Linguistic Potentiality and Technological Reproducibility: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Translation Revisited

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【摘要】

本文嘗試從翻譯、語言、及書寫作爲記憶補足的科技客體三者之間的根本問題出發，重新探討班雅明翻譯理論的獨道之處，亦引用法國哲學家史提格勒(Bernard Stiegler)提出之「誰」(the *who*)與「什麼」(the *what*)互相成立之理論深化關於書寫作爲科技客體的討論。最後根據討論結果探討全球化時代的翻譯特質，在高度科技發展的時代裡，翻譯、語言與科技的關係呈現何種特色。

【關鍵詞】

班雅民、語言潛勢、科技複製、可翻譯性、書寫體制

【Abstract】

The place of linguistic potentiality and technology reproducibility that textures Benjamin's theorization of translation seems to have been downplayed in contemporary translation studies. This study aims at tracing the connections of language, translation, and technology in Benjamin's theory. I would include in my discussion Bernard Stiegler's theory of the co-constituting relation between the human subject (the *who*) and the technical object (the *what*) to deepen our understanding of aspects of language and technology in Benjamin's theory. Finally, the results of discussion will be taken as the bedrock of an analysis of translation of the here and now to see how translation is related to language and technology in an age of globalization and information expansion.

【Keywords】

Benjamin, language potentiality, technological reproducibility, translatability, orthographic writing

I. Introduction

It is valid to argue that a better part of our latter-day theories of translation studies in their producing a more viable account of the role played by translation is more or less inspired by an intense interest in Walter Benjamin's theory of translation exemplified in his 1923 text "The Task of the Translator" ("Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers"). George Steiner in *After Babel* maintains that the literature on the theory, practice, and history of translation can be loosely divided into four periods, among which the fourth phase started with the rediscovery of Benjamin's "The Translator" essay along with the influence of Heidegger and Gadamer. The response to the text in question that Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, and other deconstructionists made in the mid-1980s has interrupted the supreme authority of the mother tongue or the concept of "original," and further problematizes the traditional nineteenth-century notion of translation, which was based on the idea of a master-servant relationship. Susan Bassnett sees Derrida's discussion of translation in his essay "Des Tours de Babel" (1985) as an important landmark that signals "the arrival of a post-structuralist branch" in translation studies, an exciting development that has helped to improve the ancillary condition of translation and its old prejudices (xvi). From the standpoint opened up by these like-minded scholars, what is truly novel and promising about Benjamin's translation theory is a revolutionary implication of the relation among languages and between translation and its origin.

Various scholars had also enlarged and extended the Benjaminian conception of translation for use in the context of postcolonial and gender studies. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994/2004) extends the notion of translation into "cultural translation" in the context of post-colonial migration. Using Benjamin's "The Translator" essay and Derrida's comment on it, Bhabha emphasizes the notion of untranstability as a point of resistance to complete integration in the subjectivity of the migrant. Gayatri Spivak, in "The Politics of Translation" (1992), focuses on the gendered agency of third world feminist translators, advocating a commitment to an alterity defined by the politics of translation. With a shift from the discussion of textual translation to that of people, both scholars have strived to "actualize" Benjamin's theory of translation in a reworked and an expanded sense, trying to find out Benjamin's relevancy to our present age. All in all, the confluence of deconstruction discourse and the Benjaminian conception of translation has not only

inspired a revision of original/translation hierarchy but the burgeoning development of translation and culture studies in the past few decades.

The editorial arrangement of *Western Theory of Translation* (2000), a book that introduces Western translation theories to the Chinese academic world, exemplifies the predominant focus on the deconstructive interpretation of Benjamin's theory of translation. Benjamin's "The Translator" essay is placed under the category titled "The Deconstructive Theory," followed by essays written by Derrida, de Man, Lawrence Venuti and Eugene Eoyang.[1] However, Edwin Gentzler in *Contemporary Translation Theories* points out that most translation studies scholars "have been all but silent in response to the questions posed by deconstructionists" for the fear of political and institutional threat to theory of translation based upon metaphysical dualism (171-72). They simply avoid responding to the unspoken and unthought-of but inherent nature of language to which Benjamin and deconstructionists address.

Another problem with the reading of Benjamin's theory of translation is that it is often applied and cited without the needed elaboration on its relation to other aspects of his philosophy. As Tejaswini Niranjana notes, it is important to have a reading that could bring out Benjamin's persistent concerns and preoccupation with "history." What she means is the continuity between Benjamin's early theory of language and translation and his later reflections on the theme of modern technological reproducibility and its impact on the structures of collective human experience and historiography. This dimension, however, has been regrettably overlooked by most commentators.[2] When these two aspects of linguistic potentiality and technology reproducibility that texture Benjamin's theorization of translation seem to have been downplayed, mis-readings can be expected. The most common of all, for instance, is an assumption that Benjamin has a preference for source-oriented translation. In a long discussion of development in contemporary translation theories, Peter France places Benjamin in the camp of translators and theorists who stress the distance between original and the translation in order to establish an exalting vision for translation rather than a secondary, subservient activity. France sees "foreignizing"

[1] 陳德鴻、張南峰編，《西方翻譯理論精選》(香港：香港城市大學出版社，2000)。

[2] Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, c1992) 4-5.

literalism, a term popularized by Lawrence Venuti, as Benjamin's preferred translation practice (4). In fact, the conventional conflicting tendencies between fidelity and freedom are precisely what Benjamin attempts to solve.

Therefore, in this paper I would argue that to have an in-depth understanding of Benjamin's theory of translation, it is necessary to pay more attention to the connections with language and technology in his philosophy. This understanding in turn may cast some light on translation of the here and now in an age of globalization and information expansion. In recent years, globalization has become a pressing interest for translation scholars, as global economy has made translation even more necessary than before. The discussion of globalization and translation unavoidably involves that of the advent of information technology and issues such as the disappearance of physical national borders in cyberspace, the rapid growth of the automation of translation due to the lack of human translators in face of the task of translating huge quantities of information, the threat of extinction faced by minority languages and cultures because English has become the lingua franca in the globalized age, and so on. All these issues point to the fact that language, translation and technics are conjoined in today's globalized techno-informational world. That also makes it relevant to reinvestigate Benjamin's theory of translation with respect to his insight into language potentiality and technological reproducibility. In other words, the discussion would revolve around the question of how can Benjamin's insights into translation incorporated with language potentiality and technological reproducibility help to give an account of translation today.

Two contemporary scholars, Samuel Weber and Emily Apter, have tried to view Benjaminian conception of translation from the angle of language, media and technics. Weber observes Benjamin's use of the suffix -abilities (*-barkeit*) as indicating a structural possibility distinctive from empirically observable facts. Under this light, language as a medium should not be understood as a "means" but as "the immediate possibility of being imparted" shown by Benjamin's use of the set of German words *unmittelbar* (immediate) and *Mittelbarkeit* (impart-ability). The immediacy of language as a medium lies in its being able to be detached from itself. So if the impartable is language itself, translatability then refers to a formal quality intrinsic to certain works themselves: a necessary possibility of being transposed, translated, and repeated in another language (*Benjamin's -abilities* 117-19). Emily Apter amplifies the

ethical issue of translation occasioned by technological reproducibility. She combines readings of "The Translator" essay with "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936) and concludes that Benjaminian conception of translation is more akin to an all-purpose, intermedial technology which is moving toward "a model of transcoding, in which everything is translatable and in a constant state of in-translation" (Apter 7). While Weber stresses the virtual potentiality or transferrable life force inherent in language as a medium, Apter highlights the fact that problems of translation, redoubled by those of technical reproducibility, may disrupt the ethics of translation.

Venturing into questions of language and technology, these two scholars reveal a new direction for the investigation of Benjamin's theory of translation. Taking this as a point of departure, I would argue that language and technology are two inseparable aspects of Benjamin's theory of translation, as they represent one of his deepest concerns—how knowledge and experience are produced and passed on. The way Benjamin talks about language and technical reproducibility is in line with his concerns about life, perception and experience, and this is where the interdependence between man and things come to the fore. In this paper, I would try to demonstrate that the connection between linguistic potentiality and technological reproducibility in Benjamin's theory lies in his discussion of the relation between man and things. Just as Adam's act of naming shows that man's ability to use language is an ability to respond to the hidden language of things, so is the question of technology to be viewed from the mimetic bond between man and things. The irreducible binding between human and technical objects is also the main theme that contemporary French philosopher Bernard Stiegler deals with in his work on memory and prosthesis in technics. It is relevant to refer to Stiegler's theory to deepen the analysis of Benjamin's notions of "mimetic faculty" (*mimetische Vermögen*) and "nonsensuous similarity" (*unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit*). These two concepts can be seen as Benjamin's reformulation of his earlier concept of language, indicating Benjamin's concern with the question of the technical possibility of the sedimentation of collective remembrance: how language, writing or other new media may function as the archive of non-perceivable correspondences between man and things.

In our age of globalization and information expansion, when what Stiegler calls as "industrialized memory" has become the norm, translation as a cultural and

commercial activity certainly plays an important role. By investigating the interrelation between man and tools, we may hope to know the nature, boundary, and ethics of translation of our age better. Yet "translation tools" should not be exclusively limited to high-tech electronic tools. They are the technical infrastructure—previous translations included—that provides material support for any translation practice. As Michael Cronin notes in *Globalization and Translation*, "[t]he product of one translation process becomes a tool in the commencement of another" (26). What is significant from our point of view is that translation is always conducted in a tool-mediated environment. So, to interrogate translation, one should investigate the meaning of tools as prosthesis for memory and the relationship between translation and technosphere.

II. Language and Linguistic Potentiality

Benjamin bases his theory of language and translation on an expressionless and non-communicable aspect of language that enables communication. To be more precise, this is the foundation upon which his theorization of language, translation, technology, and history is rested. In order to figure out what this virtual expressionless aspect of language is and what effects it has upon language, I suggest one should try to analyze some crucial antitheses in Benjamin's accounts of language and translation. With sets of seemingly opposed concepts, he intends to claim that linguistic potentiality exits in and beyond human language.

To begin with, Benjamin makes an important distinction between the "mental entity" (*geistiges Wesen*) and the "linguistic entity" (*sprachliches Wesen*) as early as 1916 in the essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." He sees such a distinction as a way to reject conventional formulae of a human subject speaking a language as a means of communication. Thus, he theorizes language as that which "is communicable *of* a mental entity, *in* this it communicates itself" ("On Language" 64). That means language communicating itself *in* itself. This manifests the purest sense the medium (*das Medium*) of the communication (*die Mitteilung*)—a medium that immediately mediates an entity's mental being. Benjamin avers, "this *capacity* for

communication is language itself" (64).[3] By saying so, he equates communicability with language itself. As mentioned above, Samuel Weber has made an analysis of how Benjamin in this text uses two different words "*unmittelbar*" (immediate) and "*Mittelbarkeit*" (communicability) with the same German root "*Mitteil*" (to communicate) to express the idea that language is essentially an immediate communicability. Weber continues to speculate on the word "*Mitteilung*" and its relation to linguistic potentiality. He observes that this German word "*Mitteilung*" is generally and plainly translated into "communication" in English but is more appropriate translated as "partitioning with" or "being impart-able," especially when Benjamin seems purposely to use the pair *unmittelbar* (immed-iate) and *mitteilbare* (impart-able) to indicate that the main and unique feature of language as a medium is that it is capable of communicating an entity's mental being by parting itself from the original context (*Benjamin's -abilities* 117). In Weber's reading, there is an inherent impart-ability in language as a structural possibility distinctive from empirical communication. Under this light, language as a medium should not be understood as a means of communication but as "the immediate possibility of being imparted" (117). The immediacy (*die Unmittelbarkeit*) of language as a medium lies in its being able to be detached from itself.

For us to appreciate the nature of this structural possibility, however, we shall have a brief excursus into Weber's discussion of the transcendental dimension implied in Benjamin's use of the suffix -ability to explain key concepts. He reads Benjamin in the context of German Romanticism and hence relating "criticizability" to his subsequent concepts of "translatability" and "reproducibility." He analyses that these three different abilities share a "tendency to form substantives out of verbs" and the nominalized verbs all designate processes conventionally seen to be "ancillary, secondary, supplementary" (*Benjamin's -abilities* 59). Weber affirms,

> To therefore define these processes as quasi-transcendental, structuring possibilities is to shift the emphasis from the ostensibly self-contained work to a relational dynamic that is precisely not self-identical but perpetually in

[3] The German text reads as follows: "*Mitteil*bare *ist unmittelbar die Sprache selbst*," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, pt. I, p. 140.

> the process of alteration, transformation, becoming-other. (59)

Weber takes this very structure of possibility to illustrate the relation of life and history, which characterizes Benjamin's "prolonged life" or "afterlife" (*Fortleben*/*Nachleben*) "[n]ot simply as that which comes 'after' a life has gone, but a life that is 'after' itself—that is, constantly in pursuit of what it will never be" (*Benjamin's -abilities* 66). The life of the original is renewed and continued somewhere else via linguistic transformation. This is the nature of what Benjamin terms "translatability." As Weber acknowledges it, this translatability is a structural possibility of a text or linguistic sign to part with its own context and to be taken away and relocated in other context in translation.[4]

Now let us go back to Benjamin and see how this structural possibility unfolds in his likening language with medium throughout the 1916 Language Essay:

> The language of an entity is the medium in which its mental being is communicated. The uninterrupted flow of this communication runs through the whole of nature, from the lowest forms of existence to man and from man to God. ("On Language" 74)

Earlier in the essay Benjamin tells us that the magic of language comes from the fact that "that all language communicates itself *in* itself" ("On Language" 64). This has nothing to do with the domain of signifying or a content of language. This "itself" is a mental entity that communicating itself in language. For Benjamin, there is an auto-performative function inherent in language, which can be seen as an ability or capacity to communicate itself by parting itself from all empirical ends. Such auto-performative quality of language is significant for the reworking of the accepted paradigms of bourgeois conception of language, which "holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being" ("On Language" 65). He comes up with an alternative that "knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication (65). It means that language itself speaks.

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[4] Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's –abilities* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008) 66. For the account of Benjamin's concept of translatability, see especially chapters five and six.

III. Translation and Translatability

Benjamin further elaborates such capacity of communicating an entity's mental being by parting itself from the original context in "The Translator." This is also where he introduces the notion of "pure language" (*reine Sprache*) and uses it to reconceptualize the concept of "translatability" (*Übersetzbarkeit*). Benjamin formulates that the expressionless creative Word of God that says nothing is what is intended to say by all human languages. This is what constitutes the kinship of all human languages and what makes translation provisionary but necessary to reach their messianic end. With the paired notions of "what is meant" (*der Gemeinte*) and "the way of meaning it" (*die Art des Meinens*) Benjamin attempts to show that translation is a temporary and provisional solution to help languages to emerge eventually as "pure language," which "no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages" ("Task of the Translator" 261). So the pure language is "what is meant" by all human languages, and yet they say it differently with different "ways of meaning it." To put it simply, the constant transformation of languages in translation is one single mode of pure language in its actualization. Translatability is then conceptualized as what makes such an ongoing movement of linguistic transformation possible. This linguistic movement as a whole moves toward the noncommunicable creative Word of God.

Weber's observation of the affinity shared by Derrida's notion of "iterability" and Benjamin's concept of "translatability" is worth noting.[5] Weber suggests that both thinkers formulate a structural possibility of a text or linguistic sign to part with its own context and to be taken away and repeated in other context. What interests Derrida the most is the question how language or a piece of writing with all its irreplaceable and untranslatable cultural singularity remains iterable. Weber regards this thought of a structural possibility for futural actualization makes Derrida one of the contemporary thinkers who have taken up the legacy of Benjamin's "-abilities," for he carries on with Benjamin's thinking on the structural possibility in language. Matthias Fritsch also sees Derrida's notion of iterability stand for a promise of memory that Benjamin takes to be connecting the past and the future to come with all

[5] Please see Weber's *Benjamin's –abilities*, especially Chapter nine entitled "An Afterlife of –abilities: Derrida," 121-128.

its openness and deferral to the future.[6]

This structural deferral to the future would lead us to Stiegler, whose discussion of orthothetic-already-there and tertiary memory is of great relevance. Following Husserl who names memory recording the "consciousness of image", Stiegler terms this constitutive cultural memory as "tertiary memory" (or what he terms as epiphylogenetic memory), the already-there that man was born into (*Disorientation* 37-41).[7] Being a mediated trace of the past, tertiary memory is a third type of memory that is technical and or written in its essence. All forms of memory of recording—from linear writing to photography and computer processing—when it records, it sets down exactly. Its repeatability comes from the programmatic and publicity character of language. As a kind of orthothetic-already-there, tertiary memory follows the law of decontextualization; it has to be a form of "exact" memory recording so as to rid itself of the opacity of contexts. As Stiegler construes it, the co-constituting relation between the *who* and the *what* is nothing but the expression of memory. Although man's collective beliefs are established upon tertiary memory he inherits, it does not mean that tertiary memory is fixed and unchangeable. As mentioned above, orthothetic prosthesis is characterized by its exactitude for memory support and yet it is subject to change in the movement of *différance* and thus produces differences and allows for different interpretations because of the endless negotiating of the *who* in the *what*. The technical objects man uses to retrieve the past become the basis of his projection of the future.

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[6] Please refer to Matthias Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), especially section two on the promise of repetition as the common starting points of Benjamin and Derrida.

[7] Stiegler in his series of studies *Technics and Time* makes a comprehensive study of the pairing of the *who* and the *what* and the formation of time based on Heideggerian account of the worldly temporality of *Dasein* and Husserlian phenomenological account of temporality. In his approach to technics, we also see an intertwined relationship among man, technics and tradition. By following and extending Heidegger's discussion of the theme of the heritage of tradition, Stiegler finds the forgetful Epimetheus best illustrates the nature and meaning of tradition. As a figure that represents the accumulation of faults and forgettings and symbolizes legacy and transmission, the forgetful Epimetheus has a name that reveals the very meaning of "epiphylogenesis."

Seen from this angle, we may argue translation is no less than a technical program which is the outcome of the dynamic interaction between the exterior milieu and the interior milieu. That would certainly help to shatter the "humanistic" or anthropological approach toward translation. This is coherent with Benjamin's aversion to the idea that man is seen as the norm of all things. Hence in his discussion of translation, it is not so much what a translator does, but what the nature of translation is that really counts. Benjamin says that translation is a form, and "[i]f translation is a form, translatability must be an essential feature of certain works" ("Task of the Translator" 254). Based on his study of German Romanticism, he associates the notion of "form" with "irony." As Benjamin notes, translation and the original share an "ironic" relationship:

> [f]or any translation of a work originating in a specific stage of linguistic history represents, in regard to a specific aspect of its content, translation into all other languages. Thus, *ironically*, translation transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm, since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering. The original can only be raised there anew and at other points of time. It is no mere coincidence that the word "*ironic*" here brings the Romantics to mind. They, more than any others, were gifted with an insight into the life of literary works—an insight for which translation provides the highest testimony. ("Task of the Translator" 258; italic my emphasis)

But what is so "ironic" about such breakaway with the embedded context to be interpreted and translated anew elsewhere? Benjamin suggests that one should read the word "ironic" specifically in the Romantics' sense, particularly in the context of how they perceive the life of literary works. Hence Friedrich Schlegel's theory of irony would be an important reference:

> Formal irony is not […] an intentional demeanor of the author. It cannot be understood in the usually manner as an index of a subjective boundless, but must be appreciated as an objective moment in the work itself. It presents a paradoxical venture: through demolition to continue building on the

> formation, to demonstrate in the work itself its relationship to the idea. ("The Concept of Criticism" 165)

What is demonstrated by Schlegel in his notion of formal irony is the decomposition of the art form in criticism. If criticism "dissolves the form in order to transform the single work into the absolute work of art" (163), so does translation. In the process of translation, a work literally undergoes transformation. Criticism is compared to the chemical that develops pictures: "it is the preparation [*Darstellung*] of the prosaic kernel in every work" ("The Concept of Criticism" 178). In the same way, translation prepares the original in its infinite process of fulfillment.

Under such conception, a genuine reflection, or the form, or the thinking of the thinking always arises from the first thinking, i.e. the matter, without mediation. With that said, it is valid to suggest that Benjamin's reading of the Romantics theory of knowledge and of art prepares his doubled presentation of the nonsensuous mimetic element alongside a semiotic communicable element in language—the fullest exhibition of mimetic behavior and the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity. Or in Stiegler's terms, this is the "*epiphylogenesis* of man," which designates "the conservation, accumulation, and sedimentation of successive epigeneses, mutually articulated" in the material environment (*Fault of Epimetheus* 140). The epigenetic layer of life has a constitutive dimension and hence influences the way we perceive the world and the way we retrieve the heritage of the past. For Benjamin, this epigenetic sedimentation or memory is best exemplified in the mimetic faculty.

IV. Mimetic Bond between Man and Things in Language and *Technik*

Benjamin's language theory formulated in the 1930s and his thinking on technology further reveals his concern about history—a history interweaved by a mimetic bond between man and things. In addition to his persistent elaboration of language as a link mediating the communicable and the non-communicable, Benjamin now places emphasis on the change of modern man's perception of the surrounding world and the loss of once powerful sympathy between man and nature. In the twin

essays of “Doctrine of the Similar” and “On the Mimetic Faculty” both written in 1933, he comes up with the concept of the “nonsensuous similarity” that exists between things (such as that between a constellation of stars and a human) and the “mimetic faculty” that produces the similarity between them. Such mimetic faculty is an ability to produce and perceive the imperceptible similarity between man and things. Benjamin maintains that when modernity and technological enhancement have radically changed such mimetic faculty, language or writing serves as an archive that keeps all these nonsensuous, magic, mimetic correspondances between man and things. So there exists such mimetic aspect in language other than its signifying function; it is the exteriorized memory of the interaction between man and matter over the course of time.

At this point, the role of language becomes decisive, as “language is the highest application of the mimetic faculty” (“Doctrine of the Similar” 697). Language, from the outset, has been under the influence of the mimetic faculty. It prevails in the Adamite spirit of language. When modern man lost the gift for perceiving similarities and becoming similar, language serves as a repertoire of experience derived from the earlier perceptual capacity for recognizing the similarity between man and things. In the two essays under consideration, Benjamin again stresses the interrelation between the two distinctive and yet inseparable aspects in language: the communicable and the non-communicable. What is different in his thought on language in the 1930s is an emphasis on “nonsensuous similarity” as what is able to bridge the gap between these two spheres. He asserts, “it is nonsensuous similarity that establishes the ties not only between what is said and what is meant but also between what is written and what is meant, and equally between the spoken and the written” (“On Mimetic Faculty” 722). This suggests that this twin notion of “mimetic faculty” and “non-sensuous similarity” is also what makes language and technology converge in Benjamin’s theory. Language is the realm where the affinity between technology and humanity is manifest. It comes to be the medium that keeps this past experience:

> Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. (“Excavation and Memory” 576)

It should be noted that this experience of the past should not be "the casual connections established over the course of time, but the similarities that have been lived," for "[e]xperiences are lived similarities" ("Experience" 553). Benjamin places experience and observation in relation to each other and formulates these two to be identical. As he acknowledges in the fragment "Experience" (ca. 1932), "[o]bservation is based on self-immersion" (553). Such correspondences between subject and object echoes what he terms as "an absence of relation" ("The Concept of Criticism" 146).

If we try to put the two equations in this fragment together that experiences are lived similarities and that experience is identical to self-immersion observation, then we get a commonality and continuity between man and all the technical facticity external to him. These are by no means mute objects or spaces. As Stiegler's systematical use of the term "constitutive" in his works shows, technical objects or technicity usher in the actual temporal experience in man. For Benjamin, what is equally important is how this self-immersion observation may eventually lead to the recognition of the unlived possibility in this past experiences or lived similarities.

These are in fact the two sides of the same coin. They accounts for the structurally necessary interaction between man and matter, the communicative and non-communicable over the course of time. There is no other thing that exemplifies such mimetic bond as language. As Benjamin sees it, this mimetic bond explains why words meaning "bread" in different languages share certain similarities with the signified. The multiplicity of languages is life itself constantly renewed in the transformation driven by the co-determining relation between alien but connected aspects of language: mental being and linguistic being; what is meant and the way of meaning it; the mimetic and the semiotic or communicative element of language.

V. Technological Reproducibility

The tracing of the development of Benjamin's philosophy of language has led us to think that the mimetic bond between man and things is what brings together language, translation and *Technik* in Benjamin's writings. This nonsensuous similarity and mimetic bond between man and things can be understood as the nexus of

Benjamin's theory linking his early language theory with his later critique of the question of technology. It should also be noted that this mimetic bond between man and technology should be placed in relation to the notion of "time" itself. Indeed, the transformation of Benjamin's theory of language from the 1910s to the 1930s indicates a growing emphasis on the notion of time and history. Samuel Weber sees this as the dimension of praxis or actualization in Benjamin's use of the suffix -ability: "[t]his is how the ostensible transcendentalism of Benjamin's -abilities comes to acquire historical, political, and cultural significance" (*Benjamin's -abilities* 119). The structural possibilities inherent in translatability as well as in reproducibility imply the original or the artwork is not self-contained, but lives on in the process of perpetual transformation and becoming other in a later time: "the individual work is considered neither self-contained nor self-sufficient; it acquires significance only through what comes after it in order to become what alone it can never be" (*Benjamin's -abilities* 62). Under this light, criticism, translation, and technological reproduction are required as the subsequent intervention of an original or an artwork for it to "signify":

> A work can only "work," do its work, have effects, be *significant*, insofar as it goes outside of itself and is transformed, by and into something else, something other. This is why "to signify" is not simply the same as to "be important." To signify is to be transformed. (*Benjamin's -abilities* 63)

So the relation of translatability to the original arguably resembles that of reproducibility to the artwork, both marking a dimension of structural possibility of the future inherent within the work of art. Although the forced travel of the artwork is not without cost (for instance, the technological reproducibility has caused the loss of the aura), the process of dislodging is at the same time the bearer of messianic hope.

Kia Lindroos agrees with Weber saying that Benjamin's concept of reproducibility is not just reproduction, but includes a dimension of structural possibility of the future within the work of art. Such a future possibility is exactly Benjamin's cairologic approach to time: "[t]he reproducibility is the element, which turns the chronological understanding of the history of work of art into a cairologic one" (Lindroos 125). In other words, artworks should not be seen as eternal or infinite existence. Technological reproducibility defines a shift of emphasis from the

linguistic transformation to a powerful technical tendency that marks an indissoluble bond between man and things. Critics like Julian Roberts (1982) and Esther Leslie (2000) points out that Benjamin's use of the German word *Technik* suggests a sense of both technology and technique.[8] *Technik* involves at once the human relations of production and the means of production. What is of particular significance is the question how the human is interwoven with the non-human and how such a correspondence between man and things could help to interpret the past and anticipate the future.

Pondering on the radical change occurring to human perception, Benjamin asks a key question: "Are we dealing with a dying out of the mimetic faculty, or rather perhaps with a transformation that has taken place within it?" ("Doctrine of the Similar" 695). The once spontaneous correspondences between things are now to be found in language and writing as it is "the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity" (697). This very question inspires his thinking of how the new media of technological reproducibility could change human perception, experience, collective memory, and thus alter literary tradition or art production. This thinking is further elaborated in essays like "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (late December 1935 to February 1936) and "The Storyteller" (October 1936) in which Benjamin links the question of technology to the structure of human language, experience, tradition and collective memory. In particular, the "Artwork" essay outlines the translation of artwork, its being reproduced and relocated in other temporal-spatial context than its own. But it isn't really a bad thing after all, for the technique of reproduction frees objects from its embedded tradition. Being re-situated, the artwork generates new context and discloses new optical possibilities.

[8] For this point, please see Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982) 158, and Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2000) xii.

VI. The *Who* in the *What*: Orthographic Writings as Prosthesis for Memory

What follows is a further attempt to develop the irreducible bond between man and matter in Benjamin's view of language and technology in the context of Bernard Stiegler's study of the interrelationship between man and the ever-increasing role of technology. I find there are a number of common themes in Benjamin and Stiegler that are worth exploring. As noted, they both tend to neutralize the opposition between human subjects and technical objects. Benjamin's notions of "nonsensuous similarities" and the "mimetic faculty" emphatically state the correspondence between man and things, which to certain extent resonates with Stiegler's theorization of the co-dependent and co-constituting relation between the *who* (the human) and the *what* (the technical object). Stiegler links technological development with the invention of the human, using Derrida's concept of *différance* as the logic of supplement to explain that this co-constituting relation or the co-possibility between the *who* and the *what* is in an infinite movement of deferring and differentiation. This movement of their coming-to-be is what constitutes the history of supplement or collective memory.

Moreover, both thinkers address themselves to the impact of the ever increasing role of technology on the structure of human experience. Benjamin's account of "shock experience" (*Chokerlebnis*) and the decay of *aura* induced by the rise of technical reproducibility find an echo in what Stiegler calls as "contemporary disorientation"—an intensified decontextualizing process caused by the industrialization of memory. So the question of the technical possibility of sedimentation and transmission of the past is a prime preoccupation in both thinkers. In the background of Benjamin's discussion of technology stands an ultimate concern over man's capacity to exchange communal experiences, and how this capacity is stored and transformed in the medium of language and other technological media, as shown by his discussion of the demise of the art of storytelling. Stiegler in his series of studies *Technics and Time* also makes a comprehensive study of the dependence of man on technical prosthesis to overcome retentional finitude.

What is particularly pertinent to our discussion of language and technology is the question of how man is related to orthographic writing as prosthetic memory. As Stiegler understands it, the process of man's externalizing of memory into matter

involves the movement of *différance*. Writing, for instance, is the result of the development of extracerebral memory. To be able to pass down the exact form of transmitted memory, the development of orthographic writing rids itself of the opacity of context so that a piece of writing can be read and interpreted even when it is cut off from the original context. This law of decontextualization is characteristic of orthographic writing. This also echoes to Derrida's concept of iterability of the written sign and Benjamin's thinking on language or artwork that constantly propels itself to develop.

Stiegler maintains that orthographic writing has the following two features that seem to be in contradiction. On one hand, orthographic is of a great precision, so that it is repeatable and transmissible. With a kind of grammatization, orthographic writing is able to rid itself of the opacity of context so that a piece of writing can be repeated, reread and interpreted even when it is cut off from the original context. However, on the other hand, what is supposed to be a right, exact true memory unavoidably gives rise to an imprecision. This very paradox of technics is caused by the movements of *différance* that governs the co-development process of the *who* and the *what*. This is also what brings about new possibilities of repetition with difference. Such repetition with difference is the structural necessary possibility inherent in language and in technology.

The structure of decontextualization is always accompanied by the effects of *différance*. According to Stiegler, *différance* designates the course of the co-development of the *who* and the *what*: "Différance is neither the *who* nor the *what*, but their co-possibility, the movement of their mutual coming-to-be, of their coming into convention" (*The Fault of Epimetheus* 141). Stiegler regards this as the enigmatic indissolubility of the *who* and the *what*. What is worth noting is that *différance* as "a process of giving place" that could bring about new possibilities of the reproduction of difference (*Disorientation* 8). Orthographic writing, as the materialized exteriorization of memory or in Benjamin's terminology "the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity" has an exactitude that paradoxically opens up the incertitude. Although constrained by an ethnic memory or an already-there, the *who* can manage to utilize the indeterminacy within it by rereading and adapting it.

VII. Fidelity to Tertiary Memory: Globalization as Translation

Based on the above discussion of language potentiality, writing as technical prosthesis and its influence upon faith and memory, I would like to explore the nature of translation with regard to globalization. The darker side of globalization is usually characterized in terms of blind duplication. For instance, heavily aided by machine translation and translation memory, translation in our age of digital reproduction plays a crucial role in localization needs for software industry. It is sometimes represented as an analogue of genetic coding, copying, and blueprinting. As Apter understands it, Benjamin's definition of translation "as that which usurps the place of the original while ensuring its afterlife, may be used to associate textual cloning with the idea of a 'reproductively engineered' original (comparable, say, to the replication of RNA molecules in a test cube), or with a translation that grows itself anew from the cells of a morbid or long-lost original" (213). She argues that translation is, in Benjamin's account, nothing but a mechanism of textual cloning that has diminished the importance of the original and blurred the line between original and "cloned embryonic forms" (Apter 213). Apter's argument indicates a common concern in the globalized world today: is it possible that the style, idiom, ethnicity or that which represents the absolute parameters of temporal and spatial experience and thus the highest level of singularity would disappear altogether? Will linguistic and cultural singularity disappear because of mass technological reproduction? It gives rise to a rethinking of the conception of originality and it requires attention to how digital technology would increasingly challenges the definition of what translation is.

I would like to address that question with the implication of linguistic potentiality in Benjamin's theory as well as the reconstitutive possibilities emerging in the mimetic bond between man and things or the play of *différance* process in which the *who* and the *what* are bound together. Based on the above discussion of antitheses in Benjamin's theory of language, we know that language consists of two transductive aspects: one is the expressionless noninstrumental component, while the other belongs to the empirical, outward-directed communication. Artworks, too, contains a virtual structural possibility that propels it to repeat differently elsewhere. Now with the explosion of information, we tend to place emphasis on the second sphere of language and forget that language represents a kind of life that transforms itself according to

the material world it inhabits. It extends its life in its being repeated differently in different spatial-temporal contexts. And if what Stiegler says of orthographic writing is adopted, the exact recording of letters is always accompanied by incertitude. Language, as all other forms of technique, is subject to the effect of *différance* as the logic of supplement.

This suggests that style as that which represents the highest level of singularity is dedicated to translation, given to publicity and circulation, yet singularity always returns in the process. So what disappears is territoriality instead of style and singularity (*Disorientation* 84-85). Technical reproducibility may have an impact upon the general conception of the "original" but it can never make difference disappear. Difference takes place at the moment of repetition. Micheal Cronin's understanding of *globalization as translation* attests to the effect of *différance*:

> […] there is no single mode of globalization which is adopted willy-nilly by different nation-states but that each country or community translates elements of the global and informational economy into local circumstances. The result is the nationally and regionally differentiated experiences of globalization across the planet. (34)

Translation and globalization grow closer in that they both have the constitutively generalizing tendency of the *what* and the irrepressible particularities and possibilities of the *who*. The way Benjamin and Stiegler treat knowledge and information differently in their discussion of technology is also crucial in this aspect. As Stiegler sees it, knowledge is the long-term memory constituted by the coupling of man and matter, the *who* and the *what*. It is meant to be transmitted and repeated. Knowledge can never be exhausted through repetition, it differs itself in the repetition.

In the case of information, repetition exhausts information's value. Translation, as Benjamin had theorized, is never saying the same thing over again. Its essential quality is not communication or spread of information. What is repeated in translation is that which calls for the possibility of repetition, something exemplifying what Stiegler terms as "identification-in-différance": only what can be reproduced and

repeated could be identified.[9] I find Benjamin's and Stiegler's distinction between knowledge and non-knowledge important for our dealing with information expansion of our age. As Stiegler notes, today in our contemporary life resulting from prevailing globalized economy and the convergence of technology and science, many non-knowledges are being produced.[10] In consider the inevitable proliferation of non-knowledges is what makes people associate translation with the notion of the uncanny Double. Following Michael Cronin's categorization, we should further define this information-based translation as "translation as communication" as opposed to "translation as transmission." The former designates the process of "conveying information across space in the same spatio-temporal sphere," while "translation as transmission" pertains to translation practices "transporting information through time between different spatio-temporal spheres" (Cronin 20). In a global age, we should make sure that these two modes of translation praxis co-exit, with an emphasis on the primary function of literary translation to be the archive of diversified cultural pasts. This knowledge of cultural pasts is of great significance with regard to the living experience of differences and singularities.

VIII. Conclusion

In the past decades, translation studies has gone through the linguistic approach, the literary approach, the descriptive approach, polysystem theory, and has come to the stage of what Susan Bassnett terms as the "cultural turn" that has brought about widespread repercussions of the deconstructionist alternative to traditional approaches. It is true that more researches are seen to be dealing with the changing face of translation praxis and translation studies, as more new challenges and circumstances emerge in our globalized world. Now we may ask, what is going to be of increasing importance to the future of translation studies? A search for the answer to this question is certainly beyond the scope of this paper. Samuel Weber is right to remark, "one cannot hope to go 'beyond' deconstruction if one has not first *encounter* it"

[9] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.) 59.

[10] Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 3. Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011) 152.

("Mass Mediauras" 149). The widespread applications of Walter Benjamin's theory of translation in poststructuralist and postcolonial contexts have produced academic contributions truly respectable.

What I have aimed at is a focused reading on implications of linguistic potentiality and technological reproducibility in Benjamin's reconceptualization of translation, as I find these two aspects are not receiving deserved attention in translation studies. Furthermore, I have also aimed at a reinvestigation that may help to give an account of the possibilities that translation offers for our globalizing technosphere. To recapitulate, certain major points can be made in addition to the most well-known revision of the original/translation relation that deconstructionism has stressed in Benjamin's theory of translation. First, the antitheses in Benjamin's theory of language are not opposite poles, but sites of constitutive necessity and structural potentiality for language. Benjamin uses these antitheses to make the point that language is language, and being language, it consists in two distinctive and yet inseparable aspects. One is the expressionless noninstrumental component that is associated with capacity, potentiality, intention, and spiritual entity. The other aspect belongs to the empirical, outward-directed communication as speech, script, writing, and the like. Translation lies in the interval between these two spheres that form a relational dynamic.

One of Giorgio Agamben's philosophical projects precisely centers on human experience of language. His philosophy of *potentiality* is intimately linked to the philosophy of language, especially the expressionless noninstrumental aspect of language. The thinker's preoccupation with an openness at the root of human language and knowledge that is before and beyond all particular meaning finds its precedent in Benjamin, when he associates Platonic "thing itself" (*to pragma auto*) in the essay "The Thing Itself" with language.[11] This "thing itself" marks the point where things appear in language and that appearance in turn exposes the existence of language. The difference that Benjamin and Agamben intend to bring to the concept

[11] Please see "The Thing Itself" in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 27-38. In this essay, Agamben has a detailed discussion of the expression "the thing itself" appearing in Plato's Seventh Letter. Its relevance to our understanding of Benjamin's reconceptualization of language is worth further pursuit.

of language is the fact that language exists and it communicates itself. This very existence of language and its *immediate mediation* alone suggests its infiniteness and openness beyond signification function.

For Benjamin, linguistic potentiality is probably best shown by the "translatability" of all languages, by an irreducible structural possibility of moving language out of its own context to be closer to a greater language of non-instrumentality. The translatability of languages is their shared capacity to express the expressionless differently. With the passage of time, language changes with the materiality of life. This defies the conventional idea of translatability as the level of transport of a semantic message into another language. The long-debated issue of license and literalness hence loses its significance as both are rooted in the conventional view of language with an ultimate goal of meaning or message conveyance. However, translation is by nature different from translatability. It is a *Technik*. It involves both man and matters, technique and technology. Translation is something that on one hand has the constituting and programming power of the *what* and on the other hand also marks the singularities of spatial-temporal experience of the *who*. The incertitude incurred by the certitude of orthographic writing reminds us of the irreducible singularity in the translation event. Translation exceeds the limit of calculation and thus requires responsible decision. In an era of globalization where digital mnemonic prosthesis has become prevalent, a question as simple as w*ho* is translating *what* offers food for thought.

For Benjamin and Stiegler, language and technology are the two aspects of the same phenomenon: the interrelation between man and matters. Language and technology both have a constitutive aspect, and they certainly influence the way we perceive the world and the way we retrieve the heritage of the past. And yet, Benjamin tells us that there is a virtual aspect beyond their instrumentality. Every past experience should be seen as redefinable and transformable through the Now-time that recognizes it. Stiegler shows us that all forms of memory the orthothetic already-there as a remedy to retentional finitude is always already subjected to the *différance* movement between the *who* and the *what*. In a globalized world today, when translation is often associated with blind duplication with the sweeping technological advancement, we should not forget that Benjamin makes the following illuminating observation: "translation is a form" and that "[t]ranslatability is an

essential quality of certain works" ("Task of the Translator" 254). First, it means translation is a form of mediation, the laws governing the translation still lie within the original, the translatability of the original. In other words, it is an ability to be translated, transposed, and repeated differently elsewhere. Translation is there to trigger this process of taking the original to somewhere other than its original context. Secondly, not all works have this essential feature. Benjamin does not offer further explanation regarding this point, but based on his differentiation of knowledge from information, it is valid to argue that only knowledge of past experience has translatability to be repeated differently in other spatial-temporal contexts. Therefore, translation today, with the increasingly global relationships of culture, people and economic activity, should be able to allow new possibilities to actualize more past experiences from diversified cultures.

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