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UNTRANSLATABILITY AND READABILITY

Abstract:

Rather than as a function or inevitable consequence of conventional translation practices (of, for example, some attempt on the 'untranslatable' poem), or as the literary maker's right to refuse the application of such practices, untranslatability is proposed as a special case of unreadability, where the latter is taken to be entailed by all embodiments of language-as-such in particular natural languages or linguistic forms. A thought experiment is described within which mutual unreadability is inscribed in the form of separate monolingual discussions on the same special subject. The discussion is complicated by the proposal that the subject of discussion - in both thought experiment and essay - is that of an actual, Chinese, 'unreadable book,' the artist Xu Bing's (1955-) *Book from the Sky*.

Keywords:

translation ♦ untranslatability ♦ readability and unreadability ♦ philosophy of language ♦ literary conceptualism ♦ art and language

In “On language as such and on the language of man” Walter Benjamin grounds a crucial understanding of translation on the commensurability of separately instituted human communities. He evokes what he calls an “evolved language” abstracted from the totality of a particular human community’s linguistic practices. “Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language can be considered as a translation of all the others.” (Benjamin 1997, 117) Benjamin wrote in German, a

language of which I know very little. I read his German texts only through existing English translations. However—and thanks in part to the very grounding that he appears, conceptually, to grant me—I feel entitled both to affirm and to elaborate on what I take to be his sense. Applied to a ‘language’—a designated aggregation of linguistic practices—I read ‘evolved’ as indicating this aggregation’s ability to support, in terms of utility, commerce, culture and so on, distinctly instituted human communities. Between such communities, Benjamin implies, a practice of ‘translation’ would be meaningful. But the ‘full meaning’ of translation is attained without any requirement for a special, distinct, historical, or ongoing practice of translation. It is attained simply by way of our shared intuition that the meaningful actions and interactions of ‘evolved’ human communities are commensurate—measured from a shared and specific (human-species) perspective, that of the ‘language animal.’ These actions and interactions are of equal extent, duration, and magnitude, and of equal value in terms of significance and affect.

There is an underlying assumption—and perhaps this is not as intuitive as it might seem or perhaps it is less intuitive that the assertion of inter-communal commensurability—that ‘evolved languages’ are not mutually intelligible whenever—on one or other side of the processes of this intelligibility—they are not learned or ‘translated.’¹ Because languages are mutually unintelligible, ‘translators’ with specialist skills may meaningfully translate some part of one community’s linguistic practices for corresponding (mutually unintelligible) practices of another. However, the viability of translation as a whole is implied by the commensurability of each community’s interactions regardless of whether or not any translation ever actually occurs or succeeds, to the extent that, from a certain perspective, to translate the entirety of a particular community’s linguistic practice would be both absurd and unnecessary, since the language of any proposed host community is already a fully meaningful translation of the guest’s.² It would be far more straightforward for a host community simply to get on with making whatever language they make. Paradoxically, and recasting Benjamin’s statement in this light, the lack of any need to translate entails the full meaning of any specific practice of translation. We might then proceed to associate this lack of any need to translate with the evolved distinctiveness of languages, and we might reason from a lack of necessity to something like a right of untranslatability. The refusal of translation becomes, by such association and reasoning, an assertion of fully ‘evolved’ commensurability, and thus a potentially powerful inter-communal sociopolitical and socioeconomic statement. However, in what follows, I concentrate on *untranslation* and a proposed *untranslatability* as phenomena of language itself, as aspects of its ontology, entailing the promise and the meaning of

translation rather than earning such fullness through any circumstances of history. If there is truth in the paradoxical implications of Benjamin's intuition, then surely—as his essay title suggests—it must be telling us something that is as much about 'language as such' as about translation.

Considered as the actual circumstance or image underlying his pronouncement, there is no paradox. From a global socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and cultural perspective we observe distinct human communities and we may—given certain ethical and political preconceptions—consider them all to be, in an important sense, commensurate: fully and equally empowered to produce linguistic expression with equivalent significance and affect. It follows, from the same perspective, that the sum of what one community produces as language is commensurate with—and thus a translation of—the totality of any other community's linguistic production. There is the underlying assumption of a certain universality of human concerns, one that suggests more than, so to say, an equal, abstract weight or value of linguistic production across distinct communities. We also expect to find specific equivalences, actually existing parallel expressions for all those experiences of human life that are shared without regard to boundaries or distinctions of any kind.

Given that this image-argument proceeds without the need to establish commensurability between any particular instances or events of language, it nonetheless makes strong and compelling claims, and does so despite an absence of any actual or necessary translation practice—one that might produce such demonstrably commensurate specific instances or events of language—and despite giving no account of the fact that all linguistic practice requires the reading of systematic, semiotic agreements that are instituted and shared by linguistic practitioners—operating *within* each particular evolved language—between and amongst an essential plurality of distinct and separate human subjects.

I am aware that I am both summarizing and skirting certain deep matters in the philosophy of language as I follow these lines of thought and propose others. Bear with me. The wager is that this approach—involving untranslatability with language as such—will help to generate new statements for a philosophical engagement with aesthetic linguistic practice, my chief concern. The thinking elaborated here—and this may help to provide the reader with context—is part of work towards a more general theory of language that has been provoked by the advent of language art in new, especially digital, media. It may also help to know that my language philosophical position is

poststructuralist and influenced by the work of Jacques Derrida. I have an underlying concern with the ontology of language, particularly in so far as language comes to exist and serve as a specific and substantive medium for linguistic art. For a variety of reasons, I will designate the “systematic, semiotic agreements” that are referred to above as ‘readings.’ A ‘reading’ occurs whenever we are able to process an element of language, at any level of linguistic structure and regardless of support media, whether (typically) auditory or visual.

All this is by way of prologue to a thought experiment. What if we were to pare down Benjamin’s trans-communal image and circumstance to something that retains its essential elements with a minimal configuration of generative linguistic subjects? Let us imagine, therefore, in each of two isolated rooms, a couple of mature, educated human beings. Our image embraces a mere four human persons in total, paired in their separate rooms, but we will say that they are very similar in background and education, and are equally accomplished and articulate. They share many cultural and intellectual interests although—to avoid jargon or the language of specialists—let’s say that no one of them is a professional art historian. After entering their respective rooms, according to the terms of our experiment, they have been asked to discuss, for an hour or so, the same renowned cultural artifact. They have all heard of this work previously, and were also given a few days’ time to research the work before they entered their rooms and began their separate discussions. As it happens, the work that they have been asked to talk about was chosen, in part, to facilitate our own further discussions in this essay, but this has no bearing on the immediate thought experiment. For the purposes of the experiment, all we require is some relatively singular topic of conversation, one that we may agree to be of commensurate interest for the isolated couples. The two paired discussants have been asked to talk about a monumental piece of conceptual art, an ‘unreadable’ book, a work created by the contemporary Chinese artist, Xu Bing (1955-). The work is well-known in the West by its usual English designation, *Book from the Sky* (first exhibited 1988).

Crucially, for our thought experiment, one of the couples speaks and reads only English and the other only German. The question we ask ourselves, by analogy with one of those implicitly begged by Benjamin’s provocation, is: Can the language (collected over the hour or so of conversation) in either of the two rooms be considered a translation of the language in the other? It is unlikely or improbable that there would be many correspondences, with systematic regularities of syntax or diction, between clauses, sentences or other sequential utterances that will have been generated separately by our

conversing couples. On the other hand, there might well be a surprising number. Why not? We had, after all, enforced reasonable specifications and contexts that suggested the conversations should be culturally and intellectually commensurate. Might not this have increased the probability that significant parallel sequences of language would be uttered in the separate rooms, including sequences possessing systematic points of correlation? Instances of—what many people would agree to be—‘translation’ that had been produced without, for these instances, any actual self-reflexive practice of translation?

Our experiment is, admittedly, a thought experiment, albeit one that might actually be carried out or, perhaps, performed. (As conceptual linguistic art?) The consideration I have requested of my readers here—Is one couple’s conversation a translation of the other’s?—is not to be answered scientifically. It is more likely to elicit a range of opinions and judgements and these are likely to be, at least to a certain extent, determined by matters of intellectual partisanship, based on prejudice, prior to any encounter with the thought experiment, concerning what traditional practices of translation consist of or look like, as well as their function or, perhaps, their ultimate cultural value.

For example, poetic and conceptual linguistic practitioners such as myself, who may be suspicious of the value of traditional or conventional translation, might be comfortable with a judgement stating that either conversation is a fully meaningful translation of the other—and not simply as a matter of intellectual prejudice, however cultivated. As a linguistic artist, I produce extended constructions in language that are generated by algorithmic or quasi-algorithmic processes. In so far as these constructs are also instances of an ‘evolved language,’ English, then they must also, surely, be subject to subsequent practices of translation into other ‘evolved languages.’ However, if the generative processes underlying this work are as important to its aesthetics, essential to its ‘full meaning,’ vital for its critical appreciation, then it should also be possible for readers to appreciate a situation in which the application of the same more or less regular processes that generated a work of language in English, would, when applied to German, generate instances of language for which there would be what I have called elsewhere “natural language non-correspondence or divergence.” (Cayley 2015, 11). The generated language in German would simply fail to correspond to what had been generated in the evolved natural linguistic world of English. No conventional or traditional translator would have taken that English and gone on to produce this German.³ Whereas I, the ‘author’ of the work in English, nonetheless remain comfortable in the approbation of what I consider to

be a good and relatively faithful German ‘translation,’ one that has been generated by means of processes that I designed, approved, intended.

Broadly, for one set of those thinkers considering the proposed ‘translations’ generated by our thought-experiment, the commensurate circumstances and processes of the experiment in the two rooms in themselves allow ‘translation’ to ‘attain its full meaning,’ whereas for others considering the question, a preconceived and distinctly instituted understanding of translation and its practices reasserts itself and prevails. This other set of scholars, critics, and philosophers will insist on some sort of interlinear, or at least chronologically determinate and archivable process of transcription, transmission, and interpretation, one that would, necessarily, occur subsequently to the original conversations in the two rooms. Moreover, in that our circumstances assert the monolingualism of each couple, conventional translation will require one or more *additional* multilingual human subjects to join the scene, engaging in the production of the supplementary texts. Only these texts, in this scenario and from this point of view, can be considered putative *translations* relative to either of the ‘evolved languages’ in question. To me, this seems like a good example of supplementary epiphenomena shoring up the metaphysical authorities of ‘presence,’ ‘origin,’ and, indeed, hypostatized translation as a removal from ‘original’ to ... to where exactly? to hastily assembled ‘academies’ of the respective ‘target’ languages perhaps?

At this point, setting aside any prejudicial conceptions of translation that have been provoked by our thought experiment, we must return to its circumstances and allow them to take us further in our speculative and linguistic philosophical thinking. Our stated concerns are, in any case, more to do with untranslatability than with reconsiderations of translation, however attained. Our couples have spoken together for about an hour, and their language, their conversations have been recorded. They remain in their separate rooms, at the further disposal of our thinking. We recall now that, for the purposes of the experiment, they are monolingual, or that, minimally, no one in either couple knows anything of the language spoken by the other couple. In these circumstances, I assert, if we take any part of the recording of either conversation and attempt to introduce it into the ‘evolved natural linguistic’ world of the other conversation, this language, unintelligible in its new context, can have *absolutely no impact* on the conversational linguistic world of the couple to which it has been introduced. This language, although it may be part of what certain observers (including myself) would consider to be already a ‘translation’ of the conversation that has just taken place in the room where it is now

being introduced, and although it is known not only to ‘be about’ but to be recently, immediately, *simultaneously* pertinent to the topic that both couples have been discussing, nonetheless: no English in the German world or German in the English world can have any significant impact on subsequent conversation or language in either room. This unintelligible language may have attained the full meaning of translation but at the same time it remains fundamentally *untranslatable* in our thought-experimental circumstances and its *untranslatability*, its aporic (non) ‘presence’ in either mutually unintelligible linguistic world, indicates, I believe, neglected and ill-considered aspects of the ontology of language that we will attempt to confront and explore, however briefly, in the ensuing context of this essay.

Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language can be considered as a translation of all the others. ... Mit dem erwähnten Verhältnis der Sprache als dem von Medien verschiedener Dichte ist die Übersetzbarkeit der Sprachen ineinander gegeben. ... Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. ... Translation passes through continua of transformation not abstract areas of identity and similarity. (Benjamin 1997, 117) (Benjamin 2002, 76)

Four sentences from the same author, quoted from the ‘same’ text, and stitched together in an indented paragraph as if they might all contribute equally to our further discussion here.⁴ However, in the monolingual diegesis of this essay’s process the sentence in German is simply unreadable—just like any part of the thought experiment’s German conversation presented to the English couple. If, like me, you don’t know German, you may not even have ‘seen’ or noted the German sentence as you read. If you did see it, you would have no way of knowing how it related to its context, as gloss or supplement, for example. The sentence would be no more or less absent if the paragraph were rendered thus (the German is ‘printed’ in white):

Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language can be considered as a translation of all the others. ...

... Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. ... Translation passes through continua of transformation not abstract areas of identity and similarity. (Benjamin 1997, 117) (Benjamin 2002, 76)

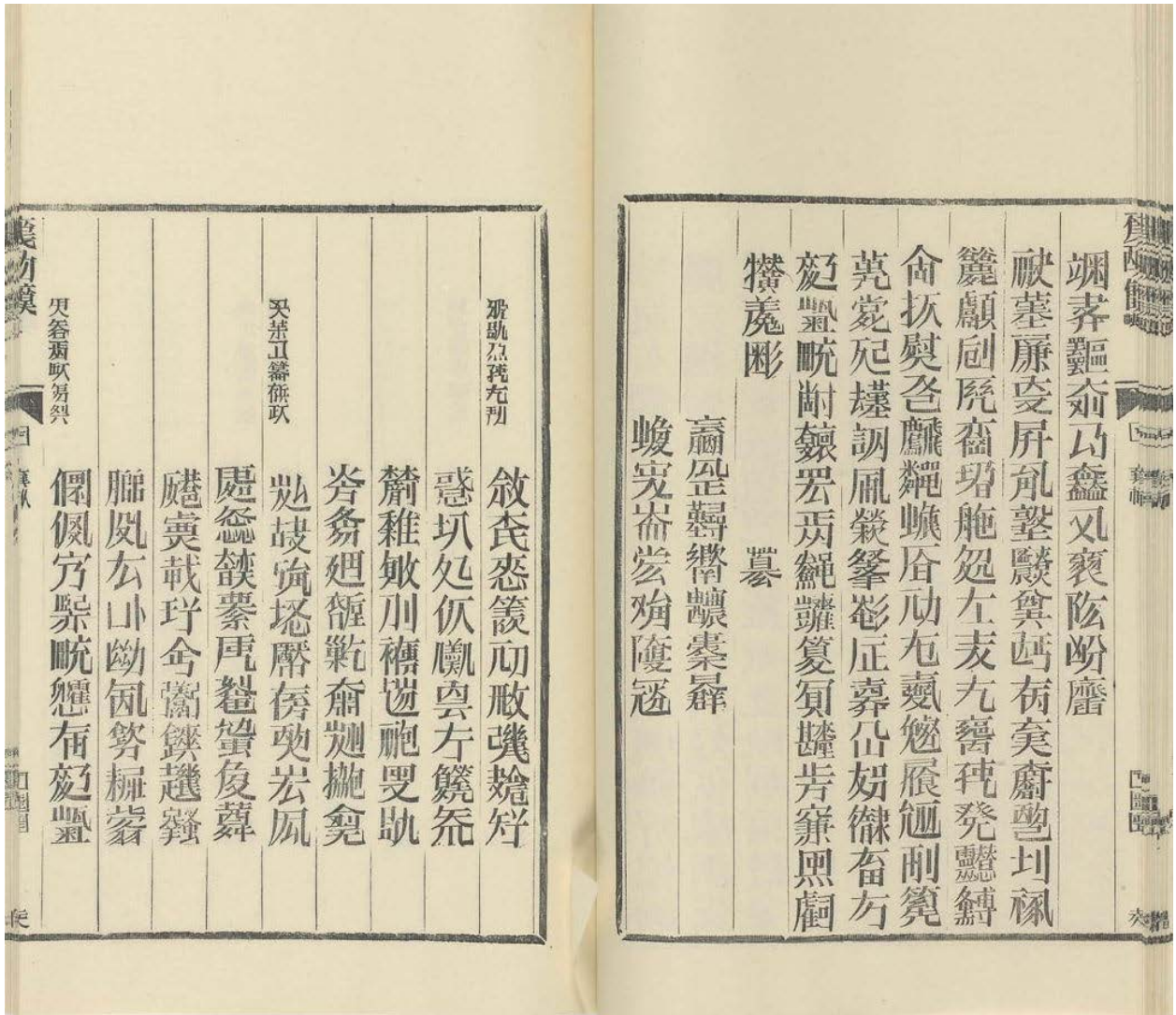
or, somewhat ironically, thus (where the German is typeset in a blackletter font):

Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language can be considered as a translation of all the others. . . . Mit dem erwähnten Verhältnis der Sprache als dem von Medien verschiedener Dichte ist die Übersetzbarkeit der Sprachen ineinander gegeben. . . . Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. . . . Translation passes through continua of transformation not abstract areas of identity and similarity. (Benjamin 1997, 117) (Benjamin 2002, 76) ¶

This last formal version of the unread sentence and its readable context is intended to show how, especially, the culturally specific material embodiments of unread or unreadable virtual language may impress themselves upon us, upon our perception, disproportionately and entirely without regard to any of their (supposed) effects as actual language.

It may now help to, as it were, join or extend the conversation of the English speaking and English reading pair in our thought experiment, and to consider, as if with them, the case of the unreadable book, this work of art, and purportedly also a work of language art, Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*. I have discussed this work extensively elsewhere. (Cayley, Xu Bing, and others 2009) A few illustrations will give those readers unfamiliar with it some sense of the work.





Three photographs illustrating aspects of Xu Bing's *Tianshu* or *Book from the Sky* (mixed media, ca. 1988-, usually exhibited as an installation, recently and until Apr 6, 2014, in 'Ink Art' at the Metropolitan Museum, New York).
Photography by Matt Pia, courtesy of Bernard Quaritch Ltd.

Book from the Sky is often presented as an installation, with the consequence that to speak critically of the work, as it has typically been presented by its artist author, may involve aspects of spectacle that I prefer to bracket here. As an installation, multiple copies of the book itself—the book that constitutes the central element of the work—and ancillary

artifacts—large ‘proofing’ sheets printed with ‘texts’ composed of ‘characters’ from the book—are arranged in a manner that offers viewers aesthetic experiences of spectacular scale and involves the visual/architectural composition of the installation space. As an artwork that addresses questions of language, I prefer to consider this work as *the edition of a book* and, as it happens, an *unreadable* book. I do want us to *see* this book in its entirety, as we relate its significant and affect to questions of reading and translatability, but I do not want to have to consider the purported effects of some grand or grandiose *arrangement* of books from the edition.

The three illustrations above will allow you to imagine the work as such. Each copy, from the edition of *Book from the Sky*, is a traditional Chinese four-fascicle threadbound book with a wooden case. The first photograph shows this clearly. The second photograph illustrates the ‘title page’ of *Book from the Sky*, again traditionally Chinese in its design, and the final photograph shows a sample opening. The ‘text’ of the book is printed—this is also entirely traditional—on one side of multiple sheets which are then worked and stitch-bound to comprise ‘folded leaves,’ ‘Chinese-style’ (in the terms of western bibliographic descriptions), with the folded edges of the leaves coinciding with what we would see as the fore-edge of a codex.

Simply on the basis of these three photographic illustrations with, further, the authority that I am able to claim as a scholar of Chinese and a student of traditional Chinese bibliography, I am confident that I can make my readers understand that *Book from the Sky* presents itself, in terms of material culture, as a *major* work of Chinese literary culture: the printed language—ostensibly—of extensive texts dressed with all the accoutrements, proper and correct, of age and authority. What you *see*, in this sense, is what you get.

Significantly, at this point, I must turn to narrative exposition in order to bring out the specificities of the work’s address to language. You, my readers, do not (necessarily) know the Chinese language and its systems of graphic inscription. Thus, you must take it on trust when you are told—by myself or by other commentators on the work—that none of the characters in *Book from the Sky* were intended by its maker to be *lexical*. That is: none of the irreducible graphic elements of the book’s ‘text’ were intended to be found in any existing character dictionaries of the Chinese language.⁵ As such, none of the characters can be read in the ‘evolved natural language’ of Chinese or, for that matter, in any other language extent.

If you are considering this work for the first time, as a monolingual reader of English (or at least one without Chinese), then there is a catastrophic ‘turn’ here, a sudden shift in your reading of *Book from the Sky*, one that has coincided with the turn to narrative exposition that I took, also catastrophically, in the paragraph above, from material cultural description (what we could ‘see’ together) to narrative exposition (what I must tell you in language). Even if you know Chinese, or have encountered *Book from the Sky* before, you may nonetheless, I trust, be able to reconceive or recall the experience of what I am calling the *catastrophic* quality of this turn. I emphasize this moment precisely because I want to institute *catastrophe*—the word itself, etymologically, a ‘sudden turn’ such that ‘catastrophic turn’ is, of course, a translanguing pleonasm—as an indicative attribute of all linguistic events, a neglected aspect of the ontology of language, crucially implicated with (un)translatability and (un)readability.

The catastrophe is, of course, the moment of the reader’s personal realization—or the reader’s acceptance of another’s exposition—that *Book from the Sky* is unreadable, untranslatable. Once this catastrophe has occurred for a reader, they cannot turn back. Whatever they may experience of the work subsequently, in terms of being moved, impressed, if not awed, by its material cultural and aesthetic presences, ‘readers’ of the work are nonetheless required, henceforth and perpetually, to be simultaneously confronted with the evacuation of any possibility of encounter with any event of language that might once seem to have been embodied in the work.

The singular nature of this work, of Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky*—the monumental scale of its material cultural gestures, its massive investment in an embodiment of the promise of language, and its obvious alienation from western systems of inscription—is precisely what allows us to become aware of the ‘same’ catastrophe that would, on the contrary and in the vast majority of reading situations, indicate and indeed constitute the event of language, its entry into the world of our reading minds. If we were told, rather, that *Book from the Sky* can be read, then the work would, as suddenly, be rendered banal, no more and no less than the book it appears to be. But this reversion to the commonplace of our encounters with embodied texts that promise language would likely also, for most readers, disguise the fact that this *same* catastrophe had nonetheless occurred, the catastrophe of language in its other turn, towards readability. Whereas the determination ‘unreadable’ stuns the vast embodied artifact and leaves us reeling in the grip and the

gravity of its catastrophe, when any other major text, a text of any moment, is discovered to be ‘readable’ its potential relation to its potential readers is instantly and catastrophically elaborated into a future of possible readings and, moreover, it instantly and catastrophically resolves into potentially readable sub-elements at any and all of the levels of linguistic structure, from book to chapter to paragraph to sentence to verse to phrase to word to letter, each of these as readable to us (or not), until our sense of that once *sudden and singular turning* from artifact into language is lost in a familiar, apparently continuous process, and a future of finer and finer grained moments of reading; lost to a series of encounters with language that seem to approximate the continua of lived experience, as if language was always already embodied in the matter of lived experience, whereas language only dwells with us, substantively, when it is able to enter, catastrophically, into our reading minds.

It was Xu Bing, as artist, who reverse engineered and undid, who *unread*, all the minute catastrophes of (un)reading that constitute his *Book from the Sky*. But he did this over time and as an individual, in a now long-past, hidden, singular process of linguistic inquiry and aesthetic practice—closely connected with his background as a printmaker. In simple terms, from pear wood, he carved the founts of Chinese characters that would be used to print his book, creating a symbol set of about four thousand items. Fashioning embodiments for each of these symbolic entities, he designed and carved in such a way as to give them any and all of the material cultural attributes—stroke forms, combinations of these forms into sub-elements, respect for contextual allostrokes, principles of composition, orders of stroke production and arrangement—that allow them to be visually recognized, to be *seen*, as Chinese characters by anyone familiar with the Chinese systems of graphic inscription. But for each and every symbolic entity, the artist was also required to attain the moment of catastrophe, the point at which the form of the ‘character’ he was carving would be catastrophically turned away from lexicality, and hence from readability. In an extraordinary process—painstakingly carving symbolic forms from wooden ‘slugs,’ lending their subforms all the attributes and appearances of readable characters, word- or morpheme-sized elements of virtual language—the artist-unreader finally, at some particular catastrophic moment, carves out the shape of a stroke (or its erasure) that turns each character decisively away from language. In a negative analogy of the commonplace processes of reading, as outlined above, he works through all the ‘words’ of his (un)text, catastrophically (un)reading. Having unread at the level of the character, the artist then goes on to arrange his unreadable characters and have them printed in the traditionally anticipated material cultural forms of textual composition and

bibliographic design, ever higher up through the levels of linguistic structure—through phrases, clauses, verses, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, books—until the monumental completion of his material culture gesture is attained. As I say, all this happens in a singular past of aesthetic endeavor, for which I have sketched a narrative, leaving you, as reader, with further, all-but-palpable proof that *Book from the Sky* is, precisely, *the catastrophe of language, the embodiment of its virtual unreadability, its untranslatability.*

For then there is the strange fact that this conceptually singular artifact comes to us—in a manner that is immediately appreciable, that we can perceive by *seeing* the book before us and without having to be told—from *another* evolved, natural language, from Chinese. Why does it not exist, as artifact, in English? A number of commensurate processes can be conceived that would realize *Book from the Sky* in ‘English’ or in any other evolved language.⁶ Without having to elaborate any of these potential processes, it will be easy for the reader to concede that, necessarily, none of the virtual linguistic forms or structures that were generated—in ‘English’ say, whatever this might mean—by any particular commensurate process would correspond, other than by coincidence or formal (rather than linguistic) design, with those in Xu Bing’s book. *Any* commensurate process will ‘translate’ Xu Bing’s text perfectly without any natural language correspondence of textual elements. So long as the catastrophe of language is attained, which for *Book from the Sky* is that of (un)readability and (un)translatability, the full meaning of translation is also attained by commensurate process, and by commensurate process alone.

These circumstances may appear to be a function of the singularity of an important work of conceptual linguistic art, but my argument is rather that these circumstances are fundamental to the ontology of language, perceptible to and operative for human readers as catastrophes of (un)readability and (un)translatability. Even within the conceptual constraints of ‘unreadable book,’ having entertained its translation by commensurate process, we can conceive the possibility of at least as many affective, (in)significant potential realizations of this work as there are ‘evolved’ natural human languages. Each unreadable ‘translation,’ if nothing else, proves the existence of the linguistic culture into which the book has been translated without the text of any of the translated books itself attaining readability (without these texts signifying or *meaning* anything). My point is that even when constrained to the production of ‘non-language,’ encounters with linguistic catastrophe are nonetheless generative, and indicative of human and linguistic being, especially *other* human and linguistic being.

Moreover, ‘commensurate process’ brings us back to our thought experiment, to the problem of the ‘translation’ of process-intensive linguistic artifactuality, and to the encompassing commensurability of distinctly instituted human communities—Benjamin’s initial provocation. Within our thought experiment, we have now shared our discussion of Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky* with the English reading couple. “Yes,” they may say to us, “we discussed many of these same concepts and considerations in the hour before you interrupted and joined us. Although your further discussion generalizes what you clearly see as generative principles underlying the address of this work to language as such, we do feel that we had already discussed and agreed a significant number of the statements you have made just now concerning *Book from the Sky*.” The German reading couple had left their isolated room and come over to where we were, together with the English reading couple. They had been listening to our further discussions, understanding nothing, although they were able to *see* the illustrations of *Book from the Sky* that were selected for the English readers of this essay. They know, they can *see*, what we are talking about. “Yes,” they may say to us, in German, without our being able to understand a word, “we discussed many of these same concepts and considerations in the hour before you interrupted us. We have no idea what you have gone on say, but we can clearly imagine certain lines of thought that you may have taken.” How is it possible to devalue the sense of shared concern and commensurate engagement that this thought-experimental scene evokes, relative to any subsequent generation and elaboration of transcribed and conventionally ‘translated’ texts—by currently absented, expert bilingual others—based on events of language—reading and unreading, translation and untranslation—that have already simultaneously transpired in commensurate processes?

The catastrophe of language, the catastrophe of *other* language, that is, the catastrophe of untranslatability and unreadability is still at the center of this scene, both the *other* language of Xu Bing’s book, Chinese, which, in the thought-experimental scene, only I, the writer, knows; and the *other* evolved languages of the two couples. The full meaning of this scene of (un)translation and (un)reading is impossible to realize without a perpetual encounter between distinct and fully commensurate processes, human actions and interactions, which may, nonetheless, be catastrophically unable to share the systematic semiotic agreements that we call readings.

In general usage, the word ‘catastrophe’ has the negative connotation of a sudden *downwards* turn towards something irreparably worse, disaster even. In the special usage that I develop here, I prefer metaphoric connotations derived from mathematics’

catastrophe theory in which minute and/or gradual, continuous changes lead to ‘catastrophic’ shifts in the behavior of a system. But I do not wish to downplay associations of catastrophe with the underlying, psychologically implicated trauma that encounters with language and their sudden turns towards or away from signification may engender. To engage or not with signification is inherently traumatic and yet it is inalienable from the events of language, as language comes suddenly to exist in us, or when we suddenly appear and act in (*another*) language. In the scene above, the catastrophe of other language has already occurred—it has been predetermined as I have described and set it out in my exposition—leaving the English and German participants in a traumatic state produced by the very mutual unintelligibility that delineates ‘evolved’ languages as such, as *other*. But the shared, commensurate circumstances of the English and German participants and most particularly their simultaneous encounter with the unreadability and untranslatability of Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky* allows them to perceive, with us, this catastrophic event of non-language as also a cultural materially commensurate ground for a perpetually deferred promise of language. *Book from the Sky* means nothing but it means the *same* for all of the scene’s participants. It is perceptibly elaborate, ‘evolved,’ commensurate in its material cultural gestures with the scale and complexities of those material supports that embody for us, separately, our communally distinct practices of language. As such, it implies the full meaning of ‘translation,’ that is *other* language itself, providing us with an image, and lending us the ground on which, for example, each of the two couples might begin to work towards the speaking and carving out, over time, of thousands of literal forms, working them until, at the initial catastrophic moment, the English couple suddenly discovers itself to have fashioned a ‘German’ symbol, a readable German word, followed slowly, steadily, overwhelmingly by thousands of such catastrophic turnings into *another* language, and up until the global catastrophic moment at which—through countless, continual encounters with unreadability and untranslatability—they catastrophically find themselves ... *in German*.

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In the context of discussions concerning theoretical ‘problems of translation,’ it is more usual to propose or discuss untranslatability as if it were a circumstance that is, more or less inevitably, encountered in the processes of translation, as if indeed untranslatability were, oxymoronically, characteristic of translation—and a fortiori of literary translation—as a cultural formation and tradition of practice. For most scholars, rather

than being a term that rejects or impedes the practice of translation, and rather than being an aspect of language that is proper to it ontologically, untranslatability becomes a more or less significant precondition of translation, and ‘untranslatable’ is simply an adjective applied, perversely, to instances of language that have already been authoritatively *translated*, in practice and in accepted transcultural fact. Untranslatability is associated with a consensual understanding that particular languages are incommensurable in terms of their expressive resources. Something that I can say easily in my own language appears to be difficult to say in another (and, of course, vice versa). I perceive a ‘lack’ in the other language. Or something I can say poetically in mine seems impossible to say (as) poetically in another’s. Or perhaps it can be said poetically, but this poetry is different. A ‘lack’ or some recalcitrant difficulty causes—depending on your final position, *some* or *any*—translation to fail. What I say fluently and poetically in my own language reverts triumphantly?, complacently?, naturally?, as of right? to the precondition of ‘untranslatability.’

This line of thinking runs directly counter to the intuition of commensurability proposed by Benjamin and pursued in this essay chiefly by way of experimental thought. Untranslatability as irreconcilable difference, all the way down through the fundamental expressive resources of particular languages, leads, by way of Sapir-Whorf, to an image of human communities more or less unable to concede that they exist in any world that they could call the *same*. By contrast, the intuition of commensurability—and also of a world that is shared by separately instituted human communities—renders untranslatability as, instead, an indicator of the lack of any *need* to translate. And any sociopolitical ‘right to untranslatability’ is taken to derive from, as we indicated above, a particular community’s insistence on untranslation as a mark of the commensurability of their language relative to any and all ‘evolved’ others.

We have, however, at this point in our thinking, gone further. Untranslatability is proposed as the translangual aspect of unreadability. Unreadability is a state that precedes all promises of language, before the catastrophe or trauma that allows it to come into being as such, as language. Untranslatability is the same circumstance where the promise of language is the promise of *another* language. Faced with another human person, we are faced with the ontological fact that we may not be able to ‘read’ any language that they produce while being simultaneously confronted with the sense that they are, nonetheless, fully capable of language. If the person we confront speaks a language that we do not know, we nonetheless believe that at some presently or, quite possibly, perpetually

deferred future moment—after changing our reading mind to learn the language—we could suddenly and completely ‘read,’ that is, understand, all of what had been said. Untranslatability becomes an inalienable aspect of linguistic ontology, an aspect of language that is entailed by the fact that commensurate human others bring language into being amongst themselves and that—despite any virtual catastrophe of complete unreadability—relative to what we may or may not be able read, we are always already empowered to work towards the fashioning of symbols that will turn suddenly so as to become instances of the symbols that any of us may share.

Henri Bergson would say that the ‘un-’ of untranslatability and unreadability is indicative of a misleading pretension of terms that are clearly composites (see Deleuze 1988, 17 ff.). A purported negative, for Bergson, brings us to consider, in a sense, *more* of the negated concept, with greater complexity, rather than allowing any consideration of the concept’s absence or evacuation. Bergson’s analysis is apposite, of course, and our occasional bracketing of the negative prefix acknowledges this. Both (un)translatability and (un)readability resolve ultimately to *readability*. As we said above, “A ‘reading’ occurs whenever we are able to process an element of language, at any level of linguistic structure and regardless of support media, whether (typically) auditory or visual.” Every reading is a minute catastrophic event, while *unreadability* as applied, for example, to Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky*, is the traumatic totality of all those catastrophic turns—away from lexicality, signification, and, indeed, reading—that were generated by the artist’s aesthetic and practical endeavor. These allow *Book from the Sky* to confront us with a proven and definitive instance of *untranslatability*, but simultaneously in the form of a material cultural artifact that is monumental in scale and which conveys, immediately and intuitively, an address to and support for language that is commensurate with any of the ‘fully meaningful’ material cultural forms that we can and do read. Unreadable, *Book from the Sky* allows us to read. Intuitively (un)translated by the unreadable material cultural forms of another evolved language—*Book from the Sky* allows us to read the perpetual, traumatic, catastrophic circumstances of readability itself.

We enter into language with every act of reading and in every instance of these same acts, language enters into the world of our experience. All acts of reading are marked by catastrophic events, the sudden removal of significant and affective impetus from material cultural supports to the event and existence of language itself, from outside to inside, from chaos to understanding, from one to another. These catastrophic events themselves constitute linguistic entities—at whatever level of structure—recasting

provisional material cultural forms as the repeatable idealities that are then able to serve as the combinatorial symbolic elements of language in so far as it is to be considered and analyzed, synchronically, in rule-governed structural systems, with perpetual trauma and catastrophe continually overwhelming and superseding these synchronous structures. But this reading of any natural language—Benjamin’s ‘evolved language,’ the highest-level humanly-appreciable linguistic entity—institutes, also catastrophically, the very break that distinguishes one language from *another*, and achieves this distinction *by virtue of the higher level reading itself*, a kind of reading that we continually perform in relation to every language that we acknowledge and recognize as such. ‘Evolved’ languages (plural) require (un)readability and hence also (un)translatability as the translingual aspect of the perpetual catastrophes of language ... that we may read.

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Notes

¹ In linguistics, generally speaking, ‘mutual intelligibility’ is a characteristic that is remarked and noted with reference to dialects of the same language. Its opposite helps to delineate distinct, ‘evolved’ languages in Benjamin’s sense. ‘Mutual intelligibility’ is a state of affairs in which speakers of different but related dialects “can readily understand each other without intentional study or special effort.” (Wikipedia, July 8, 2014).

² The use of the terms ‘host’ for the more usual ‘target’ and ‘guest’ for ‘source’ or ‘original’ language follows (Liu 1995) where an explanation of this preferred usage may also be found in the introductory chapter.

³ In passing, it is perhaps worth stating that a statistically based algorithmic translation service such as Google Translate would be similarly conservative, unable to embrace the potentialities of translation as commensurable procedure. The current triumphal progress of statistically-oriented engines of algorithmic translation, facilitated by the collection of big (linguistic) data, brackets any consideration of how the language that is collected or subject to translation was generated in the first place, as if this could have no subsequent bearing on the ‘full meaning’ of any purported translation of—as here we consider here—algorithmically generated language. There is irony and paradox in the realization that statistical linguistic models may be significantly influenced by linguistic data that has been procedurally generated or, indeed, produced by statistically based algorithmic translation services.

⁴ These four sentences, from Benjamin’s ‘On language as such and on the language of man,’ were also used—in German, English, and French versions—as ‘supply texts’ for the author’s digital language art work, *Translation* (2004-). See <http://programmatology.shadoof.net/?translation> for further information or to read this work. Please note that *Translation* uses QuickTime technologies that are no longer well supported by Apple or by other contemporary platforms, although as of Fall 2014, the work can still be experienced and read more or less as composed and programmed.

⁵ Some critics have pointed to rare instances of characters that have crept into the work unintentionally, but this does not, in my view, affect the tenor of any discussion of its significance.

⁶ One of my own schemes is set out in the essay ‘His Books’ (Cayley, Xu Bing, and others 2009).