

## 5 From untranslatability to translatability

This chapter looks at the philosophical, linguistic and socio-cultural underpinnings of (un)translatability and its limits.

### **‘Linguistic relativity’ and translation: a historical overview**

In contrast to the view that language ‘reflects’ the culture of a social group, the ideas that came to be known as ‘linguistic relativity’ imply the very opposite: language in its lexicon and structure has an influence on its speakers’ thinking, their worldview and their behaviour.

While structural linguistics has left the translator with an ultimate uncertainty as to what the full meaning of a particular linguistic form is, this disquietening uncertainty has increased substantially under the impact of theories about the ‘hidden metaphysics’ or worldview that languages are said to embody. In both the traditional mentalist and rationalist-universalist views, language is thought to be but a tool operated by something deeper – thought, reason, logic, cognition – which functions in line with biological-neurological mechanisms common to all human beings. Inside this framework, different languages are seen merely as parallel instruments embodying this universal reason, and varying only along specifiable parameters. On this view, any text can be readily translated from one language into another. Humboldtian and Whorfian views, however, imply the very opposite: language – in its structure and lexicon – has an influence on thought and behaviour, and this influence has important consequences for the possibility (or impossibility) of translation.

The idea that the individual’s mother tongue is the primary source of socialization and cognitive conditioning goes back to German idealistic philosophy. Johann Georg Hamann handled the question of the influence of language on thinking, and Johann Gottfried Herder also regarded languages as embodying specific mental characteristics of their speakers, languages being but reflections of a certain ‘national mentality’ – an idea that was later also taken up by Wilhelm Wundt, who stressed the interconnectedness of language and thought in his *‘Völkerpsychologie’*. But it was Wilhelm von Humboldt who became the first influential propagator of the idea that every language, as an a priori framework of cognition, determines the *‘Weltanschauung’* of its speakers. However, Humboldt also looks upon language as a self-contained, creative, symbolic organization, as

'*energeia*' in a speaker – an idea later taken over in the twentieth century, most prominently by Chomsky in his early work. Language, in this view, is conceived of as an active and dynamic force, which not only refers to experience and (what later came to be called) 'context', but also defines it for the speaker, because he unconsciously extrapolates from the language's implicit expectations. Any natural language is believed to have an 'inner form' peculiar to it, just as the 'external' (superficial) language structure varies widely among languages. This spiritual structure that languages possess corresponds to the thought processes of its users. In Humboldt's view, then, languages lie at the interface between objective reality and man's conceptualization of it. They act like coloured glasses, forcing speakers to perceive reality in language-specific ways (see Brown 1957: 116).

Humboldt's ideas are, however, not as radically and simplistically deterministic as they are often made out to be: Humboldt's very idea of language as a creative and active entity also led him to believe that the laws of thought are strictly the same in all languages – an idea further developed by Chomsky – and that in fact: 'Jede Sprache besitzt die Geschmeidigkeit, Alles in sich aufzunehmen und Allem wieder Ausdruck aus sich verleihen zu können'. For Humboldt, then, language is no ready-made 'ergon', ('Werk'), but rather 'eine Thätigkeit' (1836: lvii), an immensely flexible system, open not only to new words but also to new concepts and ways of thinking transcending itself and its contexts of immediate use.

In essence, this view of language implies already Roman Jakobson's well-known axiom of expressibility and the concomitant law of universal translatability, i.e. 'all cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language' (1959: 234). In other words, Humboldt cannot really be seen as a one-sided determinist, whose ideas deny the very possibility of translation.

Such a one-sided interpretation of Humboldt's ideas was, however, spread some hundred years later in Germany, when his ideas were reformulated by a group of linguists often referred to as neo-Humboldtians, among them Jost Trier, Karl Vossler, Johann Leo Weisgerber and Helmut Gipper.

Trier (1934) believed that the lexical field made up of conceptually related words corresponds to a conceptual field, the lexical field being only the outward manifestation of an underlying conceptual field, with the sum of all the conceptual fields in a given language making up the *Weltanschauung* embodied in that language and in its speakers. Since lexical fields differ from language to language, the corresponding conceptual fields and their sum total, the worldview, are likewise not the same for any two languages: speakers of different languages have different conceptions of reality.

Johann Leo Weisgerber (1929) also looks upon a person's mother tongue as an intermediary, a 'geistige Zwischenwelt', enabling contact between human beings and reality, and thus channelling speakers into a specific *Weltanschauung*. On this view, the individual's way of perceiving and thinking about the world are completely determined by her native tongue. Weisgerber maintains, for example, that although the human sense of smell is normally equally well developed in all humans, speakers of German do not rely on this sense much because there are so few terms expressing the sense of smell in German. Vision, on the other

hand, is by far the most important sense organ for German speakers because it has the most differentiated terminology. For Weisgerber, then, language (as an undifferentiated whole) determines cognition and behaviour. Similarly, Karl Vossler maintains that we are all enslaved by the 'inner nature' of our language, 'out of which we neither can nor wish to escape' (Vossler 1932: 197).

To bridge the gap between different languages seems to be, in this neo-Humboldtian framework, a hopeless undertaking. To translate is theoretically impossible, for how can any translator rid himself of the chains of his own language-cum-worldview, how can she ever know how speakers of the language into or out of which she is to translate, interpret reality? Vossler states categorically: 'The inner language form is untranslatable' (1932: 182).

For the neo-Humboldtians, who interpret the 'meaning' of a linguistic unit as a concept residing in a speaker-hearer's mind, translation is thus impossible because of the ultimate inaccessibility of that meaning form outside of the language inside which it is encapsulated. Far from being a reconstitution of something like the 'objective content' or the 'meaning' of a text, translation becomes at best, in Gipper's (1966) words, 'a kind of spiritual metamorphosis'.

Neo-Humboldtian versions of the connection between language and thought repelled many scholars because of the missionary pathos of their presentations – Harold Basilius (1952: 99), for one, called Weisgerber's diction 'hieratic' – and because of the sporadic ethnocentrism marking it along with much other work in the early 1930s in Germany. The relativity postulate put forward by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, on the other hand, was given much more serious attention in linguistic circles, especially in the United States. Sapir (1921, 1949) and his disciple Whorf (1956) advanced basically comparable ideas. Sapir expresses their crux in the following manner:

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone [...] but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society [...] the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group [...] the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same worlds with different labels attached.

(Sapir 1949: 162)

Here we have the same hypothesis of 'linguistic determinism' and its logical correlate, 'linguistic relativism', that was put forward by the neo-Humboldtians – from which in theory the same consequences for translation should follow. As opposed to the neo-Humboldtians, however, Sapir and especially Whorf made at least some attempts to prove these ideas empirically. Whorf adduced a whole catalogue of impressive data illustrating the great differences between American Indian languages and what he called Standard Average European (SAE) languages, i.e. the undifferentiated collectivity of English, German, French, Italian, etc. Like Trier and Weisgerber, Whorf also inferred mental and behavioural differences from differences between languages on the level of lexis. However, he

particularly emphasized grammatical structure as the crucial feature in the connection between language, thought and the segmentation of reality.

While Whorf examined only such vastly different languages as SAE and American Indian languages, it is not difficult to list many other instances of grammatical diversity among the languages of the world: languages differ strikingly in the grammatical categories that are obligatorily represented: for instance, the category of number is not obligatory in Chinese; Fijian has a four-way number system for personal pronouns (singular, dual, paucal, multiple) but no number at all for nouns; gender is likewise not found in all languages, and the number of gender distinctions varies greatly in languages that have gender; many languages have an elaborate apparatus of aspects: momentaneous, continuative, incentive, cessative, durative, durative-incentive, iterative, momentaneous-iterative, and so forth. This listing of grammatical differences between the languages of the world could obviously be extended at great length. Now if languages display such striking grammatical differences, and if – as Whorf maintains – linguistic form has a truly ‘tyrannical hold’ upon our way of thinking and perceiving, one might conclude that the theoretical possibility of translating, not only from and into SAE and American Indian languages, but also from and into many other languages, seems to be denied. If all our knowledge is mediated through our native language, it is not possible for human beings to rid themselves of that mediating influence. Given Whorf’s (and the neo-Humboldtians’) implicit mentalistic view of meaning as images or concepts present in speaker-hearers’ minds, it is logically impossible to know any foreign language, let alone translate, for the cognitive differences between members of different language communities will result in different and unknowable concepts or images of the same referents in their minds. One can never know the objective intellectual content of any foreign language, because this foreign language has to be learned in exactly the same way as any aspect of reality which is subject to, and shaped by, native-tongue conditioned ways of thinking.

Also, since in translation grammatical form must necessarily change, the kind of grammatical meaning that Whorf imputed as being present in language users’ minds, is, of course, routinely and necessarily lost in translation. On Whorf’s view, then, a translation being thus formally different from its original, would no longer be a translation, but a ‘transfiguration’. Hence, we may say, with Feuer (1953: 95) that linguistic relativity is the doctrine of untranslatability *par excellence*.

In the English-speaking world, the linguistic relativity postulate is often also referred to as the ‘Sapir-Whorf-Korzybski’ hypothesis, because Alfred Korzybski and other members of the General Semantics movement were strongly influenced by Whorfian ideas and also emphatically stressed the conditioning influence of language on thought (see Joseph 1996: 365–404). Unlike the neo-Humboldtians in Germany, who tended to stress the rich cognitive implications of one (the ‘primary’) language as opposed to others, the motivation behind the General Semanticist school was more pragmatic, i.e. they wanted to liberate and emancipate speakers from the traps of commercialism, political propaganda and other ‘hidden persuaders’ which were fast spreading in the mass media in the USA and elsewhere. They alerted consumers to the dangerous influence language may exert

on its unsuspecting speakers by projecting illusions of reality through its arbitrary structures and words. These ideas had many followers – from Marshal McLuhan and his warning that the ‘medium is the message’ to today’s critical discourse analysts, feminist linguists and politically correctivists, who warn against the subtle and nonetheless pernicious influence language can exert on thought and behaviour.

Humboldtian and Whorfian ideas were, however, also often perverted in that the superiority of one specific language was assumed, whereby speakers of that language were also necessarily to be understood as superior to speakers of more ‘primitive’ languages. Having stressed the deplorable ethnocentrism which some German linguists of the 1930s in Nazi-Germany had embraced, I have also to point out that the misuse of Whorfian thoughts is far from being a specificity of German linguists of a particular period of history. In a well-known early book on translation (Brower 1959) – which, among other reputable work, contains Jakobson’s seminal article ‘On Linguistic Aspects of Translation’ – Willa and Edwin Muir write about ‘Translating from the German’, linking the nature of the German sentence structure with the mental make-up and behaviour of the Germans, and comparing it all with English sentences and the English mentality:

The shape of the German language affects the thought of those who use it and disposes them to overvalue authoritative statement, will power and purposive drive. In its emphasis on rigid subordination and control, the structure of the German language conditions the kinds of thought that it expresses. One could deduce Hitler’s Reich from the ruthless shape of the German sentence [ . . . ] Nor should we forget that the favourite German word of abuse is ‘Scheiss’. So the right image for the German sentence is that of a great gut, a bowel, which deposits at the end of it a sediment of verbs [ . . . ] To turn classical German into sound democratic English – there is the difficulty.

(1966: 96)

Reading cognitive-behavioural implications into language structure in this way is, of course, a total misuse of Humboldt and Whorf, and it is perhaps not completely absent from much of today’s allegedly deconstructivist, politically correct, feminist and critical discourse analysis.

### **Recent empirical research on linguistic relativity and its impact on translation**

While there have been surprisingly few empirical studies testing the Whorfian postulate in the last forty years or so, interest in the question of how the language we speak influences the way we think and act has recently resurged, and a number of empirical studies have examined how language, thought and reality are interconnected in clearly delimited areas (for overviews see Lucy 1992, 1997). Lucy (1997) divides this research into structure-centred studies, domain-centred studies and behaviour-centred studies. In structure-centred studies (such as Whorf’s comparisons of Hopi and English), observed structural differences between languages

are taken as a starting point for examining behavioural differences. Examples are Lucy's (1992) study of how differences in grammatical number marking in English and Yucatec-Maya affect speakers' performance in tasks of remembering and sorting, or Slobin's (1997) finding that lexicalization patterns in different languages cause speakers to describe motions in typologically distinct ways leading to distinct narrative styles in the different languages. Domain-centred studies (such as the classic studies of the lexical encodability of colours) start from segments of experienced reality and investigate how different languages encode these segments. Members of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, for instance, looked at how space is handled in different languages using a variety of elicitation tasks, and found that speakers of different languages respond to these elicitation tasks in ways corresponding to their verbal practices. Behaviour-centred studies start from observed behaviour in different linguacultures – following in essence Whorf's classic example of accidental fires attributed to linguistic usage. Noteworthy in this paradigm are Finnish studies (see references in Lucy 1997: 303), in which the higher rates of occupational accidents in Finnish-speaking contexts as compared to Swedish-speaking contexts are explained with reference to structural differences and differences in orienting meanings between Indo-European languages such as Swedish and Ural-Altaic ones such as Finnish.

Research such as the above support the linguistic relativity postulate in specified ways. Structural differences, as Lucy (1997: 308) rightly points out, are of central importance in any comparison of the meaning potential of two languages. Clearly, therefore, given that language structures necessarily change in translation, it is necessary that any argument concerning the feasibility of translation has to be located at some other linguistic level, i.e. the level of discourse. Since discourse is realized inside the social and cultural traditions in the two linguacultures meeting in translation, and these can be analysed and compared, a basis for translatability may be guaranteed. Recent attempts at examining differences between languages at the discourse level (see for example Chafe 2000 and Slobin 2009) have pointed to differences in the conceptualization of certain domains and to differences in speaker orientations to space, time, motion, to the reality of what is being said or the interaction between speaker and hearer themselves. But these differences are unlikely to amount to insuperable difficulties in translation, making translation ultimately impossible.

### **Relativizing assumptions on non-translatability**

The consequence of the Humboldtian and Whorfian postulate for translation seems to be the denial of its theoretical possibility – 'theoretical' because the practice of translation flies in the face of this dictum; translation practice has been a thriving business from time immemorial! So why should we be faced with such an apparent contradiction? One obvious answer might be: because of the nature of language and the nature of human beings. Arguing against the 'linguistically atomistic' nature of many early Whorfian studies, Longacre stated over sixty years ago: 'Language is not utterly at the mercy of its own distinctions and categories,

but has within itself resources for outstripping and transcending these categories' (1956: 304). This means that languages are not really that different from the viewpoint of the potential of the whole system, i.e. the differences between languages are not so much in kind as in the degree of explicitness and emphasis: what one language has built into the layers of its structure, another language expresses only very informally and sporadically, but all languages have the resources to express any experience or state-of-affairs in a comparable manner (see Jakobson 1959: 234, and also Sapir, who is often only quoted as a radical relativist, but writes 'both Hottentot and Eskimos possess all the formal apparatus that is required to serve as matrix for the expression of Kant's thought' (1921: 210)).

Another argument relativizing the force of linguistic relativism on translation is language change (see Ortega y Gasset 1960: 60). Languages change constantly; so does our experience and conception of the world around us. But the two do not change at the same pace or in direct parallel. Any language is full of fossils or anachronisms, and at any particular time much of language is conventionalized and automatic (see the relevant experimental evidence described by Langer, e.g. 1989). The road from language forms to consciousness is still largely unknown and may be more complicated than is often assumed. Conclusions as to direct correlations between language thought and reality can therefore not be drawn.

Further, due to each individual language user's creativity and flexibility, and simple cognitive competence, language can hardly ever have an overpowering influence on its users, i.e. we might supplement the axiom of expressibility with an axiom of conceivability. Langacker puts this nicely: 'We are perfectly competent of forming and mentally manipulating concepts for which no word is available. We can make up imaginary entities at will, and if we so choose, proceed to name them. For example, imagine a unicorn with a flower growing out of each nostril' (1967: 40).

How well the influence of language on cognitive capacity, on the routes, rates, and quality of human thinking can be counteracted is demonstrated by the (obvious) fact that different worldviews or philosophical positions have been expressed in the same language, and the same philosophical position has been expounded in structurally very different languages: Descartes, Comte and Bergson had the same grammatical structure at their disposal, and Aristotelian metaphysics has been developed by Arabic and Hebrew thinkers as well as by medieval Christian philosophers. The precariousness of stating a dependence of worldview on language is illustrated by Stuart Chase's (1953: 104–6) prognosis that Marxism would never be able to take roots in China because language barriers against Marxism would be too difficult to overcome.

Further, the very concept of one single monolithic and unchangeable mother tongue as an instrument of eclipsing powerful cognitive influence needs to be relativized. There may be precariously little justification in speaking of any complex language community's speakers being conditioned in comparable ways: within one language community, contrasts in codability, grammatical structure as well as discourse norms may be just as great as between different language communities. Certain subgroups, e.g. professional ones, in a language community may

have developed highly differentiated vocabularies and grammatical and discursive norms deviating from usage normative in other subsections of complex societies. Thus the validity of the Wintu verb may be seen to have a direct translational equivalent in the kind of language used by scholars in professional English publications – although, of course, in the latter case the concern with evidence is not reflected in the method of conjugating verbs. To posit habitual modes of thought of whole linguistic communities may thus turn out to be phantasmagorical concepts because in any complex community a subsection may be found that shares the cognitive propensity of another supposedly very different linguaculture.

In a world which has either always been, or is now fast growing to be, bilingual or multilingual, there can hardly be an overriding influence of ‘the mother tongue’ as a thought and behaviour-conditioning instrument. Second and foreign languages are acquired by individuals to admirable degrees of perfection, and the world is full of bilingual and multilingual individuals, the monolingual person being rather an exception. John Macnamara’s (1970) early *reductio ad absurdum* of the impossibility of both bilingualism and translation on account of linguistic relativism is still valid today. Macnamara had argued that, following a strong Whorfian hypothesis, a bilingual person would hardly manage to communicate with himself because, in switching to language B, he would never be able to understand or explain what he had just communicated in language A – a patent reduction *ad absurdum*.

In sum, then, linguistic relativity, though clearly affecting, in specified areas, some of our cognitive behaviour, can be counteracted. In other words, while it is undeniably true that differences in codability and obligatory structural distinctions in languages can have specifiable effects on perception and thinking processes and behaviour, these effects do not amount to impenetrable differences in world-view between different linguacultures. There is always an escape from the trap of one’s language – through language itself, through the creativity, dynamism, flexibility, as well as the complexity and basic comparability of both individuals and languages. Translation is not in principle impossible.

## **Culture, context and translatability**

### *Linguistic-cultural relativity and translation*

Such a more positive approach to translatability derives from linking linguistic diversity with external differences of historical, cultural and social background, rather than insisting on the overriding importance of linking cognitive and linguistic differences. If languages are seen to be structured in divergent ways because they embody different experiences, interests, conventions, priorities, values, then the importance of what may be called linguistic-cultural relativity emerges. Cultural knowledge, including knowledge of various sub-cultures, has long been recognized as indispensable for translation, as it is knowledge of the application linguistic units have in particular situational and social contexts which makes translation possible. ‘Application’ refers here to the relation holding between an

expression and the cultural situation in which it is used, its pragmatic meaning. In establishing equivalences between linguistic units in translation, the notion of 'application' is crucial: if sense and reference differ for two linguistic units in two different languages – as they very frequently do – it is their *application* in particular, knowable cultural contexts that allows of translatability. Linguistic units can never be fully understood in isolation from the particular cultural phenomena for which they are symbols. The Japanese key words *amae* and *enryo*, for instance, cannot be translated unless the relevant cultural features, to which these words are applied, are taken into account. Only knowledge of these renders translation – in the sense of reconstitution, not transfiguration of meaning – possible.

While differences in the worldviews of speakers of different languages resulting in different concepts in their minds may not be accessible to the translator, the intersubjectively experiencable application of linguistic units in a particular cultural situation can. In other words, knowledge concerning when, why, by whom and to what effect language-specific units are employed can, in theory, be accessed. Linguists and ethnologists are capable of working with languages and cultures other than their own.

Even if the cultural distance between languages is great, cultural gaps can always be bridged via ethnographic knowledge and insights or, stated negatively, untranslatability only occurs whenever such knowledge, such insights, such reflection is absent.

Conceptions of language within the broader context of culture, whereby meaning is seen as contextually determined and constructed, are not recent developments (as e.g. Gumperz and Levinson 1996: 225 suggest) but have long been available inside Russian Formalism, the Prague school and Firthian traditions. Scholars working inside these traditions believed, as did the ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski, that 'the main function of language is not to express thought, not to duplicate mental processes, but rather to play an active part in human behavior' (1935: 7). From such a vantage point, Malinowski for one attacked the idea that languages reflect certain mental make-ups because, in his view, the meaning of a linguistic unit cannot be captured unless one takes account of the interrelationship between linguistic units and 'the context of the situation'. Such a view of meaning has important consequences for the possibility of translation: translation becomes 'rather the placing of linguistic symbols against the cultural background of a society than the rendering of words by their equivalents in another language' (Malinowski 1935: 18). Similarly John Rupert Firth (1957) and Michael Halliday (1978), both strongly influenced by Malinowski, regard language as part of the social dynamic process, as observable and explicable 'language events', with meanings of utterances being defined in terms of their use and function in the context of a situation. Such social views of language have also explicitly taken account of the fact that language is never a monolithic homogeneous whole but always reflects social, geographic and individual differences, and changes over time.

The linguistic relativity postulate does not entail that translation is theoretically impossible, but is relevant in the translational process, in that it is necessary to

relate the source text to its cultural context, as it is only in this context that the text has meaning. As this meaning is to be transposed into another linguaculture, the process of translation becomes a process of recontextualization. The issue is thus one of *linguistic-cultural relativity* (see also House 2000). In the process of recontextualization, two types of translation, overt and covert translation, need to be differentiated (see Chapter 8 for details). They differ fundamentally in their goals and procedures, and it is only in covert translation that linguistic-cultural relativity is built into the translation process itself. This may be achieved via the use of a cultural filter, whose basis should be a body of empirical cross-cultural studies.

### ***Translatability: recent neurolinguistic studies***

Macnamara's (1970) early *reductio ad absurdum* of the impossibility of bilingualism and translation as a logical consequence of linguistic relativity is still valid today. He had argued that the 'Whorfian bilingual' would be unable to communicate with himself: in switching to language B, he would never be able to understand what he had just communicated in language A. Recent empirical neurolinguistic studies of bilingualism and translation (see for example Price *et al.* 1999; Paradis 2004; de Groot and Christoffels 2006) using modern technological means of neuroimaging such as Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), Positron Emission Tomography (PET) and Event-Related Potential (ERP) can be taken to confirm Macnamara's – at the time necessarily – more informal views. They suggest that in the bilingual's (and the translator's) brain a joint conceptual system can be accessed by different routes via different languages. Conceptual representations are language-independent, whereas lexico-semantic, morpho-syntactic and phonological representations are language specific. The two languages are organized in two separate subsystems, and these subsystems can be activated simultaneously, with the possibility of a supervisory attentional system exercising inhibiting control for the comprehension of the source text and the production of a target text. The two languages involved in the process of translation are therefore conceptualized as both interconnected and separate. If they are used simultaneously as in translation, speakers are in a 'bilingual mode' (Grosjean 2001), which enables them to understand, compare and transfer expressions in two different languages.

The importance of pragmatic meanings in translation referred to above is accounted for in the operation of two separate L1- and L2-related pragmatic systems that select the linguistic elements appropriate to the message to be expressed inferring text producer's intentions from given contexts. The neuropsychological processes involved in the bilingual brain are believed to be identical for all languages, and there seems to be no mechanism in the bilingual's brain which is not also operative, at least to some extent, in the monolingual brain (Paradis 2004: 229). Neurolinguistic studies are an important and promising new line of research, and the hypotheses suggested in this paradigm may well provide plausible descriptions and explanations about how translation is made possible.

### ***True limits of translatability***

There are, however, a few exceptions to universal translatability, which I will now briefly discuss.

All languages as creative dynamic systems are well equipped to express ad hoc any aspect of human life whenever the need arises. In Roman Jakobson's much-quoted words: 'All cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language. Whenever there is deficiency, terminology may be qualified and amplified by loan words, neologisms or semantic shifts, and finally by circumlocutions' (1959: 234). Given this 'law of universal translatability', we should nevertheless not forget that there *do* exist certain real limits to translatability. First of all, and Jakobson recognizes this by explicitly referring to 'all cognitive experience', the possibility of translation is severely restricted if we take connotations into account. Connotations defy explicit definitions, they vary even within one individual's mind as her moods and experiences change. Also, connotations cannot be clearly delimited from denotative meanings. So connotative meanings are too elusive to be captured in translation because of their inherently indefinable nature. And the enormous difficulties in literary translation derive of course mainly from the fact that literary texts abound in personal deviations (i.e. connotations) from central denotative meanings.

The second, and most formidable, limitation to translatability occurs in all cases in which language adopts a different function over and above its 'normal' communicative function.

Translatability is limited whenever the form of a linguistic unit takes on special importance. We can therefore qualify the dictum of universal translatability as Nida and Taber have done long ago: 'Anything that can be said in one language can be said in another, unless the form is an essential element of the message' (1969: 4).

Form, of course, plays an important role in literary texts, especially in poetry, which, according to Jakobson (1959: 238), is by definition untranslatable. In poetry, only the creation of a new text is possible: 'creative transposition' takes over where translation finds its limits. In literary texts, meaning and form operate together, they are no longer arbitrarily connected. Therefore the form cannot be changed without a corresponding change in meaning. Since the form cannot be detached from its meaning, this meaning can never be expressed in other ways: paraphrase, commentary, explanations of various kinds, coining or borrowing new words – all of which render pragmatic translation ultimately possible – are not sufficient in literary, especially poetic translation.

Another limit of translatability is found in the fact that each language is unique in its social and geographical diversification, reflected in social and regional dialects of both groups and individual speakers. Since each language is unique in its diversification, translation of this intralinguistic variation is severely curbed. Although, for instance, in the translation of dialectal passages, translators often try to achieve functional equivalence by resorting to presumably corresponding dialects in the target language community – e.g. those commanding equivalent prestige – this often remains unsatisfactory.