Flusser on Translation, Part I

Translated from the Portuguese, with commentary, by Christopher Larkosh

Philosophy of Language (1966), Chapter IV

The arguments that all of you formulate in this discussion of the theory of knowledge that we are elaborating push our present course towards a digression to which I will dedicate today's 'class.' It is becoming obvious that the test of our theory of knowledge will be a theory of translation yet to be elaborated. That theory will have to make explicit why translations are possible giving a determinate meaning to the term 'translation,' and will have to explain why translations are impossible, giving a different meaning to this term. Professor Leonidas gave an example of the first case last Friday in how translating plane geometry into three-dimensional geometry was possible. I will give an example of the second case: the translation of plane geometry into the language of mysticism is impossible. The three languages in discussion, that of plane geometry, that of three-dimensional geometry, and that of mysticism, mean the same 'something' that is reality, if we give credit to traditional philosophy, including the neo-Positivists. The statements of the two forms of geometry and mysticism are true, in accordance with that philosophy, if and when they mirror a situation of reality. Yet I will seek to prove that the statements of plane geometry are untranslatable into statements of mysticism. Out of two, one: or 1) the language of geometry is significant, not being the language of mysticism, or the language of mysticism is significant, not being the language of geometry, o both are insignificant, or 2) both languages are significant, but the impossibility of translation between them proves that their meaning does not reside in their mirroring of 'something' common to both of them. It is obvious that we cannot condemn one of the two languages, or both, of having no meaning. It is this second alternative that must be explained by the theory of translation, and that we will seek to elaborate today. A preliminary consideration becomes desirable: the illustrations that I provided exemplify languages on the kind that I will call language layers (*camadas de língua*). Plane and three-dimensional geometry as well as mysticism are layers of a 'natural' language: for example, Portuguese. I will call translation s between layers 'vertical translations'. Natural languages exist, such as Portuguese or Swahili. I will call this kind of translation "horizontal translation'. I will consider 'natural languages' as a point of departure for this argument, without examining, in the present context, their problematic 'naturalness.'

From a structural point of view, we can try to force natural languages into the following schema: (see attached illustration). I will only discuss inflected languages, and will consider the possibility of translation between languages with different structures on a future occasion. Simplifying radically, inflected languages are characterized by the following structure: they consist of words. Words allow for consideration both within and outside of sentences. Considered outside of sentences, these words can be inflected. I will consider two kinds of inflection: declension and conjugation. Declension is the inflection of words called nouns or other words similar to nouns, whereas conjugation is the inflection of verbs. There are inflections that transform words from one type to another. [These I will consider later, perhaps.] Declension is responsible for that aspect of our outside world that we call 'space', and conjugation for that aspect that we call 'time'. Languages with another structure cannot result in worlds that have aspects of time and space in our sense of these terms.

Words can also be considered within the context of a sentence. From this point of view, problems of subject, object, etc. emerge, as well as those of questions and commands etc., [which I will consider later if I have time.]

Languages of the kind that we speak are represented in two ways when seen from the outside: as sounds and as designs (spoken and written language). A brief overview of language will reveal that it deals with symbols of sounds, with some exceptions: for example, algorithms. Over the course of discourse, symbolic systems develop that do not represent sounds of spoken language, for example symbolic logic or musical notation. The symbolic systems that represent sounds of spoken language (alphabets) are the result of the attempt to translate spoken language onto a two-dimensional plane. These symbolic systems, which do not represent sounds of spoken language, are the result of an effort to translate onto a two dimensional plane. Spoken language serves as a referential system in all of those systems, and all those systems are derivative. These efforts at translation have enjoyed considerable but limited success. Alphabets translate the meaning of spoken language, but not all of it. Mathematics and musical notation translate the structure of spoken language, but not all of it. It is a problem with which we will deal in greater detail in the future. It would be a mistake to call symbols of mathematics of logic 'ideograms.' The ideograms from the written language from the Orient are independent of spoken language, and have much greater autonomy than algebraic symbols, for example. It is possible that some ideograms emerged from the attempt to translate spoken language. Other resulted from an effort to depict, that is, an unarticulated gesture. But on the whole, Oriental

writing is an autonomous system, and on a structural level entirely different from our type of languages.

So this is the structure of our languages, radically simplified. My theory of translation affirms that translations are possible between our kind of languages, given this basic structural identity. In accordance with this theory, translation consists of adaptation of a sentence, let's say, in Portuguese, into another language, say Arabic, in the following manner. First we analyze the Portuguese sentence on the level of sentence and that of its words. We will immediately choose Arabic sentences with similar structure and Arabic words of similar structure. We will call the result, which will be an Arabic sentence composed of Arabic words, a 'translation of a Portuguese sentence.' It is obvious that the new sentence will not be the perfect equivalent of the original sentence, as there will not be a point for point correspondence. The situation of reality that the Arabic sentence may establish will not be identical to the one established in Portuguese. The two realities will be different and in this sense, I can say that translation is impossible. But they will be structurally similar, and in this sense I can say that translation is possible. Let us consider for a moment why these two situations of reality are different.

I will give two examples. The conjugation of the Indo-Germanic verb[1] creates a conception of time that is articulated in the past, present and future tense. The conjugation of the Semitic verb creates one articulated in past and future tense. In the Semitic reality, the present is not a tense. If I translate the Portuguese phrase 'eu falo' [I speak] with the Hebrew 'ani omer' I have entirely changed the situation of reality. The situation of 'ani omer' [lit. 'I speaker'] is static, because it doesn't involve time. Nonetheless, it does have to do with translation, because the structure of the Portuguese phrase is 'sou falador [I am a speaker]' which corresponds approximately to the structure of the He-

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[1] Much linguistic terminology that Flusser employs is already dated, evinced in the use of obsolete terms such as 'Swahili', 'Oriental', or perhaps most lamentably 'Indo-Germanic'. Then again, do we still live in the 'same' linguistic world as Flusser did? Is the 'we' that is reading still speaking one of the language that Flusser considered 'similar to ours'? This question could also be posited by way of the conceptualization of the Hebrew language at the center of this philosophical inquiry. Although it is true that Biblical Hebrew does not have a present tense per se, that does not necessarily preclude the capacity of people of conceive of one, does it? Especially in the mid-1960's in which most Hebrew speakers were bilingual (many in language that did indeed have a present tense), having escaped centers of Jewish diaspora in Europe like Flusser himself. Might not that multilingual sensibility be brought to bear on the way that Hebrew is experiences not only as a scriptural register, but as a present and lived language? Again the metaphor of translation emerges to expose the incommensurability of human experience, of how no two experiences are truly 'similar.' Each is unique, whether the approach to language or languages, or the movement across continents and the attendant adaptation of identity that such movement predicates. The languages that each of us inherits or chooses to document our lived present invariably differ. And that seems to be what Flusser is attempting to point out here, that we are never *finished choosing language.*

brew phrase, of a language that does not contain the verb 'to be', therefore not allowing for the translation for the Portuguese word 'sou' [I am]. Second example: Consider the set of words 'a casa do livro' [lit. 'the house of the book']. Due to declension, that set establishes a relationship between two nouns, which is the nucleus of a situation of reality. 'A casa' [The house] is nominative, 'do livro' [of the book]. And the situation is therefore one characterized by a relationship of 'ownership.' The house is the property of the book. In this situation, it implies that 'the book has a house.' Now consider the translation into Hebrew 'beit hasefer'. What is subject to declension now is the first noun 'beit' [house]. Our categories 'nominative' and 'genitive' are not applicable to the situation of reality that is emerging. However, we are dealing with a approximately legitimate translation, due to our analysis, which resulted in 'o livro tem casa' [the book has a house]. It is true that Hebrew does not have verbs like 'ter' [to have] or 'haver' [there is, there are] and that the present tense does not exist. The sentence 'the book has a house' is thus untranslatable. But Hebrew has a dative case that is very similar to our own. I can construct a Hebrew sentence 'bayit lisefer' [lit. 'house to the book']. And I can, in a very laborious way, adapt the present tense of the Portuguese verb 'ter' [to have] to this dative, for example 'house belongs to the book'. I can therefore affirm that the translation of 'casa do livro' by 'beit hasefer' is approximately correct. But I have a surprise. 'Beit hasefer' which I discovered meant 'house of the book' actually means 'school'. And this discovery will be pivotal for my belief in a situation of reality beyond languages. In effect, no school exists that the two languages can attempt to articulate, and our example proves it existentially. The most we can say is the following: in the context of the world created by the Hebrew language the words 'beit hasefer' occupy a place that approximately corresponds to the place occupied by the word 'escola' (that is, place of contemplation and leisure, 'schole') in the context of the world created by the Portuguese language.

Everything I have just said refers to that kind of translation that I called 'horizontal' when introducing the problem. All of the sentences that we have considered up to this point participate more or less in the same linguistic layer that I will designate by way of the term 'conversation,' and this will be a technical term from now on. I will define the layer of arguments in conversation 'verses.' I will define 'verse' as a sentence that predicates an original proper noun, and I will define 'linguistic layer' in which verses occur, as 'poetry.' This is about definitions defined ad hoc, and I ask that you accept them without understanding, for the time being, to what end I recur to these terms. Everything that we have discussed up to now refers to translation of conversational phrases from Portuguese to Hebrew, and therefore horizontal translations. I will formulate my theory of this kind of translation in the following way: horizontal translations are mutual adaptations between two structures of lan-

guages in corresponding layers. The more similar their structures are, and the poorer they are in meaning, the more successful they will be. I believe that my definition is now plausible with respect to structural similarity. I will now deal with poverty of meaning.

In the preceding talks, I defined discourse as the progressive exhaustion of meanings through the predication of nouns. The process begins with the predication of proper names, whose meaning is infinite. The proper nouns appear in discourse through an activity that I call 'chamar' [port. 'calling,' 'naming'], but now I will change the term. I will now say that this activity of naming is that of poetry. Phrases that predicate new proper nouns produced by poetry are verse. Verse constitutes the poetic layer of language. The conversational layer of language is the result of an attempt at vertical translation; it consists of verses translated into prose. In that kind of translation, proper nouns are translated into names of categories, and the dense and implicit structure of verse is loosened and made more explicit. It is obvious that is about a kind of progressive translation; the poetic quality of verse is progressively made into prose by the ongoing conversation. The conversational layer of language can therefore be stratified into substrata in agreement with the degree of 'prosification' achieved. The substratum from which our examples of horizontal translation have been taken is relatively underdeveloped. It can be placed relatively close to the layer of poetry. This is the reason for the relative difficulty of translation from Portuguese into Hebrew on this substratum. If the examples had been taken from a more developed and prosaic layer, for example, from that conversation called 'chemistry,' the difficulties of translation would have been much smaller. I imagine that the translation of the sentence in Portuguese 'uma molécula de sal de cozinha consiste de um átomo de sódio e outro de cloro' [a molecule of kitchen salt consists of one atom of sodium and one of chlorine'] wouldn't present too great a problem. If we were to move onto a more advanced level, for example to the layer of sentences such as "Na + Cl = NaCl," the difficulty of translation would be minimal, and would only involve substituting the Latin alphabet for Hebrew. Finally, we would arrive at the purely formal layer of symbolic logic, and on it there would be no difficulty of translation because all translation would disappear. Formal logic is the articulation of the structure common to both Portuguese and Hebrew, and on that layer exempt from meaning the two languages merge. Basically, it is this identity that allows for translation between any layer. If horizontal translation is analyzed, it is revealed as a complicated case of successive vertical translations. The Portuguese phrase to be translated into Hebrew is translated vertically into the layer of symbolic logic and then retranslated into the corresponding conversational layer in Hebrew. The speed with which we perform translations in practice obscures the complexity of this process. In the vertical translation into

the formal layer we progressively strip the phrase of its meaning and make it structure explicit. When translating back into the layer of conversation, we dress the phrase in meaning once again, but obviously in one slightly different from the first. Prose sentences, of course, ones relatively poor in meaning and closer to the layer of form, are easily translatable, because the process one must go through is relatively limited. Phrases full of meaning, such as versos, are not translatable even between languages with very similar structures, because the process is very long. It is this fact that my definition of horizontal translation articulates.

Before I consider vertical translations I would like to respond to a objection formulated a young friend of ours, namely that which concerned the translatability of Portuguese into Andamanese.[2] If my argumentation is valid, it is obvious that we can translate from Portuguese into Andamanese only to the extent that we find a formal base common to both languages. I will fail to take into consideration that even if that common base was found, the translation will be very vague, given, for example, the lack of declension and conjugation in the Andamanese language, and therefore neither time nor space in our sense of the term. But let us look at a purely formal aspect of the problem. According to our symbolic logic, if a=b is true, then a≠b is not true. But I know from my knowledge of Andamanese that a ballerina can be a sweet potato and not be a sweet potato simultaneously. The structure of her language must be entirely different from my own. Even so, if I discover some common base, it would have to be so tenuous as to make translation a ludicrous and unsuccessful effort. I won't say that these translations are impossible, but they must depart from the original to an absurd extent. I know that Li Tai Po had fits of laughter when presented with the translations of Li Tai Po done by Ezra Pound[3], and it is this comic quality in such efforts at translation that I have in mind.

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[2] I wonder: why does he choose the languages that he does as examples? Especially 'Andamanese.' While there is a Andamanese language family, there is no one Andamanese language per se, and many of them were extinct by the 1960's. I believe that one can assume that Flusser wished to choose an example of extreme and incommensurable linguistic difference, one that could be represented by any one of the languages in this group, or for that matter, any number of non-Indo-European languages.

[3] Unfinished business: The reference to Ezra Pound makes me wonder whether this discussion is emerging at least partially from a conversation with Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos and Décio Pignatari, Brazilian concrete poets and intellectuals who dominated cultural life in São Paulo in the 1960's. Such questions on translatability also suggest a great deal of resonance with other intellectual movements of the period. This translated fragment only underscores the necessity of reconnecting Flusser with a broader range of mid-20th Century Latin American authors, artists and intellectuals, although I would imagine that is precisely what this issue and others on Flusser in Brazil would attempt to achieve.

I will now go on to consider vertical translation briefly, of which horizontal translation is only a complex case. I borrow the example provided by Prof. Leonidas last Friday. I translate vertically from three-dimensional geometry into plane geometry. The structure of three-dimensional geometry contains, among other logical and formal elements, three Cartesian axes that that coordinate points: these three axes are space made into prose and are derived, in the final analysis, from the declension of nouns. The language of three-dimensional geometry is a highly prosaic conversation, one far removed from poetry. I will try to turn this language even more into prose and eliminate one of the axes. I will impoverish the meaning of this language with the elimination I have made, because from now on all the points that I spoke of will have but two coordinates, and all of my equations will be squared and have only two roots. My new language will be more economical and simple, and will employ fewer terms. It will not be less vast than that of three-dimensional geometry, because all three-dimensional geometry can be represented through plane geometry. But it will be less meaningful. The nouns that I will use will be one step further removed from proper nouns predicated in verses. Plane geometry, because it is one step further away from the plenitude of reality established by verse, has in this sense less reality than three-dimensional geometry, and in this sense three-dimensional space is more real than flat space. This is precisely the reason why I translate vertically: to achieve a greater economy of terms and less reality. Fundamentally, vertical translation does not extend from a global aspect of predication of proper nouns towards names of categories. The result is that the language of plane geometry is, as a whole, a category of which three-dimensional geometry is a member. I will therefore define vertical translation in the following way. Ascendant vertical translation is the progressive conversion of verse towards conversation and from verse into prose. Descendant vertical translation is the attempt to revert conversation into verso and is therefore an inverted translation. I will return to the problem of vertical translation when I discuss verse and poetry.

Now consider the attempt of a statement in plane geometry into one of mysticism. I said that languages like ours can be considered as systems of words organized in phrases and that these phrases can be classified for example as indicative, imperative interrogative etc. Verse with its dense structure, is a synthesis of those dense kinds of phrases. Conversation makes that dense structure explicit in the ways enumerate above. Plane geometry turns verse in vertical translation into the form of indicative and interrogative phrases.[4] Mysticism, if analyzed on the level of form, will be re-

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[4] Also significant is the role of word play in this philosophical discourse, an element of the original text brought into even greater relief through the act of translation. The translational metaphor par excellence, that of turning, resurfaces con-

vealed as a conversation the turns verse in vertical translation into imperative and interrogative phrases. So it is all about two vertical translations of verse aimed at two different linguistic horizons. To want to translate plane geometry into mysticism, or vice versa, is thus to want to encompass two linguistic horizons. Encompassing the two cannot be achieved by a adaptation of the two structures, and in this sense, translation is not possible. It is possible to adapt geometry to mysticism, but this task has to be accomplished by a concentric translation that points out the verse from which both of those conversations originated: thus, by a kind of descendant vertical translation. This type of convergent translation, whose inverted discourse predicates names of categories in the direction of the proper noun contained in the verse, is called "philosophy." Because philosophy is an inverted and reflexive discourse, it attempts to translate all layers of conversation onto itself by turning them back into verse. This is the role of philosophy in the critique of language.

Therefore, I reformulate: horizontal translation is the mutual adaptation carried out between two corresponding layers in the structures of two languages, and the more similar the two structures are, and the poorer in meaning the two layers are, the more successful the translation will be.[5] Horizontal translation is a complex of ascendant and descendant vertical translations. Ascendant vertical translation is turning verse in the direction of a conversation that progressively converts verse into prose. Descendant vertical translation is the attempt to turn conversation back into verse, whereas the sum of ascendant translation is the progress of the discourse. The sum of descendant translations is philosophy.

So what did I achieve with the theory of translation I have just presented to you? Namely, the elimination of the pseudo-concept of extra-linguistic reality from our future conversations. I do not translate a Portuguese phrase into one in Hebrew because both refer to one and the same extra-

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tinually in his choice of words: verter, verso, vertical, versão etc. How much of the meaning of this text is on the level of style, that is to say, in the linguistic interplay between terms and turns? If so, are we not already on the level, at least partially, of poetic translation?

[5] In translating this text, I ask whether my experience in translating it allows the theories he expounds to hold up. I would say that I found the text reasonably simple to translate, as philosophy falls within the disciplinary boundaries with which I feel most comfortable as a translator. By extension, however, the perceived level of difficulty of translation, whether of chemistry or poetry, depends not only on the notion of equivalence but the sensibility and specialized expertise of the individual translator. It goes without saying that not all translators find the same difficulty in the same kinds of texts, no matter what the level of poetic structure or presumed transparent equivalence might be considered inherent to them. Translating poetry may not offer the same simplicity of meaning as reflected in presumably more straightforward prose language, but at times the joy of poetic 'transcreation', to use a term coined by Haroldo de Campos might serve as a form of recompense for this ostensible difficulty. Boredom might make a simple task more difficult that a challenging but joyful one, don't you think?

linguistic situation, but rather because the structures of the two languages are similar. I will thus be able to eliminate the Wittgensteinian "Sachverhalt." As a by-product of my theory, I got a plausible explanation for the process of translation, and in so doing perhaps the nucleus of a more adequate technique of translation. Through my theory of translation, I was able to encompass both the progressive and the reflexive aspect of the intellect as a field of languages. And I succeeded in formally defining the intellectual movement called "philosophy."

What didn't I achieve with my theory? I wasn't able to explain why languages with both similar and different structures exist. I have not explained the reason for the structures of our own languages. I didn't get to explain how translations from spoken to written language are made. And I wasn't able to explain a number of other problems, ones that all of you will certainly show compassion for me by pointing out. All the same, I believe I've made some progress. I made a clearing for the future discussion on those consequences of epistemology that we have been debating. In this way, today's talk was a discourse, but an ex-cursion', one that I will ask you to forgive, given my own extreme didactical inability.

I will not provide a bibliography, as the theory I have elaborated was my own.

Christopher Larkosh 15.5.06.