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When the Spoon Becomes a Knife

On Using Words and Things to Create Relationships

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> "What has happened to them that they have been given names? Something is indicated in this way about the use of these figures. Namely – that one recognizes them as this and that at one glance. One does not count their lines and corners to do so; they are types of forms for us, like knife and spoon, like letters and numbers."
> *L. Wittgenstein, Bemerkungen über die Grundlagen der Mathematik, Teil I, § 41*

The *Laffen* (dandies) that Faust so disparagingly names along with doctors, scribes and parsons in his opening monologue were understood in Goethe's day not only generally as "vain, young, superficial" men. According to Krünitz' Encyclopedia of Economics, published between 1773 and 1858, this was also the term used for the merchants from Nuremberg, who sold "iron Laffen" to the pot smiths, specifically "hollow forms, to which a shaft is not yet attached".[1] The stage of the production of spoons

that precedes stamping and polishing is still called “Laffe” in German today. The word goes back to the early high German feminine noun “Laffe” meaning “lobe”, “(large) lip”, “mouth”. The German verb *laffen* or *laffan* means: to slurp, to lick. These words are probably also the origins of the word “Löffel” (spoon).

Here it seems as though we are witnessing a linguistic production process, a differentiation in the naming of actions (*licking*), objects (*spoons*), social and economic functions (*merchant suppliers*) and characteristic traits (*vain*). A complex “process of metonymization”[2] is underway, which seems to derive all of these terms from one root, which partly maintains a connection among them, but also partly opens up remote fields of association and symbolization. The thematic adjacency of the expressions is thus not eliminated (they are not made congruent), but is instead retained as an overlap, as tension, as difference. The alternative of convergence/differentiation results in a third: the *relationship*. What is interesting in our case is how the double function of *lips*, in a sense the “guards” of the entrance and exit in relation to the processes of exchange between the outside world and the physical or intellectual, mental inside comes into effect here: the lip, the mouth expands semantically into the term for an instrument for the intake of food. On the other hand, “laffen” relates not only to techniques for the intake of food (lick, slurp), but also to the sometimes vain, superficial emission of semantic contents: even today, the word “labern” (“blabber”) is used in German to denote relatively worthless talk. The adjective “lapp” refers to this kind of talk in a “course” state, one could say, to a kind of talk that is missing the moment of structuring, of active formation. This kind of talk thus appears to be more of a regurgitation, disconnectedly spitting out what is undigested, rather than an attempt to convince someone with well formulated arguments.

An excellent, award-winning translator from Dutch into Italian made a seemingly glaring mistake in the course of a translation. He was to translate a text about a young woman who had been a victim of violence. In a highly intense scene, in which the woman is thinking about her experience, there is a description of her preparing something to eat. Her revolving thoughts are partly expressed in the text through the stirring movement that she carries out with a spoon. This word occurs several times in the relevant passage, and as the movement obviously becomes increasingly aggressive, at one point the translator accidentally translated the word "spoon" (in Dutch: *lepel*) with the word "knife" (in Dutch: *mes*). The corresponding words in Italian are closer phonetically, which could also be a reason for the mistake. They are *cucchiaio* and *coltello* (in Spanish they are even more similar: *cucharilla* and *cuchillo*). Nevertheless, the phonetic similarity does not suffice to explain the mistake. The aggressiveness of the movement that characterized the text obviously triggered for the translator the association that turned the spoon into the far more dangerous cutlery usually used for cutting. In this way he added something to the text, an unconscious interpretation, one could say. Just as a wish, an aggression, an association of things which have nothing or only very little to do with one another at the conscious level, irrupts in the psychoanalytically understood error, the "Freudian slip", occasionally there is also a productive moment in a "false" translation, a new, unexpected aspect that leads to a semantic metamorphosis. Psychoanalysis would not sufficiently fulfill its task if it did not deal with the "work" that led to an "incorrect" association. In the same way, an investigation of the mistake in relation to the translation has to pursue the "activity" on which it is based.

In the present case the metamorphosis (the transformation of the object) is an accentuation, an intensification of the subject matter. However, the movement of the transformation could also go in completely different directions. In the case of the activity of linguistic translations it is always rooted in decisions, which are usually based on rational, comprehensible criteria. Their task is to minimize the occurrence of errors as far as possible. They are developed in canonized methods of translation, which are especially articulated in some fields, but play a minor role in others. Whereas within legal, administrative or scientific discourses, for example, specialized rules for the translation of certain terms dominate for obvious reasons, in terms of the question of translating literature and especially in translating poetry it is difficult to find generally applicable criteria. Depending on the situation, in these kinds of "free translations" sometimes it is the terminology that is more central, sometimes the syntactical structure, or then again the rhythmic or phonetic arrangement. The difficulty of finding an "objective" correspondence is thus a great opportunity in translating poetry or experimental literature: the point is to find a criterion, an analogy for the way the target language is constructed, but one that is always a productive analogy. It is less a case of applying a given rule, but rather of finding rules for situations that are not (yet) defined. It therefore adds something to the original, since it expands its "regularity" and founds relationships that were not there before.

If we look more closely at the development of discourses that seem to be determined by a striving for objectivity, we notice that their history is just as permeated by fissures, arbitrary agreements and power relations as the history, for instance, of any "natural" language. Within the framework of the formal social sciences or those based on mathematical methods the aim is to reduce what is

unfocused in terms of meaning, as it occurs in natural language. Nevertheless, the process of the development of scientific methods is by no means a straight line and reflects historical, political and social constellations. In addition, it is not always possible to translate empirical data into formal structures. Mathematics, for instance, "hides" certain problems in describing physical processes in the so-called *initial and boundary conditions*.[3] These serve more to delimit a problem than to supply exact solutions. The genesis and praxis of a multitude of "languages" and "styles" are thus inseparably linked – just like the possibility of conducting theoretical discussions.

In conjunction with the European unification process, agreements made at the central level are translated into the respective national languages not only in the sense of a neutral harmonization of legal and administrative systems, but also with the not explicitly named objective of creating a scope for national politics. Hence multilinguality is used to form filters that make certain political contents accessible to manipulation (specifically in both directions, thus also from the national language to the European context). Translation in the narrower sense is not the only technique for controlling and "objectifying" political contents in this context. However, it is evident here how important it is to determine certain "terms" in representative political discourse and how important the question of a "national language" is for maintaining the relationships of representative power. This speaks for the necessity of translation processes (key word: *sustaining linguistic diversity*), but only to the extent that they do not destabilize the identity of the respective "national language". This framework that distributes identities and differences in a certain way and seeks to channel and control them through the contents expressed through these identities and differences, could be contrasted with the

“language of things”, which operates at levels that elude static distribution between identity and difference to a certain degree.

If we return to the aforementioned meanings of “Laffe”, “laff”, etc., then we see that in the integral semantic differentiation, there is a hierarchization in relation to the sites of production, of definition, of control and of the transfer of *meanings* and *values* that, although it is integral, does not necessarily have to be applied. With the “Laffen” we are initially concerned with social figures, who essentially appear as mediators. They operate on the “surface”, whether they appear as actual salespersons/purveyors of goods within the chain of production, or as representatives of “lifestyles”, as brokers of symbolic values like fashion, jargon, music, culture. They deal with half-finished products, which have to be further processed by the respective manufacturing industries or even the consumers (recipients), or else adapted to the respective contexts of use.

To a certain degree they seem to be compelled to overlook the distinctiveness of the material they transport. They have to sacrifice the possibility of appropriation to the distinctiveness, so as not to limit the object in terms of a range of circulation that is as *general as possible*. They are *mediators* in the strictest sense of the word, because they are responsible transmission. They *are* hollow forms, in which ideally anything can be laid without essentially changing it. In just the same way – and this is where the *thing* metonymy is hidden – they *use* hollow forms for the transport, which are then further processed. They consequently maintain (or it is expected of them) that they do not change these “surfaces”. Yet we would underestimate this superficialness in its power to change the material, if it were not pointed out that these brokers purposely present themselves as neutral mediators (and thus simultaneously appear as smugglers). They enable the illusion that the possibility

of translation is based on: the illusion of an undamaged transport, a whole
and complete equivalence. This illusion is projected onto the *mediators*, who appear as its guarantors. This is why a translation appears to be “correct” or “false”. It is considered on the basis of the results, not the process behind it. An error is thus a false result, and it is rarely taken into consideration which work and which effort preceded this error. These efforts, however, have long since surreptitiously entered into the “own” language, which certainly is changed by the linguistic import. Hence it depends on the degree of the censorship, whether these changes can also be used.

The superficialness attributed to the *Laffen* turns out to be ambiguous. On the one hand, *notice is taken* of it: this is expressed in the contempt for these mediators, who form a certain link in the chain and cannot penetrate into the essence of the things because of their superficialness. They only seem to *lap/blabber*; they are not expected to be able to access the “true values” of education, culture, the will to shape. They produce nothing but the relationship of other actors, managing these relationships although all their skills, their whole knowledge seems to only be intended to radiate vain brilliance and not to lead them out of the stage of the immature personality. Yet particularly this reduction of the figure of the mediator seems to lead to essentially stabilizing the chain of production, which is also in the interests of censorship (or linguistic customs clearance). Indeed it guarantees that the “depth” of the one side and the other is not endangered. It ensures the identity of both the languages entering into a relationship with one another. It seems to safeguard against any contamination, since the paradigm of equivalence (the equivalence of two expressions) is not doubted. What emerges is a procedure based on a division of labor,

in the framework of which the determination of equivalence is *turned over* to several specialists. To the same extent that these are regarded with disdain as vain dandies incapable of eduction, they are furnished with trust (credit), which they need in order to carry out their work of mediation.[4]

How much does differentiation then strive to make a transformation process appear as a mythical occurrence, as a material or formal transformation? And to what extent is metamorphosis used to support myths of identity? Faith in the possibility of a transformation presupposes that there is a secret concealed in the equivalence, a hardly comprehensible capacity of things and people to assume a different form *and* to add something to the world of forms at the same time. One could say that in this mythological sense the metamorphosis forms the schema[5] for real, banal processes of transformation, whether they apply to material production (the transformation of energy), the biological, physiological realm (growth, metabolism, decay), or the mental sphere (maturation processes, crises, breaks, formations of desire, personality changes). The schema allows us to carry out a condensing interpretation of concrete processes of change, whether these are of a physical, mental, technical, social or symbolic nature. The things are what we run up against again and again within the framework of transformation processes: when they do not obey, when they constrain our wishes, when it seems that desire cannot be fulfilled with them, but also when they force problems on us that later lead to effective solutions or even change the form of thinking itself.[6] The things can be destroyed, replaced, repressed, exchanged; the extent of their resistance can be distributed among several other objects, etc. However, they can also sweep thinking up and carry it away with them, organizing it in a completely new way.

By assuming all these functions, the things are, in a sense, accepted into the symbolic universe, they attain a "sign-like" character, so that within a certain system of rules they can be shifted, exchanged, etc. A value is then assigned to the respective stimulation that they trigger, which orders this partial aspect of a thing into a more or less rigid, more or less differentiated system of equivalences. The most primitive schema for assigning these values is that of the separation into *accept* and *reject*. The more this schema solidifies, also *by becoming* differentiated and increasingly fine, the more what is "thing-like" about the things vanishes, that which generates jolts in the symbolization process; what is then primarily at stake is the unequivocal value, to which a stimulation is attributed, but without querying this in terms of its possible abundance of meanings.

A metamorphosis is not only to be understood as a schema for culturally or socially *predetermined* transformation processes, but can also form a disruptive, surprising occurrence that calls the certainty of the terminology system into question. In the aforementioned example of the transformation of a *spoon* into a *knife*, we could therefore ask what this means for the concomitant questions of the *mediation*, the *exchange* or the *transition* from one form to another. The part of the spoon that has most interested us so far also undergoes an essential change in the image: the *Laffe* becomes a *Klinge* (blade). In German this synonym for "cutting edge" is also an example of a metonymic word formation. It goes back to the verb "klingen" ("sound") and is to be associated with the sound that was caused by the cut of a sword when it hit the helmet or armor of the opponent.[7] In fact, the register of associations does indicate a different direction here. The aggressiveness that caused the translation error, as maintained above, veritably inverts the space of meaning: *mediation* in a

conflict is transformed into an *escalation*, the penetration into the body is no longer associated with the necessary intake of food and a successful exchange between inside and outside (communication, ordering of the contents), but rather with danger, injury, destruction. And yet, just as the expression *Laffe* led us to question the boundary between inside and outside, to more closely question the alleged superficialness of the *vain fops*, so it also seems here that the verb "klingen" leads to other areas, enabling a doubt about the fixed meaning of the object *knife*. Here the knife in turn undergoes a metamorphosis and is transformed into the acoustic effect that it triggers, into a carrier of stimulations beyond pain and destruction. Certainly, its essence is not to *mediate*, but to separate, to fragment, etc. The effect of the transport of acoustic stimulations is not part of its "instrumental design", yet it belongs to its essence *as a thing*. It may make it possible to question the illusion that we have called a precondition for translation: the equivalence. Pursuing "klingen" means going "below" the plane of meaning, evaluating the stimulations proceeding from the things not according to a language that is structured once and for all, but recomposing them differently, in a new way, diving into the whispers and roars that lie before every meaning and every transport. It means following the splinters and fragments that are left over in the process of producing meaning. Pursuing the sound particles, the unordered stimulations, in fact we expose ourselves to the thing side, the material aspect of any object of consciousness. Along this track it becomes clear how so-called errors of judgment occur. They involve paths and procedures that run outside the given semantic systems, but which are repressed or censored, because they process "illicit" material.

These reflections yield several models for the process of translation:

(1) First of all, for the position of the *mediator* the question arises about his (or her) accumulated trust (credit). This credit can contribute to standardization, to a differentiation of symbolic capital in the most diverse products, which are less context-specific and can therefore be deployed at many different intersections. An example of this are formalized languages, which are used as the foundation for various techniques of domination (mathematics, statistics, computer programs, protocols, standardized accounting reports). This, however, requires an accumulation of negotiating power (as the result of conquest, but also as a result of complex forms of cooperation). The greater the negotiating power is, the more *probable* its destructive impact will be in the colonization and symbolic exploitation or suppression of specific contexts, since these contexts will be incorporated into a larger identity, a state context, a transnational production structure, etc. This constant, standardized expansion of *credit* to all forms of life could be called the semiotics of the "liberal". This semiotics judges all forms without distinction on the basis of the same model. As previously mentioned, however, this is not the only way in which formalized languages can be employed. For instance, when mathematics thematizes its own initial and boundary conditions, it accepts the thing-ness of things, the unpredictable, the uncontrollable. Ideally this results in completely different forms of dealing with trust and the problem of "uncertainty".

Another, essentially different kind of trust is most effectively used in the specific contexts in which it was developed (it proves to be inaccessible to formal descriptions from the start). This credit reduces the fundamental insecurity regarding the transfer to other contexts by tending to make it impossible. The resultant trust, however, strongly depends on the special needs, for which it must repeatedly seek new mediating solutions. On the one hand this

guarantees the absolute distinctiveness of any expression, yet this is specifically a distinctiveness of the expression and not so much of the subject matter. The resultant products can only be used in a certain context, which involves a process of the "never-ending recognition of difference". Translated to social contexts, what we are dealing with here is a semiotics of the "communitarian". A system of single communities develops, which strictly separate themselves from one another through mutual recognition. The resultant "identitary" trust guarantees no equalization between "overlapping" needs, primarily because this is a kind of trust that is managed in closed contexts. Hence this can also lead to forms of dependency and exploitation, which are *personal* in this case, but are nevertheless accepted.

(2) A productive use of trust arises, however, when constellations of meaning and value, as suggested previously, can be dissolved and radically changed. The accumulation of trust should therefore be contrasted again and again with doubt and the search for new meanings. For this reason, it is very important to actually consider trust as *credit*, as a form of *reciprocity*, which must be arranged with a view to the future and is not fixed from the start. Both the semiotics of the *liberal* and of the *communitarian* indicate a tendency to eradicate reciprocity and transform credit into forms of control (reduction or exclusion of the unpredictable). Always when translation takes place against this kind of static background, in other words before a scenario of different identities, the perspective of the *relationship* between the original and the target "language" tends to vanish. The work of translating, however, is specifically working on this reciprocal relationship that should change *both* poles.

(3) Because of the resistiveness of things, the *language of things* is a key to understanding *metamorphosis*. It lays out a track to the *use* that conjoins words and things. For this reason, it also foregrounds the possibility of shaping the future in the sense of reciprocity: it *generates* exchange objects, in other words sensual or symbolic objects that were not previously included in the circulation. These additional objects correspond less to a *linguistic added value* that can be appropriated by the identitary languages (communities), but rather to a creation of heterogeneous possibilities of connection. Even though at the end of *morphogenesis* there may always be names, terms, verbs; all together they are no guarantee that the *forms* will not elude us again and again in the use of things.

(for Andreas Diblik)

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[1] Cf. www.kruenitz1.uni-trier.de (accessed on 20 Dec. 2006).

[2] As a figure of speech *metonymy* is determined by a relationship of *contiguity*, in other words of objective "proximity" and not by similarity (like the metaphor). Hence the object can stand for the action carried out or the creator for what is created (in our case the merchant for the object he sells).

[3] Cf. S. Kauffman, *Investigations*, New York: Oxford University Press 2000, p. 96.

[4] It is not difficult to also recognize in the figure of the *Laffen* one of the most fateful anti-Semitic constructions in history. One of the most memorable descriptions of the associated projections is found in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The "credit" that makes the business and production relationships circulate is

consequently linked with the ambiguity of the prejudice against "the Jews", to whom avarice and calculating cold-heartedness (in other words, a lack of *depth*) are attributed. Shylock is broken not only by the legalistic tricks of his opponents, but also by the fact he is not believed capable of human relationships *per se*. From the perspective of the noble society of Venice, it is therefore legitimate to rob him of his daughter.

[5] On the concept of the schema, see I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft. Werke, ed. W. Weischedel, Vol 3*, Darmstadt: WBG 1983, B 176–187 (*Critique of Pure Reason*).

[6] Cf. the chapter "The Image of Thought" in G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, New York: Columbia University Press 1994, p. 129–167.

[7] See, for example, the term "Klinge" in Grimm's Dictionary.