

# Saying the unsayable, in Vietnamese\*

Tue Trinh

## Abstract

This note discusses translation in and of the Tractatus. Wittgenstein took translation to be word-for-word. This view conflicts with reality. I propose to resolve the conflict by separating logical forms, which represent thoughts, from their externalization, which makes these thoughts perceptible to the senses. I also relate some problems I encountered when translating the Tractatus from German to Vietnamese.

## 1 Translation in the Tractatus

The English poet, literary critic, and translator John Dryden distinguished between three modes of translation (Frost 1955). The first is ‘metaphrase’, which is word-for-word translation: each word in the original text is replaced with its counterpart in the target language. The second is ‘paraphrase’, which is sense-for-sense translation: the translator grasps the meaning of the sentence in the original language and finds a way to express that meaning with a sentence in the target language. The third is ‘imitation’, which is loose translation: the translator finds a creative way to convey the content of the original text with a new text. Dryden argued for metaphrase, which he thought was the good ‘middle way’. Wittgenstein, in the Tractatus (Wittgenstein 1921), seemed to think that metaphrase is the way to go. Here is what he said.<sup>1</sup>

4.025 Die Übersetzung einer Sprache in eine andere geht nicht so vor sich, daß man jeden Satz der einen in einen Satz der anderen übersetzt, sondern nur die Satzbestandteile werden übersetzt. (Und das Wörterbuch übersetzt nicht nur Substantiva, sondern auch Zeit-, Eigenschafts- und Bindewörter etc., und es behandelt sie alle gleich.)<sup>2</sup>

This description makes translation out to be a very dull and trivial exercise: substitute each word in the original language with its counterpart in the target language. Wittgen-

---

\* This work is supported by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARIS) project no. J6-4615.

<sup>1</sup> I will use the English translation by Michael Beaney (Wittgenstein 2023), and will present the English version of the propositions quoted from the Tractatus as footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> The translation of one language into another does not proceed by translating every proposition of one into a proposition of another, but only the constituents of the proposition are. (And the dictionary translates not only substantives but also verbs, adjectives, and conjunctions, etc.; and it treats them all alike.)

stein mentions the ‘dictionary’. It seems that what he had in mind is a list of pairs  $\langle x, y \rangle$  where  $x$  is a word in the one language and  $y$  is a word with the exact same meaning in the other language. Translation could then be automated by an engineer with rudimentary programming skill. We might still need lexicographers to compile the dictionary which inputs the program, but this task should be simple, given the perfect matching between the vocabulary items of different languages. The translator would go the way of the dodo, and the scribe.

Of course, we know this is not reality. Translators have not gone the way of the dodo, and translation is hard work. And while AI programs do a good job and are getting better every day, the underlying algorithm is certainly not what Wittgenstein takes translation to be: it is not replacing one word with another. Furthermore, and notably, the ‘good job’ these programs do is certainly not good enough when it comes to texts such as the Tractatus. The Vietnamese version of ‘Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist’, produced by Google Translate at the time of writing (March 7, 2025), is ‘thế giới là tất cả mọi thứ đó là trường hợp’. I am a native speaker of Vietnamese, and the reader can take it from me (and to the bank) that the sequence is barely grammatical. On top of that, to the extent it can be interpreted, it says something completely different from the intended meaning of the German original.

Why, then, did Wittgenstein say what he said? One possible answer is that he had no idea about translation. This I find hard to believe. Wittgenstein spoke German and English, and it is known that he translated some of his texts from German to English himself. He must have seen, immediately, that he could not just replace one word with another. Another possibility is that 4.025 is a joke which is part of a bigger joke that is the whole book. While I am not ruling out this ‘resolute reading’ of Wittgenstein’s text, mostly because I don’t think I know enough about it, I do want to explore a third possibility.<sup>3</sup> I propose we read 4.025 as describing not what translation is but what it is supposed to be if language works the way it is supposed to work. But how is language supposed to work?

The Tractatus promotes a specific view on language: the so-called ‘Picture Theory of Language’ (PTL).<sup>4</sup> One way to articulate a theory is to say how things look if it is true. I submit that 4.025 articulates PTL in this sense: it tells us how translation looks if PTL is true. The basic idea of PTL is that language can represent reality in essentially the same way musical notation can represent sonatas and symphonies. There is a one-one correspondence between the basic building blocks of language, i.e. the ‘words’, and the basic building blocks of reality, i.e. the ‘objects’.<sup>5</sup> The ‘form’ of a word determines

---

<sup>3</sup> For the ‘resolute reading’ see e.g. Conant (1989), Diamond (1991).

<sup>4</sup> See Anscombe (1959), Stenius (1960), Keyt (1964), Hope (1965), Kenny (1973), Hintikka (1994, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> I will present PTL using a set of terms which largely but not completely overlaps with Wittgenstein’s nomenclature in the Tractatus. For example, he used both ‘word’ and ‘name’ to refer to what I call ‘word’ here, and my use of ‘form’ below corresponds to his ‘logical form’. Similarly, he used ‘world’ and ‘reality’ to mean both what I mean with ‘logical space’ and what I mean with ‘the actual world’. My goal here is to present the idea of a theory with maximal conciseness and precision. It is not textual analysis.

how it can combine with other words, just as the ‘form’ of an object determines how it can combine with other objects. Importantly, a word and the object it represents share the same form, which means that words and objects are embedded in the same space of combinatorial possibilities. To each combination of words there exists a structurally identical combination of corresponding objects. Suppose, for example, that the words  $w_1, w_2, w_3$  represent the objects  $o_1, o_2, o_3$ , respectively, and furthermore, that the forms of these words allow for the combination (1a) but do not allow for the combination (1b).

(1) a.

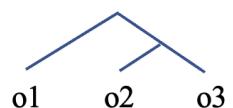


b.

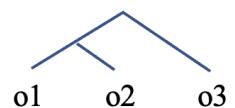


Then it will be the case that the combination of objects in (2a) is possible but not that in (2b).

(2) a.



b.



A legitimate combination of words, i.e. one in which the words ‘fit together’ by virtue of their forms, is a ‘sentence’. A combination of words which do not fit together is ‘gibberish’. A combination of objects is a ‘situation’. There is, of course, no extra-linguistic counterpart of ‘gibberish’, as there can be no combination of objects which do not fit together.<sup>6</sup> A sentence depicts a situation by the words being structurally related to each other in the sentence the same way the objects represented by these words are structurally related to each other in the situation. Thus, sentence (1a) depicts situation (2a). The words, each of which comes with its form, determine the set of legitimate word combinations, i.e. the set of sentences. Call this set the ‘language’.<sup>7</sup> The objects, each of which comes with its form, determine the set of all situations. Call this set ‘logical space’. Since words and objects share the same form, language and logical space are isomorphic in the same way two combinatorial systems, i.e. two algebras, are. A ‘maximal situation’, i.e. one in which every object is present, is a ‘possible world’, or more simply, a ‘world’. There is one distinguished world in logical space which is not merely possible but also ‘actual’. If a sentence depicts a situation

<sup>6</sup> The reader might raise an issue with (2b): isn’t that an instance of extra-linguistic ‘gibberish’? The answer is no. I am using words to talk about the correspondence between words and objects, so (2b) is really a combination of words (of the meta-language). If I were to use real objects, say chairs and tables, then a combination which is at odds with the forms of the objects, e.g. the table being inside the chair, would not be feasible. We can talk about it as being impossible, but we cannot construct it, then point at it and say ‘this is impossible’, as I have done with (2b). The fact that there is gibberish, i.e. that we can *say* what cannot *be*, is a puzzling fact about language, as noted by Aristotle (see Lukasiewicz 1971 – I thank Salvatore Pistoia-Reda for drawing my attention to Aristotle). Presumably, it is what gave rise to many philosophical problems. But we will not go further into this topic.

<sup>7</sup> Since the words themselves determine what is a sentence and what is not, there is no need for a ‘grammar’, i.e. a set of rules which state how to construct sentences and which cannot be deduced from the properties of words.

which is part of the actual world, the sentence is ‘true’. Otherwise it is ‘false’. We use language to ‘provide information’, i.e. to locate the actual world in logical space. This means when we ‘say that  $\phi$ ’, we perform at least two acts: (i) presenting the situation depicted by  $\phi$  and (ii) claiming that that situation is part of the actual world. Thus, ‘saying that  $\phi$ ’ is the same as ‘saying that [ $\phi$ ] is true’.<sup>8</sup> Note, incidentally, that under the view of language as a combinatorial system isomorphic to logical space, ‘inference rules’ become superfluous, in the sense that they cannot be violated: [Mary walks] is guaranteed to be true if [John sleeps and Mary walks] is true in the same way the situation in which Mary walks is guaranteed to be part of the actual world if the situation in which John sleeps and Mary walks is part of the actual world.

5.473 Die Logik muss für sich selber sorgen [...]. Wir können uns, in gewissem Sinne, nicht in der Logik irren.<sup>9</sup>

Let us now turn to the concept of ‘translation’. I think we can agree on the following characterization of it: translating means saying the same thing in another language. Thus, translation requires there be exactly one logical space and at least two languages. Saying the same thing means claiming of the same situation that it is part of the same actual world. That would be impossible if speaker and hearer dwell in different logical spaces. And there would, trivially, be no translation if there is only one language. But I have presented PTL as a theory about ‘language’, not one about ‘languages’. How do we square PTL with Wittgenstein’s remark in 4.025? To resolve this question, I propose we assign two readings to the term ‘language’ used by Wittgenstein in the Tractatus: it can either mean *any* symbolic system which is isomorphic to logical space, or it can mean *a* symbolic system which is isomorphic to logical space. Understood in the first sense, there is only one language: it is what is common to all symbolic systems isomorphic to logical space. Understood in the second sense, there can be more than one, perhaps infinitely many, languages. Now, isomorphy is an equivalence relation. That means that if two symbolic systems are isomorphic to logical form, they are isomorphic to each other. Thus, different languages are isomorphic to each other. The question then arises as to what the difference between them consists in. What distinguishes one language from another? Suppose  $L$  and  $L'$  are two different languages. Since they are isomorphic to each other and to logical space, a word  $w$  in  $L$  corresponds to a word  $w'$  in  $L'$  which is of the same form, and both  $w$  and  $w'$  correspond to an object  $o$  in logical space which is also of the same form. If a word is exhaustively identified by its form and denotation (i.e. the object it represents),  $w$  and  $w'$  would be identical, and since we have chosen  $w$  and  $w'$  arbitrarily, this holds for all words in  $L$  and  $L'$ , which means  $L$  and  $L'$  are identical, in contradiction to our supposition.

The way out of this dilemma, as I see it, is to say that form and denotation do not exhaustively identify a word. There is more to a word than how it combines and which object it represents. And it is this extra something that varies from language to language. Recall one crucial fact about language mentioned above: it is used to provide

---

<sup>8</sup> I will use square brackets to distinguish between meta- and object language.

<sup>9</sup> Logic must take care of itself [...]. In a certain sense we cannot make mistakes in logic.

information. Our characterization of ‘saying that  $\phi$ ’ as ‘saying that  $[\phi]$  is true’ explicates what ‘information’ is. But we have not considered the ‘provide’ part. To provide is to provide someone with something. A more accurate description of ‘saying that  $\phi$ ’ is thus ‘telling someone that  $[\phi]$  is true’. This means sentences must be ‘externalized’, i.e. made perceptible by the senses.

### 3.1. Im Satz drückt sich der Gedanke sinnlich wahrnehmbar aus.<sup>10</sup>

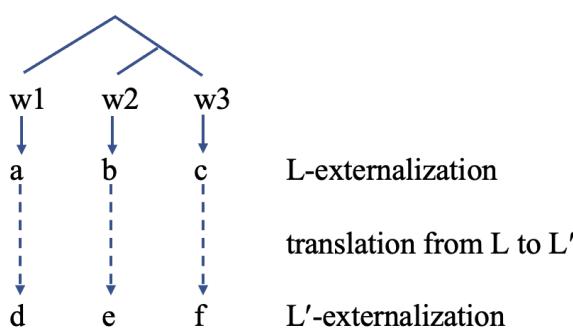
It is externalization, I will argue, which gives rise to cross-linguistic variation. Take sentence (1a), reproduced in (3a) and (3b), for example. It would be possible to externalize  $w_1, w_2, w_3$  as  $a, b, c$ , as in (3a), or as  $d, e, f$ , as in (3b). If we add this layer of analysis to the sentence, the sentence turns into two sentences in two different languages.

(3)



Thus, languages are identical up to externalization. As far as structure is concerned, there is only one language, because there is only one logical space. Words are structurally arranged in the same way in all languages, because they have the same forms with the objects and hence with their counterparts on all other languages. It is only when words are assigned auditory or visual shapes that cross-linguistic differences emerge.<sup>11</sup> We now have a straightforward way to understand Wittgenstein’s remark. Translation from a language  $L$  to another language  $L'$ , under this perspective, would just be replacing the  $L$ -externalization of each word with its  $L'$ -externalization.

(4)



The dictionary, then, would in fact be a list of pairs  $\langle x, y \rangle$ , but  $x$  and  $y$  are two different ways to externalize the same word. Saying that the word  $x$  in  $L$  is translated as the word  $y$  in  $L'$  would mean saying that the word which is externalized as  $x$  in  $L$  is externalized as  $y$  in  $L'$ .

<sup>10</sup> In a proposition the thought is expressed perceptibly.

<sup>11</sup> I list ‘auditory’ and ‘visual’ because we are most familiar with pronunciation, writing, and gesturing as modalities of linguistic communication. Braille can be argued to exemplify tactile externalization. I will leave the olfactory and the gustatory system aside.

## 2 Translation of the Tractatus

But that is not how translation actually works. Translation in real life is very different from its description in 4.025. This is a puzzle, because that description follows from assumptions that seem obvious: (i) words stand for things and they are put together in a sentence to represent how the things they stand for are arranged in a situation; (ii) sentences are used to convey information and must therefore be externalized, as we cannot read each other's minds; and (iii) externalization may vary across different speech communities, giving rise to different languages. The question, then, is what makes translation in real life so different from translation as described in 4.025.

### 2.1 The complexity of externalization

The answer I want to defend is this: externalization in natural language is much more complicated and chaotic than how it is presented in (3) above. The scenario in (3) is one where each language maps each basic building block to exactly one perceptible sign. But that is completely unrealistic. Consider the English sentence in (5), for example.

(5) he thought his mom would call him

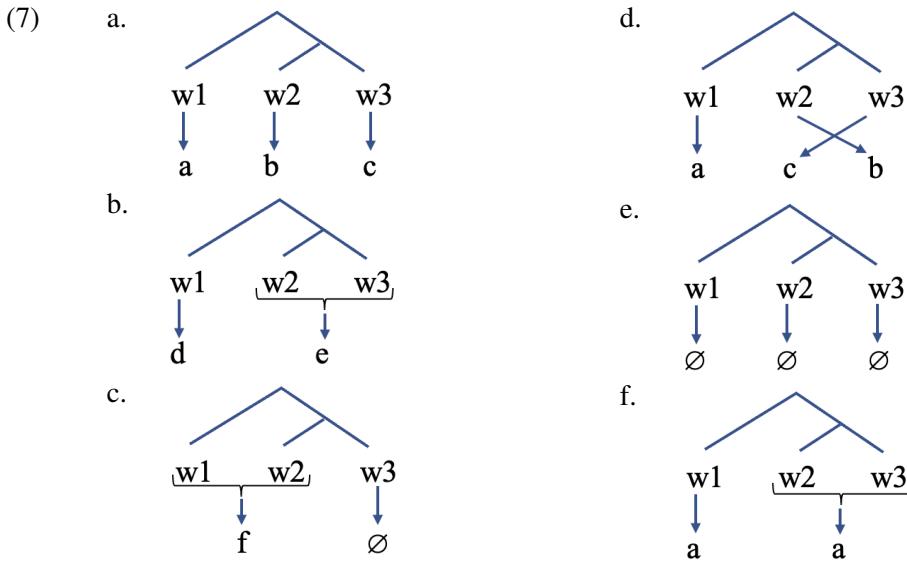
We would agree, I hope, that this sentence consists of seven words. But note that the word 'word' in ordinary language is not to be identified with the term 'word' as it was introduced in the last section. A 'word' in ordinary language is almost never a basic building block of language. We know, for example, that the words [he], [his], and [him] have some but not all things in common. That means that none of the three is basic, because basic entities do not have subparts and hence cannot have some but not all things in common. Linguists will say that [he], [his] and [him] are all [pronominal], [singular], [third person], while [he] is [nominative], [his] is [genitive], [him] is [accusative]. The same holds for the word [thought]: it is really the fusion of [PAST] and [think]. Now, it turns out that in Vietnamese, [singular] and [third person] are also externalized as one word, but the distinction between [nominative], [genitive] and [accusative] is not realized phonologically. We may say that these building blocks are all mapped to  $\emptyset$  in Vietnamese, where  $\emptyset$  is the 'null formative', i.e. one that has no phonological consequence at all. Moreover, Vietnamese differs from English in that it spells out [PAST] as an independent word.

(6) nó dã nghĩ mẹ nó sẽ gọi nó  
he PAST think mother his would call him

There is also, as the attentive reader may have noticed, the issue of 'linearization': mapping a hierarchical structure into a linear structure. Semantics cares about constituency: which elements make up one unit and which ones do not. It does not care about linear order. A thought does not take up space or time. However, a thought made perceptible to the senses does take up space or time. It so happens that the primary modality of language is sound, or more specifically, temporally extended sequences of phonemes. Suppose we have a unit with two elements, a and b. One language might map this unit into the string [a b], while another might map it to [b a]. This is the case

with English [his mom] and Vietnamese [mẹ nó]. English places the noun after the possessive, while Vietnamese does the opposite.

We now see that a structure of basic building blocks such as (1a) may undergo externalizations which differ in more ways than indicated by (3). Some of these other ways are presented schematically in (7).



Thus, one and the same proposition may be expressed differently across various languages as [a b c], [d e f], [d e], [f], [a c b], etc. Some language may not externalize w1, w2, or w3 at all, making (1a) inexpressible in it. This is the case of (7e). It is also possible that different words, or combination of words, receive the same externalization, leading to ‘ambiguity’, i.e. different meanings being associated with the same sound. This possibility is illustrated by (7f). Wittgenstein discussed ambiguity in 3.323.

3.323 In der Umgangssprache kommt es ungemein häufig vor, daß dasselbe Wort auf verschiedene Art und Weise bezeichnet – also verschiedenen Symbolen angehört –, oder, daß zwei Wörter, die auf verschiedene Art und Weise bezeichnen, äußerlich in der gleichen Weise im Satz angewandt werden. So erscheint das Wort ‘ist’ als Kopula, als Gleichheitszeichen und als Ausdruck der Existenz [...].<sup>12</sup>

There are, in principle, many more ways of externalizing (1a). I should also note here that the ‘building blocks’ which we have mentioned above, e.g. [PAST] or [singular], are not really basic. We can easily entertain analyses of these concepts which break them down into more basic ones. Suppose we succeeded in arriving at the final analysis of (6), i.e. its maximally articulated logical form, we would probably be looking

<sup>12</sup> In everyday language it occurs extremely often that the same word signifies in different ways – that is, belongs to different symbols – or that two words, which signify in different ways, are applied in a proposition in ostensibly the same way. Thus the word ‘is’ appears as a copula, as an identity sign, and as an expression of existence [...].

at an enormously complex structure of ultimate basic building blocks. I submit that it is these ultimate basic building blocks, the ‘elementary particles’ of the language of thought, which Wittgenstein call ‘simple signs’ or ‘words’. These ‘names’ will be atomic and hence have nothing in common with each other. They are far removed from the syntactic and semantic elements of natural language with which we are familiar. Natural language is an instrument that emerges from the need for communication among social beings which know that they are extremely similar in their conception of reality. When I speak, I am conveying the logical forms of the propositions which I claim to be true. And since I know that my hearer, and know that he knows, that we share the same logical space and the same strategy of externalization, I can compress the gigantic logical form to be conveyed into a few bits of sound and rely on his ability to reverse engineer this radically impoverished output back to what I am trying to get across.

4.002 [...] Die stillschweigenden Abmachungen zum Verständnis der Umgangssprache sind enorm kompliziert [...].<sup>13</sup>

Given the wide range and numerous dimensions of variation among speech communities with respect to how configurations of basic building blocks of the language of thought are made perceptible to the senses, it is clear why translation cannot work as Wittgenstein described in 4.025. Even if the translator has a perfect grasp on the meaning of the original sentence, it is rarely, most likely never, the case that the relevant logical form has an externalization in the target language which conveys it as well as the externalization it receives in the original language. How a speech community decides which (combinations of) basic building blocks should be externalized in what way depends so much on historical accidents and chance events as to practically preclude such scenarios as (4). We should keep in mind that the Tractatus seeks to reveal the conditions for the possibility of perfect symbolic representation and communication. The description in 4.025 should therefore be considered one of an ‘ideal’ case, where logical forms are completely explicit and no reliance on ‘stillschweigende Abmachungen’ is presupposed.

## 2.2 Saying the unsayable, in Vietnamese

I will now discuss two problems which I became acutely aware of when I was translating the Tractatus from German to Vietnamese. Both problems pertain to externalization.

### 2.2.1 Syllabification

Externalization involves mapping from syntax to phonology. This process includes ‘syllabification’, i.e. segmentation of the string of grammatical formatives into syllables. We have noted that a word is often composite. This is clear in cases of languages like German. Consider proposition 2.014, presented here in (8), as an example.

---

<sup>13</sup> The tacit agreements underlying the understanding of everyday language are enormously complicated.

(8) Die Gegenstände enthalten die Möglichkeit aller Sachlagen.<sup>14</sup>

A linguist would tell you that the word [enthalten] consists of three ‘morphemes’: [ent], [halt], and [en]. We need not, for the purpose of this note, go into details of the definition of a morpheme. Suffice it to say that a morpheme is a part of a word which is potentially meaningful and which the word can have in common with other words. Thus, we have [entfernt], [Sachverhalt], and [gehen], each of which has one morpheme in common with [enthalten]. Now, when you try to pronounce [enthalten] very slowly, you will realize that you break it up into three units: [ent], [hal], and [ten]. These units are called ‘syllables’. As we can see, the morpheme [en] is not a syllable, and the syllable [ten] is not a morpheme. It is a general fact about German that not every morpheme is a syllable. Another illustration of this fact is [Sachlagen], whose morphemes are [sach], [lage], and [n], and whose syllables are [sach], [la], and [gen]. The smallest linguistic unit in German which is guaranteed to be a sequence of syllables is thus not the morpheme but the word: every German word must begin a syllable and end a syllable. Suppose the rule for inserting empty space into text is (9).

(9) Empty Space Rule (ESR)

Insert an empty space after the smallest linguistic unit that is guaranteed to be a sequence of syllables

Then we have an explanation as to why words, but not morphemes, are separated by empty space in written German texts: German adheres to ESR. Now let us look at the Vietnamese translation of 2.014, presented in (10).

(10) Các vật thể chứa đựng khả năng của mọi sự tình.

There are more empty spaces in (10) than in (8). And if I ask a German speaker how many words are in (10), the answer will likely be ‘eleven’, and he will say that these are the words: [các], [vật], [thể], [chứa], [đựng], [khả], [năng], [của], [mọi], [sự], [tình]. However, this answer is wrong. The Vietnamese sentence has seven words, just like the German sentence: [các], [vật thể], [chứa đựng], [khả năng], [của], [mọi], [sự tình]. The reason (10) looks like it has eleven words to the German speaker is that empty space is inserted after every morpheme in Vietnamese, so some of the words look like they are two words. For example, [sự tình] is one word, which means ‘Sachlage’, and which has two morphemes, [sự] and [tình], written with an empty space between them. The same holds for [vật thể], which means ‘Gegenstand’, [chứa đựng], which means ‘enthalten’, and [khả năng], which means ‘Möglichkeit’.

Should we conclude that Vietnamese adheres to some rule other than ESR when it comes to the insertion of empty space into text? No we should not. Vietnamese actually does follow ESR. What distinguishes Vietnamese from German is the fact that every morpheme in Vietnamese is a syllable, hence trivially a sequence of syllables. Vietnamese, in technical jargon, is a ‘monosyllabic’ language, while German is a ‘poly-

---

<sup>14</sup> Objects contain the possibility of all states of affairs.

syllabic' language. In a monosyllabic language, morpheme boundaries co-incide with syllable boundaries, while in a polysyllabic language, this is not the case.

I believe that this typological difference between German and Vietnamese, which pertains to how syntax is mapped to phonology, i.e. externalization, accounts for an important difference between how we experience the original German text of the Tractatus as compared to how we experience its Vietnamese translation. It is a fact about philosophical works that we access them, for the most part, by way of reading. Thus, there is a visual component to our engagement with them. Looking at the German text, we see three levels of organization. First, morphemes are grouped into words which are separated by empty spaces. Then words are grouped into sentences which are separated by punctuations. Sentences are then grouped into larger units such as paragraphs, sections, texts etc. The first two levels are crucial, as it represent two different ways the grammatical system interprets complex expressions. The meaning of a sentence is predictable: it is computed from the meanings of the words and how these are put together. The meaning of a word, however, is essentially unpredictable. Even if the word is morphologically complex, its meaning may or may not be a function of the meaning of the morphemes it contains. Take [Sachverhalt], for example. It consists of the three morphemes [sach], [halt], and [ver]. Can we predict what [Sachverhalt] means from the meaning of these morphemes? The answer is no.<sup>15</sup>

Being aware of the morphological structure of the word may help us remember what it means, but we cannot rely on this structure alone. Words are thus similar to traffic signs. The structure of a traffic sign is often suggestive of what it means, but we still have to, in principle, learn what each sign means by remembering a list. Note, incidentally, that Wittgenstein also remarked on this difference between words and sentences in the Tractatus.

4.026 Die Bedeutungen der einfachen Zeichen (der Wörter) müssen uns erklärt werden, daß wir sie verstehen. Mit den Sätzen aber verständigen wir uns.<sup>16</sup>

Wittgenstein used the term 'einfach' to describe expressions whose interpretation is not compositional and thus has to be laid down conventionally, and acquired by way of 'explanation'. These are the 'words'. Expressions whose interpretation is compositional are sentences, which can be used creatively to communicate new contents.

4.03 Ein Satz muss mit alten Ausdrücken einen neuen Sinn mitteilen [...].<sup>17</sup>

Morpheme boundary, then, does not play a role in compositional interpretation, while word boundary does. This crucial distinction finds an expression in German orthography, which puts empty spaces between words and not between morphemes. However, it does not have an expression in Vietnamese orthography, which treats morpheme boundary and word boundary in the same way. This is why the Vietnamese text looks

---

<sup>15</sup> In fact, it will be very hard to give the meaning of, say, [halt] as a morpheme.

<sup>16</sup> The meanings of the simple signs (words) must be explained to us for us to understand them. With propositions, however, we communicate.

<sup>17</sup> A proposition must convey a new sense with old expressions.

radically different from its German counterpart. Looking at the German text, we see chunks of different length and complexity. Looking at the Vietnamese text, we see chunks of approximately of same length and the same complexity. This is not because all words are of the same length and complexity in Vietnamese, but because these chunks are syllables, not words.

What does all this have to do with translation? Well, the translator's aim is, ultimately, to replicate the experience of reading the text in the original language for readers of the target language. It is obvious that translators always try to convey aspects beyond propositional content: they try to find equivalent idioms, onomatopoeia, imagery, meters, etc. Reading the *Tractatus* in the original is a very different visual experience as compared to reading it in Vietnamese. Imagine if every syllable is written separately in German.

(11) die ge gen stän de ent hal ten die mög lich keit al ler sach la gen

The additional mental step has to be taken to group these syllables into words. This might not be so hard for (11), but when sentences get longer and more complicated, the processing stress on the reader becomes quite considerable. It is not for no reason that classic Vietnamese texts contain sentences that are, by European standards, ridiculously short. Sentences in modern Vietnamese texts, which are not translations from European languages, are still shorter than sentences in, say, German or English texts. Now, if the aim is to replicate the experience of reading the *Tractatus* in German for speakers of Vietnamese, it faces an unsurmountable obstacle presented by the difference between these two language with respect to syllabification: one inserts syllable boundaries between words and one inserts them between morphemes. This is, presumably, an arbitrary choice made by the grammatical system at some point in history, but it resulted in two very different reading and writing traditions. One way to overcome this obstacle is to break long German sentences into shorter ones, turn relative clauses into main clauses, etc. This is, I think, a terrible solution, as it disrupts the flow of the text and, also, the information structure of the sentences. A different solution is to be innovative and put dashes instead of empty spaces between morphemes of the same word. For example, the word [vật thể] ('object') can be written as [vật-thể]. Believe it or not, this practice was adopted for a short while in the history of Vietnamese orthography, specifically in the South during the 50's and the 60's of the last century. The problem with this approach is that the text ends up looking horrendously ugly. The third way to overcome the obstacle is the default one: to ignore it. This is my way. As translator, I try to keep as close to the structure of the original sentences as possible. Between making the text Vietnamese so that it feels familiar to Vietnamese readers and keeping it German so that it feels German to Vietnamese readers, I choose the latter.

### 2.2.2 Ambiguity

As mentioned above, externalization may result in 'ambiguity': more than one meaning being associated with the same sound. Natural language is massively ambiguous. Take the word [Subjekt], for example. It is quite obvious that different (combinations

of) concepts are associated with this sequence of phonemes. It may denote a syntactic position in a sentence, an agent of judgement, a topic of discussion, etc. The same holds for [Gegenstand], [Substanz], [Satz], and many others. In fact, there is practically no word in any language that is not ambiguous. When we read a text, we have to determine from the linguistic context, and from background information, what the intended meaning of each word is. For example, when we read the Tractatus, we see that the word [Gegenstand] has a very specific interpretation: it refers to the basic building blocks of the reality which we use language to talk about, i.e. things that have no parts and cannot be described as a configuration of different things. But this is not the meaning which [Gegenstand] has in ordinary language. People can, and do, point at tables, hammers, computers, etc., and say that these are ‘Gegenstände’, without assuming that they have no parts. It is only in the context of the Tractatus, which contains other sentences that together elaborate on the concept of a ‘Gegenstand’, that we can deduce what Wittgenstein wanted to say with this word. The same holds for [Substanz]. In everyday life we use this word to refer to alcohol, gasoline, salt, sugar, iron, etc. But Wittgenstein used it to mean the set of all basic building blocks of reality, i.e. the set of things that fall under the concept [Gegenstand].

Does ambiguity pose a problem for translation? In principle, no! Suppose no word exists in Vietnamese which is ambiguous in exactly the same way as the word [Substanz] in German. That should not prevent me from conveying what Wittgenstein wanted to convey, as I could just choose some Vietnamese word, preferably closely related to [Substanz] in its semantics, and use it with the same consistency in my translation as Wittgenstein used [Substanz] in the German text. If I do the same for every other word, my translation should emerge as a structure of interrelated expressions which holistically communicates the content of the original text. But again, things are not as simple as that. I have been speaking as if ambiguity is completely accidental, e.g. as if there are no reasons for the word [Substanz] to be associated with the different meanings that it has. But there are of course such reasons. This word has a long history in Western philosophy, and its semantics has developed naturally from how it has been used by various thinkers at various times. Wittgenstein assigned a specific reading to it, but this reading harks back to other readings which it has had in its evolution and which accompany it in more or less the same way an orchestra accompanies a soloist. The pleasure of reading the Tractatus, or in fact any other work, consists in hearing both the solo part and the orchestral part, i.e. both the melody and the harmony. The experience of grasping the meaning of [Substanz] intended by Wittgenstein becomes so much more satisfying, and in a certain sense so much more illuminating, when we also realize how that meaning is related to the other meanings of [Substanz]. And the Tractatus is particularly beautiful in that it does not invent new words just to express exactly what it wants to express, but uses familiar words, in a nonchalant manner, and lets the reader figure out himself how they are to be understood, both from reading the text and from reflecting on their ordinary semantics.

This, I think, poses a very difficult challenge for the translator. I can indeed find a word in Vietnamese to translate [Substanz] and use it in such a way that the reader

will grasp what it means in the context of the Tractatus. But Vietnam does not have the same philosophical tradition as Europe. There is no word in Vietnamese which has the same phylogenetics as [Substanz]. So even when the Vietnamese reader has understood that the word refers to the set of basic building blocks of reality, he will not be able to engage with the overtones and the harmony that accompany it. His experience will be impoverished in more or less the same way as one of hearing only the solo part of a concerto. It will necessarily be more shallow and less illuminating. At this point I see no solution to this problem. I believe one will only come about with time, after enough translations of enough philosophical works have been made and thus sufficient intertextual groundwork has been laid.

An ambiguity in German that is painfully lacking in Vietnamese happens to be one which Wittgenstein discussed in the Tractatus and about which we have provided a quote in the previous section. It is the ambiguity of the word [ist] ('is'). As Wittgenstein pointed out, [ist] can be used as copula or as expression of existence. Both uses are made in 6.44.

6.44 *Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern, daß sie ist.*<sup>18</sup>

If I could translate one sentence in the Tractatus with all of its glory, it would be this sentence. But I could not. The sentence plays on grammatical idiosyncracies of German that are simply not available in Vietnamese. One is the ambiguity just mentioned. The word [ist] in [wie die Welt ist] is a copula verb. It is transitive and connects a subject to a predicate. The declarative counterpart of the embedding sentence would be [die Welt ist P] where P is a description. The word [ist] in [daß sie ist] is intransitive and means 'exists'. This ambiguity obviously has historical roots in the philosophical tradition of Europe, and is thus absent from any word in Vietnamese. But there is another pair of expressions that help make 6.44 such a gem: [wie] and [daß]. The first is a question word. It is a place holder for the predicate that is the direct object of transitive [ist]. The second is a complementizer which introduces an embedded sentence. As German happens to be a wh-movement language in which question words are fronted to the initial position of the sentence, [wie] ends up occupying the same slot as [daß]. This, in conjunction with the two instances of [ist], gives the sentence a parallel structure in which two similar sentences fit right into the two slots after [nicht] and [sondern]. The frame is thus [nicht p sondern q], with p and q having the same frame of [X die Welt ist], with X being [wie] in the first sentence and [daß] in the second. The musicality of this sentence is just ineffable in Vietnamese, as this language has no word which is ambiguous in the same way as [ist], and furthermore, is not a wh-movement language, so the Vietnamese counterpart of [wie] would not have the same syntactic distribution as the Vietnamese counterpart of [daß]. The translation ends up being something like 'the world is structured in what way is not mystical, but that it exists is mystical'. This is perhaps even worse than listening to a concerto with only the solo part.

---

<sup>18</sup> Not *how* the world is, but *that* it is, is the mystical.

### 3 Conclusion

I have discussed Wittgenstein's remark on translation in the context of his Picture Theory of Language, and showed how the difference between this description and how translation works in real life may be reduced to the fact that language is not only used to represent reality but also to communicate, i.e. to provide information. Communication requires externalization, and it is the complexities of externalization that give rise to cross-linguistic variation and thus pose challenges for the translator which go beyond finding for each word in the original text its counterpart in the target language.

### References

Anscombe, Gertrude E. M. 1959. An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Conant, James. 1989. Must we show what we cannot say? In The Senses of Stanley Cavell, ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne, 242–283. Lewisburg: Bucknell.

Diamond, Cora. 1991. The Realistic Spirit. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Frost, William. 1955. Dryden and the Art of Translation. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hintikka, Jaakko. 1994. An Anatomy of Wittgenstein's Picture Theory. In Artifacts, Representations and Social Practice: Essays for Marx Wartofsky, ed. Carol C. Gould and Robert S. Cohen, 223–256. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Hintikka, Jaakko. 2000. On Wittgenstein. Belmont: Wadsworth.

Hope, Vincent. 1965. Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and the Picture Theory of Meaning. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Edinburgh.

Kenny, Anthony. 1973. Wittgenstein. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Keyt, David. 1964. Wittgenstein's picture theory of language. The Philosophical Review 73:493–511.

Lukasiewicz, Jan. 1971. On the Principle of Contradiction in Aristotle (translated from German by Vernon Wedin). The Review of Metaphysics 24:485–509.

Stenius, Erik. 1960. Wittgenstein's Tractatus: A Critical Exposition of its Main Lines of Thought. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1921. Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung. Annalen der Naturphilosophie 14:185–262.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2023. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Translated by Michael Beaney. Oxford: Oxford University Press.