

Unamuno and Ortega's Ideas on Language and Translation

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Resumen: En este trabajo me propongo abordar algunos pasajes en los ensayos de dos destacados pensadores españoles cuyas ideas han ejercido un gran influjo sobre otros escritores sobre todo en la primera mitad del siglo XX. No cabe atribuir, no obstante, sus reflexiones sobre la lengua y las lenguas a la originalidad de su pensamiento, sino a la asimilación de lecturas foráneas, en especial a la filología alemana decimonónica. A pesar de tal influencia, sus ideas representan una renovación en medio del erial de la cultura española de entonces en esa materia. Me parecen asimismo pertinentes sus reflexiones sobre el papel que desempeñó la traducción en las cultura occidental.

Abstract: My purpose in this paper is to discuss some outstanding passages in the writings of two well known Spanish philosophical thinkers whose thought was highly influential on many other writers at least in the first half of the 20th century. Their major reflections on language and languages, however, cannot be attributed solely to their personal ideology, but to their feeding from foreign sources, notably from German 19th century philologists. However, they represent a fresh renewal of ideas in the bleak panorama of the Spanish cultural environment at the beginning of the last century. A special emphasis is laid to their insights into the role played by translation in Western culture.

Palabras clave: Filosofía. Lenguas. Cultura. Nación. Traducción.

Key words: Philosophy. Languages. Culture. Nation. Translation.



Introduction

One of the major achievements in the 20th century linguistics is awareness of the relevance of asking 'what is language?' rather than the more trite and superficial question 'what is a language?'. It is normally assumed that providing an answer to the latter will automatically mean providing an answer to the former. But whereas the answer to the latter is grounded on transcultural criteria, the answer to the former requires abstract arguments that go well beyond mere communication systems. The ages-old field of philological study focused on accounts of the grammatical (phonology included) paradigms of particular

language or group of languages, whereas the new discipline of linguistics laid the stress on the design features of language structure. A not irrelevant one would be, for instance, drawing a distinction between minimal meaningful units or *morphemes* and the non-meaningful distinctive units or *phonemes*¹. The ensuing interrelated analysis of the two levels was a major issue in linguistic theory often discussed independently of particular languages during the first half of the last century. Furthermore, this feature of duality of structure must be described in terms of a special body of concepts that attempt to accommodate all possible kind of facts to the axioms of the theory. The result is that the units are theoretical constructs of supposedly universal validity. Thus, the theory would allow us to say that *went* consists of two morphemes as does *tapped* although it cannot be separated into two recognizable combined segments.

However, the interest of the idea of 'language' cannot be entertained without having first given some thoughtful considerations to what 'a language' is and does in the community that uses it. Saussure let this be clear in his still 19th century mind. *Parole* or real speech takes precedence over abstract matters or *langue*, the sole purpose of which is the communication of human beings².

Now it is apparent that throughout most of the 19th century scholars had engaged their attention in details of drawing comparisons of particular grammars of a wide range of languages, and concentrated on looking into their similarities and their differences. In that scholars' were culturally prejudice, since their attention drifted to European nations and centred round the so called 'civilized' cultures. But in spite of much effort invested on investigating what a language is, it would be hard to draw a distinctive line between 'popular' and 'technical' accounts of that issue. Ever since Graeco-Roman antiquity, a series of ideas had taken roots in our Western tradition. A not lesser one would be found in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, where words are essentially substitutes for things: "everything has a right name of its own, which comes by nature"³

But whether adopting a natural or arbitrary view on words and things, the Greek and Roman traditions have handed down to us the point that names are somehow related to referents in the world. And comparison of European languages would come but to foster the idea that there was a kind of natural way referents were expressed in the various languages. Only later in the 20th century

¹ L. Bloomfield, *Language*. New York Holt, 1933

² Roy Harris, *The Language Makers*. London: Duckworth, 1980. He cites in this connection the following relevant words in Saussure's *Cours de linguistique général*: "language is many-sided and heterogeneous: embracing various domains, at the same time physical, physiological and psychological, it belongs both to the individual and to society: it cannot be classified under the category of human facts, because one does not know how to establish its unity" (Paris, 2nd ed. p. 25, my translation)

³ Plato, *Cratylus* 383^a (trad. H. N. Fowler, Loeb Classical Library ed)

some linguists⁴ would develop interest in the universals of language, which actually were found to be surprisingly few. The grounds for a new way of seeing a language were laid by Locke⁵ already in late 17th century and then taken up by Saussure when he claimed that "the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image".⁶ At least there is now a more interesting mental displacement of the *locus* for the sign. Now the signs are associated directly with ideas, a psychological view that was apparently more promising. Though it did not go a long way either.

Some of these ideas passed on to German idealism which assumed the role of critic of the realist argument that names should act as substitute for referents in the external world, as they thought it was an inadequate explanation for the state of affairs. Social phenomena are not described in a direct, undisputed way, but only through representations of the things in the minds of speakers. At a later stage it is also assumed that the speakers of a given cultural sphere (say the Greek or the Germans) in fact share the same vision of things⁷.

What is implied here is a *logocentric* view of reality, according to which either words rule the world of referents, or else the other way round, as a key to solving the intelligibility of reality, since either way amounts to the same type of interdependence. This has been made widely manifest in relevant writings by many German idealist thinkers, who are inscribed in the Platonic view of language.

1. Language and race in Unamuno

One of the most frequently recurring ideas in Unamuno's philological writings is the metaphor that language is the *blood for the spirit*, a thought that reproduces the Platonic notion that language is food that nourishes the ideal reality of mental forms. In his "Rosario de sonetos líricos" we can read:

La sangre de mi espíritu es mi lengua
Y mi patria es allí donde resuena
Soberano su verbo....

(*Soneto XLVII*)

⁴ Notably essays in J. H. Greenberg (ed) *Universals of Language*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1963

⁵ John Locke, *Essays concerning Human Understanding*, London, 1690. Cf. Hans Aarsleff, "Locke's reputation in nineteenth-century England" in *From Locke to Saussure*, London: Athlone Press, 1982., p. 120-142.

⁶ In *Cours*, p. 98 (my translation)

⁷ cf Hans Arens, "Organización: ciencia filosófica románica, Humboldt" en *Lingüística*, Madrid: Gredos, 1975

With it this Spanish scholar summarizes his vision of language in words that are greatly indebted to some European idealist thinkers.

That debt was in fact acknowledged by the Spanish scholar, although many critics think that his thought was original enough not to be a servile imitator of his sources. In many of his articles and essays, in particular those about Spanish and Basque language, we can notice a genuine concern about the origins of human language⁸, a really hard-to-tackle topic that only very few contemporary linguists were prepared and willing to address competently. Moreover, he was familiar with several European modern languages besides his long education and expertise as a classical scholar⁹.

One major topical theory he approaches in the then controversial relation between race and language¹⁰. There is a long lasting tradition in Western thought concerning this issue, and here Unamuno directly draws from German and French sources. Herder is a source reference that, though far away in time, is, nevertheless, quite a noteworthy one. The bridge that draws close language and the character of a community of speakers –be they a nation or not- is a recurring one in German idealist philosophy of language. Note Herder's words:

“Yo, por lo tanto, consideraría a la lengua como el instrumento, el contenido y la forma del pensamiento humano y preguntaría (...) ¿En qué medida la lengua de los alemanes está en armonía con su manera de pensar? (...) ¿Cuánto puede explicarse en él (su idioma) a partir del mundo de circunstancias y acontecimientos de tal manera que el contenido peculiar del mismo haya sido amasado por su manera de pensar y vivir? (...) ¿de tal manera que las reglas de la morfología corran paralelamente a los rasgos fundamentales de su carácter y todo el gran secreto del idiotismo alemán sea espejo de la nación?”¹¹.

Along supposedly similar lines Unamuno states in one of his essays:

⁸ A notable influential source is Herder's *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*, 1772 and the ensuing Humboldt's *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, 1820. On the former's influence on the latter, cf. K. Koerner, “On the problem of influence in linguistic historiography” in H. Aarsleff et al. (eds) *Papers in the History of Linguistics*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1987

⁹ He was in fact Professor of Greek in the University of Salamanca from an early age in his scholarly career and by holding that position he was able to become the Chancellor of that University twice in a period of political unrest.

¹⁰ In an evolution-oriented 19th century work by André Lefèvre, *Les Race et les Langues*, Paris: Felix Alcan, 1893, the typical evolutionary view of language origins, that was certainly most influential for years, was as follows: “Nous n'allons si loin. Le cri est l'origine; l'onomatopée est le seconde étape, où le langage rencontre les matériaux que vont élaborer l'association des idées et la métaphore. Nous ne pouvons mieux faire, pour clore le débat, que de nous approprier l'opinion de Whitney (*Vie du langage*, 4e. edit., 1892, p. 242): “...La reproduction d' un cri est vraiment de la nature de l'onomatopée” p. 27

¹¹ Quoted in Spanish by H. Arens, *La Lingüística: sus textos y su evolución desde la antigüedad hasta nuestros días*. Madrid: Gredos, 1975 p. 168-169

“La lengua, instrumento de la acción espiritual, es la sangre del espíritu y son de nuestra raza espiritual humana los que piensan y, por lo tanto, sienten y obran en español. Y la acción sin lenguaje no es más que un gesto”.¹²

There is little doubt that Locke’s mentalistic ideas are a distant referent that had left a profound influence on Western thought during the eighteenth century, notably on leading thinkers like Condillac, Bosses, Horne Tooke, Bayly or Herder.

Unamuno mentions the word “spirit” when referring to language. The interpretation of this topical term in 19th century should be made in the framework of the German idealist tradition in philosophy. But an English forerunner, John Locke, is incumbent with a insight of it: “Spirit in its primary signification is breath; angel, messenger; and I doubt not but, if we could trace them to their sources, we should find in all languages the names, which stand for things that fall not under our senses, to have had their first rise from sensible ideas”¹³ A young Unamuno suggests this in a metaphorical language in a talk delivered in Bilbao in 1887 entitled “Espíritu de la raza vasca”:

“El hombre piensa con palabras...El lenguaje es la raza, pero ni la raza hace el lenguaje ni éste a aquella; son como el órgano y la función, el uno no crea al otro sino que ambos son efecto del medio ambiente obrando sobre la interna plasticidad. Nada diferencia más al espíritu de una raza que su idioma, y no es que no podais objetar algo a ésto”.¹⁴

In his writings on Basque language he singles out its primitive structure, which needless to say, is its most interesting feature as an old language, in spite of the obvious lack of modern vocabulary that, for Unamuno, makes it unfit for the demands of today’s speakers. Now the physical environment seems to be of great value for Unamuno in the shaping conditions of the “spirit” of race. Unamuno insists once again on the commonplace idea of milieu –as contemporary psychologist of language and some extreme functionalists would characteristically stress- in his published talks:

“Los idiomas antiguos eran más perfectos para la expresión de lo real, del sentimiento que brota, del instinto que salta, para la poesía épica, para lo concreto y sus matices. Los modernos lo son más para lo ideal y lógico....”¹⁵

This last thought, strange though it seems to us though still popular in non-linguistic circles, is deeply rooted in 19th century beliefs on language and their functions in primitive societies. Thus Max Müller, an influencing voice in 19th century linguistics, would state some years before Unamuno:

¹² M. De Unamuno, “La raza y la lengua”, in M. García Blanco (ed) *Obras Completas de Unamuno*, Barcelona: Vergara, 1958, Tomo VI p. 89

¹³ J. Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 1690, III, i, 5

¹⁴ in M. García Blanco, *Obras Completas de Unamuno*, Madrid: Aguado, 1958, tomo VI, p. 198

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 198-199

“El lenguaje mitológico -no ha que olvidarlo- carecía de voces simplemente auxiliares. Toda voz, fuese nombre o verbo, tenía su poder completo durante el período mítico. Las palabras eran pesadas y poco manejables. Decían más de lo que debían, y a eso se debe, en parte, a que el lenguaje mitológico nos parezca tan extraño...(…).no tenemos más que sustituir el verbo completo por un auxiliar para transformar el lenguaje mítico en lenguaje lógico”.¹⁶

Now the particular vision of a community, according to W. Von Humboldt, would be identified by a kind of “internal form”¹⁷ (in his own words, *innere Sprachform*) in a continuous, dynamic process of evolution which would subsequently be developed by German linguists and philosophers like Steinthal or Cassirer. However, this trend of thought can be traced back to early language thinkers like Herder and it can be further extended to modern linguists like Weisgerber. Humboldt’s words can only be interpreted in that direction:

“Language is surely the result of an internal necessity of man, and there is nothing casual or voluntary in it: a community (*Volk*) speaks as they think, thinking thus because they speak that way, and the fact that they speak and think that way is founded in their physical and spiritual circumstances and it has come to be identified with these”. [my translation]

J.G. Herder¹⁸ in his *Über die Ursprung der Sprache* suggested already in 1770 a close organic relation between language and thought that goes well beyond a mere instrumental view of language as a form of expression. The character of it as *Schatz* (treasure) points to the cumulative experience of successive generations of people through language. The essential issue in Humboldt’s *inner form* is the correlation traceable in the contents of thought, an undeniable borrowing from Kantian¹⁹ transcendental philosophy. For Humboldt²⁰ language is not just a vehicle

¹⁶ F. Max Müller, *Mitología Comparada*, Barcelona: Teorema, 1984, p. 60-61 On this German linguist who was exiled in Oxford where he taught, while he was devoted to the study of Sanscrit and the *Rig Veda*, see Joan Leopold, “Ethnic stereotypes in Linguistics: the case of Friedrich Max Müller (1847-51)” in H. Aarsleff et al. (eds), *Papers in the History of Linguistics*, Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, pp 502-511

¹⁷ W.von Humboldt, *Von dem gramatische Bau der Sprachen*, in *Gesammelten Schriften*, Band 6, 2te Schnitt, Berlin: B. Behr’s Verlag, 1907, p. 344.

¹⁸ J.G. Herder, *Fragmente über die neuere deutsche Literatur*, in *Herders Werken*, Berlin: Hempel, Part 19, pp. 340 ff.

¹⁹ Herder and Hamann had replied to Kant’s idea “pure reason” for leaving aside the active role of language. In Humboldt the determination of the nexus between thought and language signposts the distancing from Kant. It is in this sense that Humboldt overcomes the restrictions imposed by Kantian thought of transcendent subjectivity. Cf. Donatella di Cesare, *Wilhelm von Humboldt y el estudio filosófico de las lenguas*, Barcelona: Anthropos, 1999, Cap V, pp. 30-40

²⁰ In his mentioned *Werke* one part is especially relevant, namely *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues* (Band 6, 1te Schnitt). Unamuno translates in 1889 the work by Humboldt “Bocetos de un viaje através del País Vasco” in *Euskal-Erria: Revista Bascongada*. Tomo XX, San Sebastián.

for the maintenance of communication, "but an indispensable one which lies in human nature, necessary for the development of its spiritual energies and for the growth of *Weltanschauung*".²¹ And that concept is explained out by Humboldt in terms of a "closed circle" formed by every language, an idea that was going to be repeated everafter as the bearer of relativistic thought:

"With the very act whereby man utters speech, he gets into it, and every language bears with it the nation to which it belongs, a circle from where he can only get out if he enters the circle of another language"²².

Unamuno surely fed on those German sources with the purpose of explaining the diversity of languages, as when he claims that "nada diferencia más al espíritu de una raza que su idioma....(pero) la raza lingüística no es idéntica a la fisiológica. El idioma vasco señala las diferencias de la raza que le habla para con los demás, por sus diferencias con los demás idiomas".²³ This same thought of the native tongue as reflection of people's psychology had been put forward by Max Müller in words of a similar ring, when he attached some psychological traits to the Arian family:

"For all these languages, from Sanscrit to English, there is a common stamp –stamp of definite individuality- inexplicable if viewed as a product of nature, and intelligible only as the work of one creative genius...(.) and all that remains in this comprehensive view is that one system of grammar and that patrimony of common roots, which we call Arian, in opposition to Semitic".²⁴

Now, what was the meaning of the repeated term *ethnic* in Unamuno? No doubt he used it the wide sense that overcomes the narrow limits of a people living within the boundaries of a concrete geographical area. The obsolete term "ethnicity" with reference to language means on the hand *kinship* and on the other *nationalism*. Quite clearly, the first is a bond that can only refer to belonging to a tribe, loyalty to a group. In E. Haugen's²⁵ terms: "The topic of ethnicity and its revival is therefore of little interest unless it refers primarily to the ideological and emotional commitment to a particular group, resulting in active work on behalf of

²¹ *Humanist without Portfolio*, ed 1963 by Marianne Cowan, Wayne State U.P. apud by J.P. Warren, "Organic theory in the American Renaissance" in H. Aarsleff et al (eds), *Papers in Historical Linguistics*, Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, pp. 513-522

²² In W. Von Humboldt, *Werke*, p. 180 [my translation] According to this view then, language is no less than that the creative force whereby nationality is originated. The term *Volkgeist* embodies in Humboldt that idealistic notion clearly based in Kantian transcendental thought. Cf. among other works devoted to this topic, K. Vossler, *Geist und Kultur der Sprache*, Berlin, 1923 and G. Schmidt-Rohr, *Die Sprache als Bildnerin der Völker*, Jena, 1932

²³ in M. García Blanco, *Obras Completas de Unamuno*, Madrid: Aguado, 1958, tomo VI p.198

²⁴ F.Max Müller, *Oxford Essays*, London: Parker & Son, 1856, p. 54

²⁵ E. Haugen, "Language and ethnicity" in M. Ali Jazayeri & W. Winter (eds) *Languages and Culture*. Mouton de Gruyter. Berlin: 1988, pp. 235-244

that group and the maintenance of its identity, not only among its living members, but also its children and young people”.

In effect, *ethnicity* is a characteristically protean concept, as it is surely a reductionist abstraction based on weak empirical grounds and therefore hard to be substantiated. Most nations today are supposed to be formed out of different integral cultural, ideological and religious subgroups. And admittedly, the more complex societies become the more the term *ethnic* means less and less. As is the case of today's Basque language many modern linguistic communities have abandoned the early stages of their ancestor's language and learn an updated version of it, in part as an artificial school variety.

2. Languages and evolution

Besides philological concerns so common in the 19th century, as a young humanist Unamuno shared the 19th century preoccupation for ethnological and sociological research which was mostly published in English, French and German. He was deeply concerned with Spanish and its relations with other modern languages. Unamuno published numerous articles on the comparison and contrasts between languages, a topic in which he made extensive readings and collected first hand evidence, outstandingly in English, French, German and Basque. Most of those publications appear in a few periodicals in Spanish like *La Nación* from Buenos Aires and *El Imparcial* based in Madrid.

In his writings Unamuno makes frequent reference to the British sociobiologist H. Spencer²⁶ as a source of influence. The latter's idea of organic analogy as a link of a continuum between the biological realm and the social one was often used to describe all kinds of human products, and not a lesser one among them is natural language. The ground ideas in developmental biology are growth, differentiation, integration and adaptation, some of which are to be strictly borrowed by later evolutionists. A further publication by H. Spencer that exerted much influence on his contemporaries was *The Principles of Psychology*, a starting point for a experimental science hitherto steep in speculative rhetoric. Quite in the line of Spencer, Unamuno suggests in several places of his article that contemporary commonplace idea that the physical environment has a direct bearing on the psychology of the race:

²⁶ Unamuno translated in the 1890's no less than eight works by Spencer. Among them the seminal *El organismo social*, Madrid: La España Moderna, 1895. As is well known, Spencer wrote in *Developmental Hypothesis*, as early as 1852, about a theory forerunning the evolutionist ideas of Ch. Darwin. In fact the new terms *evolution* and *survival of the fittest*, two central ideas in evolutionary theory, was first coined and popularized by him. As he projected his theory of biological evolution onto a social plane, he attached a relevant role to the idea of *organic analogy*.

“Si algo influye en la raza es el medio ambiente. Somos un pueblo montaños y costero, las montañas...y el mar han formado nuestro espíritu...el alma entre las encañadas se recoge, concentra y espesa...Aquí el monte divide a los pueblos...La montaña nos ha hecho amantes de la primitiva libertad, el mar aventureros y expansivos, recios y flexibles”.

In a similar way Ortega y Gasset also supported these ideas, partaking the biological and the social adaptation to the milieu in a series of articles included in *El Espectador* and more notably in his book of essays first published in 1928 by Espasa-Calpe and later edited as *Notas*²⁷

Thus in the essay included in *Notas* and entitled “Tierras de Castilla” Ortega argues with clear Spencerian accent:

“De lejos se los confunde (a los pueblos) con la tierra ocre labrada por las aguas en las batientes de los cerros...(...). Rodrigálvarez, en tanto va hablando al ritmo lento del andar de las mulas. Se mueve. Porque este Rodrigálvarez vive, como todos los hombres nacidos en estas campiñas ásperas, en perpetua defensiva. Cada refrán les sirve como trinchera, y en el breve claro que dos de ellos dejan, disparan una asta maligna. La imprecisión del hablar y del pensar, característica de los campesinos, les facilita sobremana las emboscadas donde ocultan sus intenciones y poderosos instintos. Son como al guerrear, al conversar, guerrilleros”. (p. 38)

The organic view of man as integral part of nature in a Darwinian and Spencerian sense, where matter and spirit are essentially organic, can be perceived in the Ortega’s masterpiece, an aesthetic critical essay, entitled *Tres Cuadros del Vino* (Tiziano, Poussin y Velázquez) also included in his youth writings in *Notas* (pp.77-88):

“Lo que llamis materia puede alcanzar una vibración rítmica – y esto es lo que llamis espíritu -. El músculo llega por sí mismo, a lo sumo favorecido por el vino, a la danza, la garganta al canto, el corazón al amor, los labios a la sonrisa, el cerebro a la idea”.

On his part Unamuno often expresses his conviction about the biological mutual feedback and organic identity of thought, language and the speaking people. It accommodates early functional views on language that sprung from the above ideas, to some extent fostered by Darwin’s evolutionist ideas. In a short press article on Basque²⁸ he writes:

“El pueblo hace el idioma y el idioma el pueblo: son como el órgano y la función; así es que ni el pez respira en el aire ni el cuadrúpedo en el agua. Lo mismo sucede con los idiomas; por esto afirmé y me ratifico, que todo idioma es

²⁷ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Notas*, ed. de Julián Marias. Salamanca: Biblioteca Anaya, 1970

²⁸ M. de Unamuno, “Más sobre el vascuence” en op. cit. p. 176

el mejor para el pueblo que lo habla. Como hay pueblos más cultos que otros, hay idiomas más perfectos y acabados”.

This comparative idea is deeply rooted in organicist ideas of the time, the fruit of Unamuno's readings on language topics. According to them languages possess the same human qualities that c in the native speakers. Needless to say, this vision of language has been argued against at the time²⁹, since it apparently had weak foundations. However, the organicist idea caught on in many philological circles in most European nations. And Unamuno shows a considerable degree of impressionistic jargon when describing Castilian Spanish in one of his typical articles at the turn of the century:

“Carece (el castellano) de las elegancias del francés, de las flexibilidades del italiano y de los sugestivos cuchicheos del inglés. No caben en el castellano ni los refinamientos de la lírica sensual francesa, ni los giros sutilísimos de los profundos musings de la lírica inglesa. Todo lo que el castellano toca se cristaliza al punto; todo lo que él dice se hace dogma. Como en los vastos páramos castellanos o como en los cuadros de Ribera, no hay en él medias tintas; todo es claroscuro...”³⁰

Now language is seen here as a metaphor for the collective spirit of a community of speakers³¹. One notable supporter of Darwin's evolutionist ideas taken to their racist extreme was one of Unamuno's favourite language thinkers, A. Schleicher³². Thus Unamuno would stick to the relativist dogma when he suggests that “la *Kultur* germánica, denominación de que tan pedantescametne vienen abusando hace tiempo, se cifra en su lengua...(…). Y es que no sirve erizar a un idioma con cañones, obuses, ametralladoras, bayonetas y cruceros, si el idioma mismo, por sí, tiene peores condiciones que otro para la lucha por la difusión y la predominancia...Las lenguas tienen ellas en sí mismas las condiciones de su resistencia, de su difusividad o de su agotamiento.”³³

²⁹ H. Aarsleff, “Bréal vs. Schleicher: Reorientation in Linguistics during the latter half of the nineteenth century” in H. Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, London: Athlone Press, 1982

³⁰ M. De Unamuno, “Sobre la dureza del idioma castellano” en op. cit. p. 470

³¹ Note Unamuno's comment: “Todos mis lectores saben la importancia que concedo en la vida humana al lenguaje, sangre del espíritu –lo repetiré una vez más– y verdadero fundamento de la personalidad colectiva o nacional” (“El inglés y el alemán” en op. cit. p.764)

³² A. Schleicher, *Die Darwinsche Theorie und die Sprachwissenschaft*. Weimar: Böhlau, 1863 followed by a more relevant work where he showed his ideas on organicism, *Über die Bedeutung der Sprache für die Naturgeschichte des Menschen*. Weimar: Böhlau, 1865.

³³ M. de Unamuno, “El inglés y el alemán” en op.cit. p. 767 Here Unamuno compares German and English in a darwinian sense of survival of the fittest. He claims that English, showing a monosyllabic structure and almost no inflexions, besides simple concatenations of sentences, is best fitted for everyday conversation, while German, showing a logical and abstract nature, has its advantages in philosophical investigation. Many modern thinkers like Goethe, Heine, Herder etc. seem to confirm this argument, to Unamuno's mind.

His ultimate criteria are then those of survival of the fittest or the best adaptation to the surrounding environment and not for reasons exclusively political or economical, as today's prevailing opinion holds, but for reasons internal to the language structure itself. He thus thought Basque unfit for modern life and in a fading irreversible condition. For him its complex, ineffective inflections bar all possibility of practical use. As Unamuno put it: "...el eusquera o vascuence, que se muere porque tiene que morirse, por ser instrumento de cultura inadecuado e imperfectísimo, enormemente inferior al francés o al español."³⁴ But as far as translation is concerned, he suggests that English shows a greater resistance to be translated and when this happens to be approached then one should expect frequent losses. In contrast, he argues that German writers gain in a translation. For him many German poetic texts translated into Romance languages sound even more beautiful than in the original. English lyrical poetry in turn is praised as the best modern poetry ever since the 18th century, and no translation can even imitate the subtleties of such language.

One last point in Unamuno to be underlined concerning translation is his transitory bias against the relevance of French culture for Spain while he is inclined to favour English influence. Thus, in a rather controversial essay, "Más sobre el idioma nacional" he makes some arguable statements on the role of Spanish for South American nations. Also he insists not without certain scorn that French influence has been scarce, and "la influencia francesa no ha pasado aquí nunca de la epidermis y apenas ha tenido acción en lo íntimo del carácter nacional"³⁵. And he goes on to say that Dickens, not Zola, is a major influence on Galdós and the realist novel in Spain. He even claims that Dickens was already popular in Spain before Zola was even translated. His views on French has a peevish ring to it, a sort of latent francophobia:

"No, lo francés no ha sido aquí nunca popular, ni puede serlo. Y no puede serlo, por la radical y profunda divergencia, y hasta contradicción, que hay entre el genio francés y el español...(...) Y si algún autor francés ha llegado a echar raíces en el gusto de los españoles, como le pasa a Victor Hugo, es por razones especialísimas e independientes del genio francés"³⁶.

3. Ortega's utopic views on translation

The very act of translation is but an illusory endeavour, Ortega argues. He puts forward the hypothesis that human aims are never reached and human

³⁴ See M. de Unamuno, "El inglés y el alemán" en op. cit. p. 768. This statement is recurrent in Unamuno who managed to become unwelcome in his own local Bilbao.

³⁵ M. de Unamuno, "Más sobre el idioma nacional" op. cit. p. 861

³⁶ M. de Unamuno, "Más sobre el idioma nacional" op. cit. p. 862

purposes never totally fulfilled. Extrapolating this metaphorically to the issue of language it can be claimed that between two given natural languages there is a never ending bridge where the other end can never be met. Though a modest and intellectually humble occupation, he suggests that translating is, however, extraordinary ('exorbitante' is the Spanish word used)³⁷. Nobody would deny that a translator can never be compared in high esteem and consideration to the original writer, at least since the 17th century³⁸. The romantic cult of originality has added but fuel to the mythological torch of authorship to the detriment of a subservient, ancillary job such as translating.

In order to hammer his point home, Ortega brings to the fore one simple example that bears evidence of what Humboldt's meant by 'internal form', the specific irrepeatable meanings of a particular language. With the unproblematic German word *Wald*, translatable in principle to most languages, Ortega tries to underline the utopic task of translation: "Es tan grande (la diferencia que entre ambas realidades existe), que no sólo ellas son de sobra incongruentes, sino que lo son casi todas sus resonancias intelectuales y emotivas."³⁹ Surely this is the moot point in translation, the area of meaning which, in spite of conceptual overlapping in a dictionary, has marginal areas that are too subtle to be shared by speakers of both languages and therefore are not covered in bilingual lexicons. Only somebody who is a perfect bilingual would know about those subtle connotative values of words, but then she would not need translations at all. Translations are intended for those whose job is to domesticate foreign concepts and meanings. Ortega's concept *miseria* refers precisely to this type of shortcoming, and in explaining this he was getting near the very heart of a language. The essence of language is revealed in translation where equivalence vanishes and one can only modestly strive for an acceptable resemblance. Ortega argues that it is impossible to get rid of the gap between language and "por tanto, que sólo cabe lograrlo en medida aproximada. Pero esta aproximación puede ser mayor o menor..., hasta el infinito, y ello abre ante nuestro esfuerzo una actuación sin límites en que siempre cabe mejora, superación, perfeccionamiento, en suma: "progreso". En quehaceres de esta índole consiste toda la existencia humana."⁴⁰

³⁷ Some ill interpreters of Ortega's words and thought, have haughtily criticised them by underlining the first part -humble occupation- as a faulty, scornful judgement, but they fail to quote the second adjective to redress the balance. It can be noted that Ortega's discourse in this essay is founded on argumentative counterpoint. To stress the "miserias" means to boldly scorn the "esplendores".

³⁸ Cf. L. Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*, London: Routledge, 1997, esp. worth reading is his Chapter on originality and authorship with clear historical examples.

³⁹ J. Ortega y Gasset, "Miseria y esplendor de la traducción" en *Obras Completas*, Tomo V, Madrid 1958 p. 436

⁴⁰ J. Ortega y Gasset, op. cit. p. 438

This last point Ortega makes is, I think, one of the most insightful thoughts on the activity of translation whose nature is quintessentially unstable, shifting and interpretable. The core of this essay is in fact a perfect piece of dialectics, when he claims that, although apparently contradictory in terms, translation must be pursued even if it is impossible to achieve it: "al hablar o escribir renunciamos a decir muchas cosas porque la lengua no nos lo permite". The utopia does not forbid the human endeavour aimed at achieving the best of versions when translating. The very nature of languages seems to bar all effort to reach the goal. However, as all translators know well, one has to do one's best to get near the effects caused by a text in the native readers, even if we know that this is an ideal reduction too. Ortega is then right when he suggests, "El buen utopista se compromete consigo mismo a ser primero un inexorable realista". Those who translate literature know this only too well, especially when they set in contrast her own version with that done by other translators of the same work.

Only when we understand the true sense of Ortega's words in this well known essay are we able to find him right when he argues that translations of works from previous ages should be done with no consideration for beauty, but for the exotic and distant character of the work, seeking to put across the very strange, archaic character of the work. This issue for which he is indebted to Schleiermacher's seminal essay on translation, has also been the easy target of today's superficial criticism, so spread among some light educational theorists, much to their disrepute. In Schleiermacher's opinion⁴¹, a translator may choose to step out of her own native language so as to get close to the target language. In Ortega's words advocating this last method proposed by the German 19th century thinker, "lo decisivo es que, al traducir, procuremos salir de nuestra lengua a las ajenas y no al revés, que es lo que suele hacerse."⁴²

But of course, let us finish this with a dissenting word which would surely provide Ortega a good excuse for further comments: one is doubtful whether the majority of the reading public would not truly be grateful for a translation done in the style of their own language. Quite on the contrary, the readers would surely be critical, and in fact they are often so, with works that sound unlike native texts. Foreign rings are often unwelcome translators are asked to domesticate foreign accents. A method that today's pedagogic theorists would recommend is quite the opposite to Ortega's idea of good translation. Literary translators would accommodate to her reader's taste and attempt to follow the so called *dynamic equivalence* proposed by Nida and Taber⁴³.

⁴¹ A good study of Schleiermacher's thought can be found in one of the best works on translation in Spanish, i.e. V. García Yebra's *Teoría y Práctica de la Traducción*, 2 vols., Madrid: Gredos, 1982

⁴² J. Ortega y Gasset, op. cit. p. 452

⁴³ E. A. Nida & Ch. R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Leiden: Brill, 1969