the use of paraphrasing). Emblematic here is the case of words bound up with “the literary-national tradition of an essential historical continuity” (Q26§11, p. 2306): the series formed by words such as “Rinascimento, Risorgimento, Riscossa” is difficult and “at times impossible to translate into the foreign language” (*ibid.*). Using current terminology, these are “culture-bound”, in other words they are difficult to make use of when taken out of their cultural context.

Natural languages, as expressions of national cultures, are characterized by languages (*linguaggi*) of different intellectual traditions, whose translatability conditions are the subject of a second line of enquiry by Gramsci. The immediate point of departure for his reflections is the comment, made at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International by Lenin. In his view the Bolsheviks had not “been able to ‘translate’ into the European languages” their own language,¹ meaning their political discourse (Q11§46, p. 1468: Gramsci 1995, p. 306). This assessment echoes another comment that Gramsci makes, this time regarding Giuseppe Ferrari, a leading member of the Action Party of the Risorgimento period, who “was not able to translate ‘French’ into ‘Italian’”, that is one national experience into another” (Q1§44, p. 44, reiterated in Q19§24, p. 2016: Gramsci 1992, p. 140; and Gramsci 1971, p. 65 respectively). Examples of this type represent the passage that allows Gramsci to reach the positions developed in Notebook 11. He there provides the theoretical bases for his argumentation, adducing as an example of an intermediate phase the translations of specialist languages of various scientific schools. In one particular example, Gramsci mentions the pragmatist philosopher Giovanni Vailati who, in the opinion of the economist Luigi Einaudi, was able to “translate any theory whatsoever from a geometrical language into an algebraic one” or from “a hedonistic one to that of Kantian ethics” (Q11§48, p. 1469: Gramsci 1995, p. 308). Elsewhere Gramsci asks analogously “whether Machiavelli’s essentially political language can be translated into economic terms, and to which economic system it could be reduced” (Q13§13, p. 1575: Gramsci 1971, p. 143).

Crucial for the creative development of Marxism, Gramsci extends the argument on the translatability of concepts into the field of the philosophy of praxis – concepts that are of use to this philosophy but which are quite different in origin – taking into account the semantic modifications that are always necessary. He states explicitly that the notes on the translatability of scientific and philosophical languages (*linguaggi*) “are in fact to be brought together in the general section on the relationships between speculative philosophies and the philosophy of praxis” (Q10II§6, p. 1245: Gramsci 1995, p. 306). Gramsci’s privileged point of

¹ Cf. Lenin: “we have not learnt how to present our Russian experience to foreigners” - see Riddell (2011) p. 304.

reference is Croce, though this is not at all the only one: he also deals with theorists of other outlooks and orientations, such as Machiavelli, Vincenzo Cuoco etc. The translation of terms and concepts coming from their paradigms does not mean their simple incorporation into that of the philosophy of praxis, but necessitates their reinterpretation and transformation through the critique of the paradigm under consideration and of the single terms that are subjected to the process of translation. One may here note both similarities with the approach of Thomas Kuhn² to the translatability of scientific paradigms, but also differences as regards the greater or lesser degree of commensurability of the paradigms themselves.

In unifying the arguments on the translatability between national languages (*lingue*), or between scientific and philosophical languages (*linguaggi*, or here, in other words, paradigmatic discourses³), and the question of their connection to their social base, Gramsci attempts to demonstrate what Marx had asserted in the *Holy Family*, namely that “Proudhon’s French political language (*linguaggio*) corresponds to and can be translated into the language (*linguaggio*) of classical German philosophy” (Q11§48, p. 1468: Gramsci 1995, p. 307): elsewhere, instead of Proudhon, we find “the practical politics” of Robespierre or French “politico-juridical” language (Q11§49, p. 1471: Gramsci 1995, p. 310, and p. 309 respectively). He also observes that Hegel posits “as parallel and reciprocally translatable the juridico-political language of the Jacobins and the concepts of classical German philosophy” (Q19§24, p. 2024: Gramsci 1971, p. 78; cf. also – for the case of France – the above mentioned Q11§48, p. 1468: Gramsci 1995, p. 307). Gramsci arrives at the conclusion that the different languages (*linguaggi*) characteristic of different nations having a similar stage of development – that of the philosophy of Kant and Hegel in Germany, of politics in France, and of classical economy in Britain – with the due caution necessary in the cases, are mutually translatable. Again in Notebook 11, Gramsci defines the three activities to be “the constituent elements of the same conception of the world” (Q11§65, p. 1492: Gramsci 1971, p. 403): there is therefore “convertibility from one to the other” and each constituent element “is implicit the

² T. S. Kuhn (1970).

³ The term “paradigm” is used by Gramsci to describe Croce’s historiography: see Q10I§9, p. 1226-9, and its first draft Q8§236; for the second draft see Gramsci (1995), pp. 348-50.

others”. And with explicit reference to the paragraphs on translatability taken together they form a “homogeneous circle” (*loc. cit.*).

In theorizing the translatability between natural languages (*lingue*), Gramsci first of all anchors language (*linguaggio*) to social reality, thereby going beyond a number of modern translation theorists who tend to overlook this linkage. His approach allows him to transcend the debate on translation between linguistic “domestication” and “foreignization”, i.e. the use of the sole terms and concepts of belonging to the language and culture of arrival or, on the other hand, the incorporation into the translated text of “extraneous” elements, that is terms belonging to the language of departure. For Gramsci “only in the philosophy of praxis”, which attempts to explain the other philosophies and reduce them to one of its own moments, “is the ‘translation’ organic and thoroughgoing” while, in other philosophies, it may often be “a simple game of generic ‘schematisms’” (Q11§47, p. 1468: Gramsci 1995, p. 307). However, as he observes in his following paragraph, with regard to such verbal questions and the “personal or group ‘jargon’” the difference between the different languages (*linguaggi*) may be significant and such terminological questions may represent “the first step of the vaster and deeper problem” posed in the *Holy Family*, namely that of the translatability of the languages (*agins* (*linguaggi*)) that characterize national cultures (Q11§48, p. 1470: Gramsci 1995, p. 309). In order for such cultures and languages to be mutually translatable, it is necessary that there should be social bases (in the Marxist sense) that are similar one to another, either at the current time or in a previous phase of the culture that carries out the translation.

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