

# Commentary: On the Translation of Literature and Experience

## Reflections with Walter Benjamin

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Is experience translatable? What are the limiting and enabling conditions for empathizing with the experiences of others – even across differences? Magdalena Suerbaum and Heidemarie Winkel examine these questions in relation to academic knowledge production, in which subjects with different positions interact with each other, for example in sociological research on migration and flight. The reflection centers Suerbaum's acquaintance with refugee mothers who built relationships with her through shared experiences of pregnancy and motherhood. But can these gendered experiences actually be shared? Are they translatable across power asymmetries related to legal status, nationality, racialization, class, and the position researcher and interviewee hold in knowledge processes (Suerbaum/Winkel 2024: 83)?

The focal point of Suerbaum and Winkel's paper is the observation that effects of power that structure research settings in sociology and anthropology make it necessary to critically review the *conceivability and translatability of experiences* that are shared between researcher and interviewee. The paper explains the epistemological challenges that arise not only from the notion of gender, but also from experience as a “foundational social-scientific concept” (ibid.: 85). Through the lens of postcolonial and feminist critique, the authors show that the concept of experience is closely tied to the Western European history of ideas, especially German Idealism, and that it served a specific function for the development of capitalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their paper thus concretizes how the concept experience is always something to be explained, historicized, and interpreted, as Joan W. Scott has elaborated (Scott 1991: 797). Reflecting on the fact that the interpretation of gendered experiences always remains the privilege of researchers, Suerbaum and Winkel propose to understand this constellation as a “continuous request to be attentive to the various structures that informed the contact between Magdalena and the migrant women” (Suerbaum/Winkel 2024: 94). Thus, they conclude that the translation of gendered experiences

must always be understood as “partial, power-induced, incomplete, and formed by structures of dominance and asymmetry” (ibid.: 95).

Reading their paper as a literary scholar, I started thinking about the act of *translation* itself. What is translation, what does it entail? Both in terms of knowledge processes and epistemology as well as regarding that particular mode of representing human experiences that is called literature. Thinking about this question, I turned to Walter Benjamin.

Benjamin writes about the pitfalls of translation in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (*The Translator's Task*, written in 1923 as a preface to his translation of the poetry collection *Tableaux Parisiens* by Charles Baudelaire) in which he starts his examination of the topic by asking what translation is (“translation is a mode”<sup>1</sup>, Benjamin 1997: 152), stating that going back to the original is mandatory (ibid.), and reflecting on the success and failure of translations of literary and poetic works. For Benjamin, bad translations consist in the attempt to simply transfer the content or the message of a literary work. However, if the translator approaches his task by writing poetry himself, the translation also misses the original (ibid.: 151–152).

Mirroring Suerbaum and Winkel's objection that translating experiences can only be “partial, power-induced, incomplete, and formed by structures of dominance and asymmetry” (Suerbaum/Winkel 2024: 95), Benjamin questions whether the meaning of works of poetry can *ever* be represented or captured in the form of translation.<sup>2</sup> For Benjamin, translation is a medium for dealing with the “foreignness of languages to each other”<sup>3</sup> (Benjamin 1997: 157). But he also points to other purposes of translation, and these reflections contain a kernel of utopianism.

Translations, Benjamin argues, can point to a place, a “domain”, and in this domain “lies that which, in a translation [of a literary work], is more than a message” (ibid.: 158). This admittedly ambiguous phrase reveals a facet of Benjamin's magical and messianic understanding of language, which he unfolds in various essays.<sup>4</sup> The

1 “Übersetzung ist eine Form.” (Benjamin 1972: 9) “Form” is a central, yet ambiguous term in literary studies; it means a “mode of representation”, a historically formed, often conventionalized way of shaping language and structures of artworks and literary texts (lat. *forma* means “shape”, “texture” or in German, *Gestalt*). A change of form affects content and meaning(s). Form and content cannot be divided neatly from each other, in the realm of art, in literature, and even science, there is no “pure” content without form.

2 “Die Frage nach der Übersetzbarkeit eines Werkes ist doppeldeutig: Sie kann bedeuten: ob es unter der Gesamtheit seiner Leser je seinen zutreffenden Übersetzer finden werde? oder, und eigentlich: ob es seinem Wesen nach Übersetzung zulasse und demnach – der Bedeutung dieser Form gemäß – auch verlange.” (Ibid.: 9–10)

3 “Damit ist allerdings zugestanden, daß eine Übersetzung nur eine vorläufige Art ist, sich mit der Fremdheit der Sprachen auseinanderzusetzen.” (Ibid.: 14)

4 Benjamin's philosophy of language understands languages both in their historical dimension and oriented toward a future, toward a “messianic end of their history” (Benjamin 1997: 157; Benjamin 1972: 14). Through a “sacred growth of languages” (ibid.) languages move to-

intangible “more” where “languages are reconciled and fulfilled” is not even achieved by the original of a literary work (ibid.: 157–158). Translations, however, can point to this virtual, imaginary place where languages reconcile and fulfill each other.<sup>5</sup> As an abstract phenomenon, Benjamin continues, translations represent the hidden and only virtual relationship that lives between different languages:

Thus translation ultimately has as its purpose the expression of the most intimate relationships among languages. Translation cannot possibly reveal or produce this hidden relationship; however, *translation can represent this relationship, insofar as it realizes it seminally or intensively*. [...] – This imagined, inner relationship among languages is, however, a relationship of special convergence. It consists in the fact that languages are not alien to each other, but a priori, and independently of all historical connections, related to each other in what they want to say.<sup>6</sup> (Benjamin 1997: 154–155, my emphasis)

Benjamin's utopianism lies in the idea of a hidden relationship between languages, which translations do not openly exhibit, but nevertheless *represent*. What Benjamin elaborates here is revealed in miniature when we consider the etymology of the word translation. Translation, in the literal sense, means “to bring across” or “to carry over” (*trans* translates as “across”, *latio* derives from *latus*, the past participle of *ferre*, that is “to carry” or “to bring”) – this implies that something is coming together, moving towards each other. *Übersetzung*, the German word, carries the idea of a river crossing.

How can we unlock this complex Benjaminian consideration? How can we *translate* Benjamin's thoughts on language, poetry, and translation to Suerbaum and Winkel's reflections about the translatability of experience? On the premise that research usually means that we (have to) *represent experiences*, since we have to publish,

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wards this messianic end, at which “reconciliation” and “fulfillment” (“Versöhnungs- und Erfüllungsbereich der Sprachen”, see next note) are possible.

- 5 “[D]as Original [wächst] in einen höheren und reineren Luftkreis der Sprache hinauf, in welchem es freilich nicht auf Dauer zu leben vermag, wie es ihn auch bei Weitem nicht in allen Teilen seiner Gestalt erreicht, auf den es aber dennoch, in einer wunderbar eindringlichen Weise wenigstens hindeutet auf den vorbestimmten, versagten Versöhnungs- und Erfüllungsbereich der Sprachen. Den erreicht es nicht mit Stumpf und Stil, aber in ihm steht dasjenige, was an einer Übersetzung mehr ist als Mitteilung.” (Benjamin 1972: 14–15)
- 6 “So ist die Übersetzung zuletzt zweckmäßig für den Ausdruck des innersten Verhältnisses der Sprachen zueinander. Sie kann dieses verborgene Verhältnis selbst unmöglich offenbaren, unmöglich herstellen; aber darstellen, indem sie es keimhaft oder intensiv verwirklicht, kann sie es. [...] – Jenes gedachte, innerste Verhältnis der Sprachen ist aber das einer eigentümlichen Konvergenz. Es besteht darin, daß die Sprachen einander nicht fremd, sondern a priori und von allen historischen Beziehungen abgesehen einander in dem verwandt sind, was sie sagen wollen.” (Ibid.: 12)

present, and teach our research, our findings, analyses, and interpretations, we can try to think of *research as translation*. Some (probably many) experiences need the work of the “researcher as translator” in order to be understood in the institutions – especially in academia with its specialized languages, terminologies, and conventions. And in fact, translation is the daily work of researchers – we “translate” when we teach, or when we present our findings to our colleagues, or when we tell friends, partners, or our children about our work.

Thinking further with Benjamin, we can understand our task as congruent with that of the translator. In other words, we can see ourselves as trying to represent a kernel of what Benjamin calls “the hidden relationship” not only between different languages, but also between our interview partners and us, and between their experiences and our own. This thought applies not only to sociological or anthropological research that requires the representation of the experiences of people who are experiencing the world as positioned subjects quite differently than the researcher. In the context of literary studies, it can mean representing (reading) experiences with literary texts, an experience that also often entails the experience of alterity.

It is in this sense that Benjamin’s idea of the virtual “place” where languages strive towards each other in order to finally complement and reconcile each other may actually be a useful figure of thought for approaching the question of the translatability of experiences such as motherhood. Assuming that there is such a virtual place, we could imagine that different experiences and the categories structuring them can grow towards each other and become transparent with regard to their embeddedness in relations of power and domination. But even though this place stays an imaginary one, it is vital to work with it in order to make inter-subjective experiences intelligible to the different subjects involved.

The task of the “researcher-translator” would then be, continuing with Benjamin, Suerbaum, and Winkel’s arguments, to understand “research as translation” as a means of dealing with difference, alterity, “foreignness” (see above: Benjamin views translation as a medium for the “foreignness of languages to each other”), but at the same time to trust that it is possible to find a connective in different experiences. Suerbaum and Winkel make wonderfully clear what this entails: It means not taking any concept, any aspect of positioning, orientation, and relation between the researcher and the interviewee as self-explanatory, ahistorical, or universal – and yet trusting that there is connectedness in experiences. Researchers can try to make this visible in the same careful and self-critical way that I have tried to unfold with Suerbaum’s, Winkel’s and Walter Benjamin’s thoughts.

## Bibliography

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