

Intransitivity of translation, Le Débat, and the primacy of the signifier, by Rent* S*lecl**

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Abstract. This paper is a pastiche of the Lacanian philosopher Renata Salecl, my fourth attempt, combined with a note. In it I present a response I anticipate from analytic philosophy to the thesis that the signifier has priority over the signified: that this thesis is either trivially true or obviously false.

People often ask me, why do you write in English? Why don't you write in your native language and get a translator? Some people even mock me for wanting to be an English lady, but of course that is not why. The problem is that it would probably involve more than one translator. The best translator I can get would translate my writing into another language, such as Urdu or Polish. And then that translation would be translated into English. And as everyone knows, translation is not transitive: there can be a good translation of something said in language A into language B, and then a good translation from language B into language C, but what is said in language C is not a good translation of what was originally said in language A.

Even French translation can suffer from this problem. Like most Europeans I am concerned about the future of France – will it remain in the European Union or join Britain in its journey into the unknown? I was watching Emmanuel Macron debate against Marine Le Pen and I am sure he said, “France: patriarch of the Enlightenment.” Then it probably got translated into a Canadian dialect: “France: handmaiden of the Enlightenment.” And finally subtitles for English viewers: “France, cradle of the Enlightenment.”¹

¹ [By the way, there is a saying, “There is no ‘I’ in team,” and I am aware of a related educational joke, I believe by Aaron Fullerton, which goes like this: “We can teach kids there is no ‘I’ in team, but it’s way more important to teach them that there’s no ‘a’ in definitely.” Probably all the cradle “talk” let me to conceive a reply: definatally!]

Watching the French debate, it occurred to me that French voters are facing a puzzle, even that France is kept in by a puzzle:

(1) We want to leave the European Union.

(2) We don't want to ban the hijab.

(3) In order to leave the European Union, we have to vote for Marine Le Pen, whose policy is to ban the hijab.

A solution to this puzzle is to accept, with Lacan, that the signifier has primacy over the signified. I find that this is one of the most difficult theses for English philosophers to understand, but a Le Pen victory would help them understand it. If the French public vote for Marine Le Pen, they are sending out a message but what is that message? Is it a message that they want to ban the hijab? Marine Le Pen has done her best to create an association between voting for her and being against the hijab, but in this situation we would merely be faced with the words "Le Pen," on the front page of every newspaper and in reports, all over the world, and these words would eclipse the policies of her party and even Marine Le Pen herself – the signifier "Le Pen" would have primacy over what it signifies. People could then interpret it as meaning something else.

This may seem an isolated example and the primacy of the signifier over the signified may seem absurd, but the consequences of denying it are even more absurd; yet they are embraced by American analytic philosopher Donald Davidson. Just imagine that you are a sailor and you find yourself shipwrecked on an island. The natives there seem to be speaking, but no matter how hard you try to understand them, you cannot figure out what they are saying. You entertain the thought that they speak a language that cannot be translated into your language, but Davidson argues that the impossibility of translating something into your own language is

evidence that the sounds being made are not speech at all (1984: 185-186). Is it not better to just accept that these people are having conversations, that you are faced with a sequence of signifiers but without knowing what is signified? If the signified has primacy, then you must translate before you can say that this is language.²

Note. Moving out of pastiche mode, I am not sure how to understand the thesis that the signifier has primacy over the signified, but one way is that it is a rejection of the criterion of languagehood advocated by Davidson. There can be the following situation:

- (a) Others are producing a sequence of sounds.
- (b) These sounds are only signifiers if they signify something.
- (c) We do not know what they signify, and will probably never know.
- (d) We know that these others are using a signifying system – that this is a language.

From the point of view of the analytic tradition of philosophy, the thesis risks being caught between this interpretation, which makes it seem unexcitingly true, and a highly dramatic interpretation, but one which leaves the thesis looking obviously false – an interpretation according to which some peculiar situation is in fact the norm.

Reference

Davidson, D. 1984. On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

² [Perhaps Davidson's requirement is more subtly that you must have good reason to think the language translatable, despite your failures.]