

Article

# Making Words—The Unconscious in Translation: Philosophical, Psychoanalytical, and Philological Approaches

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**Abstract:** The topic of the article is the status of translation and homophony in philosophy, psychoanalysis and philology. The article focuses on the question of how translation is carried out using the basic principle of equivalence of meaning by homophony and what effects this can produce. The analysis of two case studies by Freud and Lacan shows that homophonic transfer from one language to another can be extremely productive for the subjective traversal of a phantasm. It is then shown that this is not, however, of purely subjective interest. Werner Hamacher has sketched the future of philology starting from such homophonic translations; Lacan has tried to advance to another theory of language through homophonic formations.

**Keywords:** translation; homophony; Freud; Lacan; Hamacher; Susanne Hommel; phantasm

## 1. Translation in Philosophy: Barbara Cassin's New Approach

French philologist and philosopher Barbara Cassin, editor of the 2004 *Vocabulaire des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004; *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, 2014), has not stopped explaining the expression she coined, “les intraduisibles”, or the theoretical attitude to translation she has derived from it. In her explanations, the following memorable wording is important: “les intraduisibles [...] c’est plutôt ce qu’on ne cesse pas de (ne pas) traduire” (Cassin 2004, p. xvii).<sup>1</sup> This sentence, with its double and bracketed negation, marks a propelling and productive failure in that, when it says one thing, it also says the opposite through the silent brackets. This paradoxical double negation, and its simultaneous bracketing, thereby opens the “bad” impossibility toward a movement; it intensifies the activity of translation, at the same time moving away from the idea that there is one adequate translation. The untranslatables are not an impossibility but a form of resistance that becomes the strongest lever of translation; translation is a performative power that generates something *new*.

Against the backdrop of the multilingualism of European thought, Cassin views translation less as a result than as a continuing stimulus to thinking. Reflecting the importance she assigns to multilingualism, she also has multiple sources for her translation theory which is inspired by Schleiermacher and Humboldt, the main representatives of a hermeneutic concept of translation, as well as by the Sophists, deconstruction (in particular Derrida’s writings), and psychoanalysis (above all Lacan’s work), a colorful mixture of thinking traditions that are not readily compatible with each other. Cassin does not harmonize them, she combines them and allows the contradictions to exist; she avoids purist thinking.

In this context, most striking are her references to psychoanalysis which has not yet formulated its own explicit theory of translation. However, in Freud’s writings, and then more explicitly in Laplanche (Laplanche 1999; Fletcher 2007; Kister 2021), we find the border traffic between the unconscious and the conscious conceptualized in terms of translation. Psychoanalytical translation could be considered an experimental way of handling what has been smuggled enigmatically between the unconscious and the conscious. Cassin never



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refers directly to the psychic apparatus and the notion of the unconscious, but we have to keep this in mind when we approach a sentence, which has the quality of an axiom, from Lacan's late essay "L'Étourdit". Cassin quotes it again and again, and places it at the heart of her understanding of the untranslatables, also in the realm of philosophical thinking:

Une langue entre autres n'est rien de plus que l'intégrale des équivoques que son histoire y a laissé persister.

A language among/between others is nothing more than the integral of the equivoques that its history has let persist. (Lacan 1973, p. 47)

Lacan's "integral of equivoques" is not a countable sum, nor an algorithm that covers all the notorious problems translators struggle with; rather, something about the relationship between/among languages is addressed as equivoque. Translation would, then, mean staying within the space of equivocality, which means not only keeping this space open but discovering it in the first place through translation. In this process, we notice the complex relationship between the written and the spoken also starting to enter into the relationship between the languages as a further dimension of difference. Indeed, the equivoques are not classical homonyms, but they are bound to the vocal; they are not written down anywhere, and they only become audible in speech.

For Cassin, an untranslatable becomes something that hangs between languages and does not entirely belong to either language. "Une langue entre autres" is not just "a language among others" but also a language "between" others. For Lacan, this points to something that he calls "lalangue"; vocal residues that have not been subsumed within the history of language, that have, so to speak, deposited themselves at its edge. I will come back to this later.

Thus, the untranslatables are not just words that notoriously create difficulties for translators. Neither are the equivoques of which Lacan speaks registered or registerable ambiguous words that we could compile into a special dictionary as especially difficult cases (they would then also theoretically go beyond the scope of what the actual *Dictionary of the Untranslatables* offers). With Cassin and Lacan, we are beyond the traditional conception of translation as an activity between more or less stable lexicons. Rather, by focusing on the equivoques, Cassin, with Lacan, discovered another linguistic dimension: a *dit-mansion*, as Lacan would say that can be driven forth in speech, in the to-and-fro between languages; always unexpected, isolated, singular, and for this reason completely incommensurable and uncontrollable. What is discovered in this way can be called the "unconscious Babel", the silent "un-ground" of language and meaning, which sporadically and suddenly, always in singular and unforeseeable situations, starts to speak, radically altering the sense of what is being uttered. The untranslatables, always singular, isolated, and punctual, are thus irregular phenomena and, at the same time, multiple and manifold.

Why should one deal with this uncanny un-ground of thinking? There can be different motivations. For Cassin, it is a way to emphasize the importance of the constant shifting of meanings even in philosophical conceptually based thinking. For psychoanalysis to which she so often refers, the sudden emergence of equivoques shows itself to be a "royal road to the unconscious", as Freud called the "interpretation of dreams" (Freud 1955, p. 604).

To go further in the exploration of the very specific energy and psychic quality of equivoques, I will consider, in a first step, a striking case, described by Freud, in which an unconscious thought emerges by dint of translation. I will also show how this very case inspired Werner Hamacher's important reflections on philology. In a second step, I will try to understand how Lacan's notion of "lalangue" can be considered an outline for a very specific psychoanalytical theory of language (and thereby of translation), a theory that would be able to address the "unconscious Babel", not on the basis of singular linguistic symptoms, but in a systematic manner. In the third and last step, I will come back to a case study which is a rare example taken from Lacan's clinical practice. It is not described by Lacan himself, but by his German analysand Susanne Hommel, who later has become an analyst herself. With Hommel's reflection about Lacan's timely intervention

as she was haunted by the threatening word “Gestapo”, the relation between different languages can be conceived of as a physical sensation of touch, and the translational process in psychoanalysis as one’s very specific way of traversing a trauma.

## 2. “Que Faire?” an Early Freudian Case of Homophony in Translation

In a document of early psychoanalysis, that is, in Freud’s correspondence with the Berlin ear-nose-throat specialist Wilhelm Fliess, we find the following passage:

Otherwise, I am resolutely stomping along in the Dreckology. A little interpretation befell me [stieß mir zu, transl. changed by J.K.] in the very first days after I returned. Mr. E., whom you know, had an anxiety attack at the age of ten when he tried to catch a black beetle, which would not put up with it. The meaning of this attack had thus far remained obscure. Now, dwelling on the theme of “being unable to make up one’s mind”, he repeated a conversation between his grandmother and his aunt about the marriage of his mother, who at that time was already dead, from which it emerged that she had not been able to make up her mind for quite some time; then he suddenly came up with the black beetle, which he had not mentioned for months, and from that to ladybug (Marienkäfer) (his mother’s name was Marie); then he laughed out loud and inadequately explained his laughter by saying that zoologists call this beetle *septem punctata*, or the equivalent, according to the number of dots, although it is always the same animal. Then we broke off and next time he told me that before the session the meaning of the beetle (Käfer) had occurred to him; namely *que faire?* = being unable to make up one’s mind . . . *meschugge!* You may know that here a woman may be referred to as a nice “beetle”. His nurse and first love was a French woman; in fact, he learned to speak French before he learned to speak German. (Freud 1985, p. 290)<sup>2</sup>

These lines do not just convincingly give expression to the meandering paths of psychoanalytical interpretative processes; rather, they also touch upon translation in a peculiar way. Patient E., searching for the potential meaning of an anxiety attack he had when he was unable to catch a black beetle, interrupts the interpretative process at a certain point, which starts with the thing-presentation (*Sachvorstellung*). The homophone dislocation, rather than a translation, of the signifier “Käfer” into French drives forth the question “que faire?”

However, this dislocation, which is at odds with everything we expect from correct speech and thought, in total disrespect to semantics, grammar, and etymology, does not seem to be a completely unsatisfying answer to the question that haunts Freud’s patient, that is, the meaning of the mysterious anxiety attack he had suffered as a ten-year-old, which he remembered years later during his consultation with Freud. An urgent question receives a belated answer that emerges from the patient himself in the form of another question, “Que faire?”

Freud describes the dislocation of the word as an “Einfall”—an idea. Not an idea in the sense of a premeditated design or plan, but much more as a literal transformation of the former “Anfall”—attack. The attack repeats itself in the sudden idea, in the incursion of something that has not had any place in thought or speech before. In the moment it is spoken out loud, the foolish “Einfall”, the “Anfall”, seems to be momentarily suspended.

Freud’s explanations suggest that the patient’s memory of the former anxiety attack touches on the primal scene, that is, on the fact, conveyed to the child through the talk of others, that his mother only reluctantly gave herself to his father, that she did not tolerate his father’s seduction. The child was not able to understand what he was hearing but must have had the vague feeling that the scene of disagreement between mother and father had affected his existence. Following Laplanche’s seduction theory, we might say that the child, confronted with the incomprehensible speech of adults about something that the child feels directly concerns his existence, has started “translating” the incomprehensible speech into

the language that is available to him. This is where the formation of the phantasm can be located (Laplanche 1987).

When it takes shape, the phantasm forms its own specific dictionary which is not documented in any of the dictionaries that we can consult. Rather, the dislocation of “Käfer”/“que faire?” is part of what we could refer to as the phantasmatic vocabulary.

Freud’s letter to Fliess tells us more about the very particular “nature” of this “translation-dislocation act”. It occurs as something that “falls”. It has the falling energy of a case (*Fall*), of an idea and incursion (*Einfall*), an incident (*Zwischenfall*), or even an accident (*Unfall*) in thought and speech. As such, it abruptly interrupts meaning and its equivalent translation. It is significant that what falls here, in Freud’s description, falls between two sessions: after the interpretative work has been broken off and before it has been resumed. In the interrupted process of understanding and interpreting, a peculiar rhythm emerges. This rhythm, which is pronounced by the specific temporality of the incidence, a rhythm in which interruption seems to be more important than the flow of speech and interpretation, also shapes the way that Freud recounts the case to his friend Fliess.

Significantly, the letter is borne by an excess of affect. Freud has just returned to Vienna from a meeting with Fliess in Breslau. The letter starts with the following preliminary remarks: “Back home and in harness again, with the delicious aftertaste of our days in Breslau. Bi-bi (bisexuality-bilaterality) is ringing in my ears, but I am still feeling too well for serious work” and “Otherwise I am resolutely stomping along in the Dreckology”.

The letter transitions from hearing, from something sounding in the ears, into the physical movement of stomping—stomping in psychic excrement, stomping in waste, which also includes the phonetic side of words—as their meaningless shell. Freud vividly and physically portrays the pleasure he takes in investigating this psychic and linguistic excrement. In the letter of 22 December 1897, which precedes the letter of 29 December and in which he discusses the translation of “Käfer” to “Que faire?”, Freud holds forth at length on the significance of the excretory processes in obsessive-compulsive ideas. Freud recognizes the latent inscription of “copro-erotic terms” into the verb “machen” (to make), whose “peculiar word indeterminacy” occupies him (Freud 1986, pp. 313–14; Freud 1985, pp. 288–89). It is striking that the verb “faire” is indeed a translation of “machen”. One might thus assume that what is driven forth in the patient’s sudden idea (*Einfall*) has already been prepared by and is thus the result of Freud’s current preoccupation with the excremental implications of the verb “machen”. Or, in other words, Freud’s insistence on “stomping” in what he calls “Dreckology” (the logos of filth and/or filthy logic) has already prepared the terrain for another mode of speaking and listening to what is being said. Moreover, in a certain sense, the stomping movement corresponds to Mr E.’s chanting, a chanting that suddenly accentuates the word (*Käfer*) slightly differently and not only shifts it into another language (French), but also gives it a completely different meaning.

As for the rhythm of Freud’s stomping account of his own interpretation, we also see how he receives the patient’s idea (*Einfall*) as a literal attack when he says that the interpretation “befell” him (“Eine kleine Deutung ist mir [. . .] zugestoßen”). It befell him after long periods of hesitancy and darkness. In Freud’s interpretation, the patient’s sudden idea in the in-betweenness of sessions is not recounted in paraphrase, but rather in a highly condensed form:

next time he told me that before the session the meaning of the beetle (*Käfer*) had occurred to him; namely que faire? = being unable to make up one’s mind . . . meschugge!

The German phrasing is even more staccato-like:

vor der nächsten Sitzung erzählt er mir, die Deutung des Käfers sei ihm eingefallen. Nämlich: ‘Que faire? = Unschlüssigkeit. Meschugge!’

Stenographically, Freud transforms the homophonic translation into a paradoxical formula. The equals sign symbolizes a conclusion (*Schluss*) that results in “inconclusiveness” or “indecisiveness”, that is, the interpretative conclusion produces a short-circuit

(*Kurzschluss*), another “attack” (*Anfall*), or “black-out” (*Ausfall*). What lies behind the equals sign is a counter-meaning that Freud comments on in a third language with the Yiddish expression “meschugge”.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. “Que Faire?” Hamacher’s Philological Response

In the 76th thesis of his “95 Theses on Philology”, Werner Hamacher takes up Freud’s letter and case study and provides commentary on them. His mode of relating to the passage seems to be sparked by the question “que faire?”, to which he responds in a Hamacherian or Ha-makerian way by “making” something different out of it, that is, a primal scene of philology. The 76th thesis reads like a belated response to Freud, who for Hamacher becomes a philologist in the best sense: a *philo*-logist, one who practices philology out of an unconscious transference:

Philology, a love story. Freud, in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess on 29 December 1897: “Mr E., whom you know, suffered an attack of anxiety at the age of ten years when he attempted to capture a black beetle [Käfer], which did not allow it to happen. The interpretation of this attack has until now remained obscure. . . . Then we broke off the session and next time, he told me before the session that an interpretation of the beetle has occurred to him. Namely: Que faire?” What Freud, the philologist, calls “interpretation” is not a translation [Übersetzung] of a word into a representation of the thing associated with it but a dislocation [Versetzung], a displacement of attention from the possible meanings to the idiom of their naming. Only through separation from meaning does an idea [Einfall] take the place of an attack [Anfall]: in place of anxiety, its articulation; in place of the animal or the name of the animal [Käfer], a question (Que faire?). And indeed in another language, French, for—so Freud continues—E’s “governess and his first beloved was French; in fact he had learned to speak French before German”. The way to “interpretation” is not the way to meaning. It is the way to a repetition of a language or to a return into a language that is kept hidden by another. The movement of philology is the movement to the language of the first beloved, to the beloved language. The question “Que faire?” and that which is asked by it are allowed to happen this time, in the repetition, by the beloved. For in “Que faire?” that which is still asked about is already done. Philology: to bring it about that the first love can be repeated, so that it allows the repeating to occur. (Hamacher 2009, p. 38)<sup>4</sup>

In his reading, Hamacher emphasizes “love” and another chain of “falls”, also present in the letter, which leads to “gefallen” (“sich gefallen lassen”, translated here as “to allow to happen”). What is allowed to happen in interpretation is love, the love implicit in *philology*, which allows the interpretation to go down another path than that of meaning. The love story told by Hamacher is able to fulfill an otherwise impossible wish, that is, to repeat one’s very first love, which is the “beloved language”. As if guided himself by this wish, he turns the psychological explanation that Freud gives (“You may know that here a woman may be referred to as a nice ‘beetle’. His nurse and first love was a French woman; in fact, he learned to speak French before he learned to speak German”) into a philological movement, which allows us, by way of repetition, to recognize that the answer to the question “que faire?” is already given in the question itself.

The repetition (*Wiederholung*) that Hamacher brings in here is a, as he writes, “Wieder-holung”. Repetition itself, by repeating, homophonically becomes something else. The hyphen emphasizes the pause in the movement of repetition itself, the small break or crack through which, by means of mere repetition, something else is driven forth, literally fetched or summoned again, that is not subsumed within the meaning of the utterance. While the meaning of “que faire?” is a question still to be answered, the *philo*-logical repetition of the scene allows the question itself to be received as its own answer.

#### 4. Lacan's Systematization of the Equivoques as "La langue/Lalangue"

The way that Hamacher doubles and shifts "Wiederholung" into "Wieder-holung" is reminiscent not least of the deliberate homophonic confusion that Lacan generates between "la langue" and "lalangue" in order to develop another language theory that would be able to systematically encompass the "language among/between" as the "integral of the equivoques that its history (that is, the history of language) has let persist" (Lacan 1973, p. 47).

Yet, in linguistics, as well as in academic philosophy and philology, the status of these kinds of homophonic confusions is contested. Grammarians and linguistics reduce them to mere coincidence. Lacan, in his late writings, would, however, go on to say that homophones were not a matter of mere chance. In doing so, Lacan was far from asserting that they were necessary. More precisely, homophones are located *between* the philosophical dichotomy of contingency and necessity.

As it is well known, Lacan's writings and seminars are characterized by an excessive use of homophonic formations which is one of the reasons why his texts resist understanding. Unlike Freud, Lacan does not give case descriptions. Instead, in Lacan we find an attempt to transform psychoanalysis, starting with homophonic formations, in order to shape another theory of language. In other words: in Lacan's writings, homophony never emerges as an object of interpretation. Rather, homophony—in pairs such as "voeu"/"veut", "non"/"nom", and "d'eux"/"deux", and in portmanteau phrases such as "les non-dupes errent"/"les noms du père", "je pense donc je suis"/"je pense donc je jouis"—enter directly into theory formation.

Linguists consider homophones to be "qualia", that is, subjective textures and, as such, pure qualities without concept. French philosopher and linguist Jean-Claude Milner, in a groundbreaking study on Lacan's use of homophones, identifies in Lacan's word games another manifestation of his "mathemes", that is, the "mathematical formulas" through which Lacan attempts to guarantee the "integral transmission of his teaching" (Milner 2017, p. 88).

One key notion in Lacan's advance toward another theory of language is the homophonic formation "la langue"/"lalangue". Lacan's neologism "lalangue" is strictly homophonic with "la langue" (the language) and, as Lacan states, arose from a slip of the tongue (in the still unpublished 1971/72 lecture series *Le savoir du psychanalyste*). "Lalangue" stands in a kind of mimetic relation to what it addresses, which is homophony itself, and the question of its different status in psychoanalytical language theory.

Lacan uses the term "language" to refer to language as it is reconstructed by linguists, as a system determined by grammatical rules that has the function of communicating meanings. Whereas "lalangue" is Lacan's counter-term to address all the lingual occurrences that are not absorbed by "language". "Lalangue", as Lacan writes in *La Troisième* (Lacan 2011), his third lecture which he held in Rome in 1974, is that which allows homophones to be considered something that is no longer purely accidental, no longer arbitrary. For this reason, they are not necessary either.

Yet, it is important to emphasize that "lalangue" is not a stable concept. When Lacan speaks, he constantly produces an oscillation between "lalangue" and "la langue". However, in the transcription of his Rome speech, a decision had to be made to write in "lalangue" or "la langue". The transcription therefore produces a constant and unresolvable dilemma as soon as it claims to be able to decide and thereby stabilize "lalangue" as a concept. For rather than a stable concept, "lalangue" is something that pulsates, emerges, interrupts, confuses, and, at a certain point, withdraws again, hiding in "la langue".

For linguists, homophonies exist, but they do not count for anything. They are waste. Psychoanalysis is "Dreckology"; it is interested in waste, in "the deposit, the alluvion", as Lacan puts it, "the petrification marked by how a group deals with its unconscious experience" (Lacan 2011, p. 20). "Lalangue" is the realm, "la dit-mansion" (a mansion in the sense of an abode), of this waste. "Lalangue" is *made* from the remnants of lingual occurrences that are not captured by the system of language; these remnants are not nothing

because they are loaded with untranslatable energy. One might say that a homophone is a kind of bottleneck between “la langue”/“lalangue”, the narrow space in which something starts to insist, and urges to be translated into symbolization and meaning.

### 5. “Geste-à-peau” a Clinical Homophonic Intervention by Lacan

To finish, I would like to come back from Lacan’s attempt to “mathematize” the equivoque to a singular case which occurred during Susanne Hommel’s psychoanalysis with Lacan. Curiously enough, we are once again confronted with the border traffic of signifiers between German and French. In this case, however, it is not about archaeologically reconstructing an earlier language that precedes German as the mother tongue, but about a second language, French, which intervenes into a German term with surprising effects. Susanne Hommel gives an account of it in Gérard Miller’s 2011 documentary *Rendez-vous chez Lacan*.<sup>5</sup> In Hommel’s valuable testimony, we see how Lacan’s theoretical movement is already at work in clinical practice.

Susanne Hommel, born in Germany in 1938, evokes the Nazi terror that she suffered under during her childhood in just a few short keywords. At age 19, she went to Paris. She began her psychoanalysis with Lacan in 1974. At the beginning of the analysis, she asked Lacan if it would be possible to cure her of her traumatic memories of the Nazi period. Lacan said little, then remarked: “*il faut faire avec toute la vie*”. The turn of phrase “*il faut faire avec*”, in which the verb “to make” returns, means more or less: it is something you will have to live with your whole life, that you will have to come to terms with (resignation), but also: you will have to learn, your whole life long, you will have to find a way to deal with it.

In one session, Hommel mentions a dream: “I wake up every morning at 5 o’clock,” and I added, ‘it was at 5 o’clock that the Gestapo came to get the Jews in their houses.’ At that moment, Lacan jumped up from his chair, came towards me, and gave me an extremely gentle caress on my cheek. I understood it as ‘geste-à-peau,’ the gesture”.

The speaker in the film interrupts: “He had transformed Gestapo into geste-à-peau (literally: a skin-gesture)?” Hommel continues: “un geste tendre, il faut le dire, un geste extrêmement tendre” (a very tender gesture, it has to be said, an extraordinarily tender gesture).

Hommel continues: “And that surprise, it didn’t diminish the pain, but it made it something else. The proof now, 40 years later, when I recall that gesture, I can still feel it on my cheek. It was a gesture as well which has an appeal to humanity, something like that”.

As in the case of Freud’s patient E., in the transition from German to French, a slight change of accent makes the signifier equivocal and drives forth another meaning. This kind of dislocation is once again turned against lexicalized meaning and inserts a counter-meaning into it. Once again, this dislocation takes place quite suddenly.

Lacan does not utter the word. He intervenes with a silent gesture, a corporeal touch (the soft caressing of the cheek) that, in turn, and clearly immediately, is translated by the analysand into the quasi-homophonic signifier “geste-à-peau”. Lacan’s gesture redirects the word as soon as it is performed, warding off its lethal impact. But Gestapo does still resound in “geste-à-peau”, albeit alienated. Lacan’s intervention did not diminish the pain, as Hommel says. She then speaks of something very general, even universal: “A call to humanity”, she says. My impression is that she is skipping over something, for there is no direct path from such a singular intervention to a call to humanity. The specific “making something else” that this gesture performs with the word in this special situation goes unspoken.

Would Lacan have been able to content himself, should he have had to content himself with saying “geste à peau” out loud? Was touching the analysand necessary? Isn’t there a danger of eroticizing the Gestapo here? Or was it actually important to send the analysand into this state of sexual giddiness? Was it important for the analysand to verbalize the gesture and thereby symbolize the word differently? At any rate, the psychoanalyst made

something with the word, and the analysand made something out of it: “elle a fait quelque chose avec”.

It seems as if the Lacanian gesture initiates a process of taking leave. As insistent as it is, it is not an act of sexual aggression, which, in the case Freud describes, seems to be the backdrop to the patient’s panic attack; it isn’t an act of “stomping” either. The gentle caress reminds me much more of Benjamin’s “Task of the Translator”, where he describes translation as a light touch, at a single point, between languages:

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point—establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity—a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux. (Benjamin 1996, p. 261)<sup>6</sup>

In the image that Benjamin conjures up here, the translation gets very close to the original before moving off again once more in the brief moment in which they touch. If the translation runs like a tangent, then it is carried at every other point by precisely this moment of the single touch.

Lacan’s gesture and Hommel’s verbalization of the same seem to me to form such a tangent. Body and language touch at the same time: language becomes a body, and the body becomes language. When Lacan’s hand strokes Hommel’s cheek like a musical instrumental, *jouissance*, too, sounds on that cheek (in French “cheek” is “joue”).

## 6. A Tentative Conclusion: Traversing the Phantasm

Susanne Hommel herself spoke about *equivokes* in terms of Lacanian “lalangue”, locating her notion of psychoanalytical translation precisely here. She writes:

What characterizes *lalangue*, it’s the *equivokes* that have set themselves down in it over time. It is the *equivoke* alone that leads to *lalangue*. I would like to suggest that translating is traversing a phantasm. There are three temporalities for the subject, just like there are three temporalities in logical time, the moment of seeing, understanding, and concluding. Traversing the phantasm, a concept used too readily in our community could be just that: escaping from immobility, from the pleasure of submitting oneself to a signifier. And sometimes, traversing signifiers, and letters, can produce a spark. Starting with any one of these languages, the aim is to find another language. (Hommel 2011, p. 181)<sup>7</sup>

In translation, Hommel recognizes the possibility of traversing the phantasm and, therefore, the real and the traumatic, which cannot be symbolized in language. Traversing the phantasm leads out of language into the realm of that which Hommel, with Lacan, refers to as “lalangue”. In this way, the *equivokes* form gates that open unexpectedly for short periods of time before closing again straight away. It is also possible to miss them. But closure has a good side too, for once the subject has slid through the gates at the moment of their opening, their closure protects the subject from the relentless burden and threat posed by certain word representations.

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## Notes

- 1 “To speak of untranslatables in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating” (Cassin et al. 2014, p. xvii). The French turn of phrase is more complicated than its English translation, which reduces the double negation to a single one. But it is precisely the entanglement in the double negation, which bypasses positive affirmation, that expresses how the translation itself changes by way of the untranslatable passages that evade it. It becomes something else that is yet to be discovered.
- 2 “Sonst stampe ich tüchtig weiter in der Drekkologie. Eine kleine Deutung ist mir in den ersten Tagen gleich zugestoßen. Herr E., den Du kennst, hat im Alter von 10 Jahren einen Angstanfall bekommen, als er sich bemühte, einen schwarzen Käfer einzufangen, der es sich nicht gefallen ließ. Die Deutung dieses Anfalles war bislang dunkel geblieben. Nun hält er beim Kapitel “Unschlüssigkeit”, repetiert ein Gespräch der Großmutter mit der Tante über die Heirat der damals schon verstorbenen Mama, aus dem sich ergibt, daß sie etwas lange mit der Entscheidung gezögert, kommt plötzlich auf besagten seit Monaten nicht erwähnten schwarzen Käfer, von ihm auf den Marienkäfer (seine Mutter hieß Marie), lacht dann laut auf und erklärt dies Lachen mangelhaft durch die Bemerkung, die Zoologen nennen diesen Käfer Septempunctata usw. je nach der Anzahl der Punkte, während er doch immer dasselbe Tier sei. Dann brechen wir ab und vor der nächsten Sitzung erzählt er mir, die Deutung des Käfers sei ihm eingefallen. Nämlich: Que faire? = Unschlüssigkeit. Meschugge! Daß man ein Frauenzimmer bei uns einen netten ‘Käfer’ heißen kann, dürfte Dir bekannt sein. Seine Kindsfrau und erste Geliebte war eine Französin; er hat eigentlich früher französisch sprechen gelernt als deutsch” (Freud 1986, pp. 316–17).
- 3 The expression “meschugge” forms a shibboleth between Freud and Fliess at the height of their correspondence. At this point, it must be mentioned that Marie Bonaparte’s first edition of their correspondence suppressed eccentric tones and expressions like “Drekkology” and “meschugge”. It was only in Masson’s revised 1985 edition that *first* appeared in English and *then* in German that this framing became legible. As if to prove the psychoanalytical theory of repression, it is only *après coup*—through translation and re-editing—that this “foolishness” has come to light.
- 4 “Der Weg zur ‘Deutung’ ist nicht der Weg zu einer Bedeutung. Es ist der Weg zur Wiederholung einer Sprache oder zur Wiederholung *in* eine Sprache, die von einer anderen verdeckt gehalten wird. Die Bewegung der Philologie ist die Bewegung zur Sprache der ersten Geliebten, zu der Geliebten Sprache. Die Frage *Que faire?* und das darin Erfragte läßt die Geliebte sich diesmal, in der Wiederholung, gefallen. Denn im *Que faire?* ist schon getan, wonach es noch fragt. Philologie: es dahin bringen, daß sich die erste Liebe wiederholen läßt, daß sie sich das Wiederholen gefallen läßt” (Hamacher 2010, pp. 79–80).
- 5 The passage of the documentary that interests me here can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VA-SXCGwLvY> (last accessed on 25 June 2023).
- 6 “Wie die Tangente den Kreis flüchtig und nur an einem Punkte berührt und wie ihr wohl diese Berührung, nicht aber der Punkt, das Gesetz vorschreibt, nach dem sie weiter ins Unendliche ihre gerade Bahn zieht, so berührt die Übersetzung flüchtig und nur in dem unendlich kleinen Punkte des Sinnes das Original, um nach dem Gesetze der Treue in der Freiheit der Sprachbewegung ihre eigenste Bahn zu verfolgen” (Benjamin 1972, pp. 19–20).
- 7 “Ce qui caractérise lalangue, ce sont les équivoques qui s’y sont déposées au cours des âges. Il n’y a que l’équivoque qui mène à lalangue. Je proposerai que traduire, c’est traverser un fantasme. Il y a donc trois temps pour le sujet, comme il y a les trois temps du temps logique, l’instant de voir, le temps de comprendre, le moment de conclure. Traverser le fantasme, un concept si facilement utilisé dans notre communauté, pourrait être ceci: sortir de l’immobilité, de la jouissance de la soumission à un signifiant. Et parfois un croisement de signifiants, de lettres, produira une étincelle. À partir de chacune de ces langues, il faudra trouver une autre langue” (Hommel 2015, p. 5).

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