

TRANSLATING THE INCOMMENSURABLE

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Abstract

The topic of this thesis is the problem of semantic incommensurability between languages. My aim is to provide an argument that plausibly disassociates the incommensurability of languages from their untranslatability. I consider the idea of these notions being connected to be a misapprehension to which much of the contemporary debate falls prey. Towards the stated purpose, I argue for the inclusion of Friedrich Schleiermacher in this modern debate and subsequently construct an argument meant to drive a wedge between incommensurability and untranslatability. I do so in the following way: (1) I argue for the translatability of incommensurable languages and (2) I argue that translatability does not entail commensurability. Finally, I argue that Schleiermacher is ultimately inconsistent but that the argument I have constructed based on his account of translation does not fall along with him.

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List of Abbreviations

Throughout this thesis, when referencing primary works by Schleiermacher, the following abbreviations will be used:

Dial O – Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Dialektik 1822. Herausgegeben von Rudolf Odebrecht*. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs Verlag, 1942.

Dial J – Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Dialektik. Aus Schleiermachers Handschriftlichem Nachlasse Herausgegeben von L. Jonas*. Berlin: G. Reimer, 1839.

Dial F – Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Dialektik. Herausgegeben Und Eingeleitet Von Manfred Frank*. 2 Vols., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001.

Dial H – Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Schleiermacher's Dialektik. Mit Unterstützung der Königlich Preußischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften Herausgegeben Von Dr. I. Halpern*, Berlin: Mayer & Müller, 1903.

DM – Schleiermacher, Friedrich. "On the Different methods of Translating." Translated from German by S. Bernofsky, in L. Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd edition, London and New York: Routledge, 2012 [2000] [1813], pp. 43-63.

HK – Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Schleiermacher: Hermeneutik Und Kritik. Mit Einem Angang Sprachphilosophischer Texte Schleiermachers*

Herausgegeben Und Eingeleitet Von Manfred Frank. Frankfurt am Main:
Suhrkamp, 1977.

M – Schleiermacher, Friedrich. ” Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens”, in KGA I/11 67-93

KGA – Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, H.-J. Birkner et al. (eds.), Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1980.

Introduction

Often said to involve irreparable loss, and to consist of unavoidable compromise, translation is commonly understood as betraying, as distorting, as approximating. ‘Lost in translation’ or ‘traduttore traditore’ are both formulas which, along with references to Babel and ‘the confusion of tongues’, have become clichés in the literature. Such wide-spread and ready-made slogans, the bumper-stickers of translation studies, testify not only to the commonplace nature of the privilege given to such claims, but also, to some extent, to their banality. Anyone familiar with the difficulties of translation or the toils of learning a foreign language could, perhaps, assent to such claims. It may even be that most self-reflective cultures contain, as part of the history of their respective literatures, a claim to untranslatability made in their name. There is however an air of premature capitulation in adherence to such claims, which has frequently been criticized and is also quite foreign to the ubiquitous nature of translation in contemporary society.

Not only do we habitually rely on translations – indeed as scholars we write and sometimes even think with translated terms – but there is more at play here than first meets the eye. Is it not the case that we possess authorized translations of texts the accurate rendition of which is of the utmost importance: namely sacred texts? Are these texts not supposed to carry the tremendous weight of absolute truth, and which, in the case of the Qur’an, contain the literal words of God? Now, if an undertaking of such solemnity is possible and, moreover, theologically endorsed, that seems to suggest that whatever gets ‘lost in translation’ is either qualitatively or quantitatively insignificant: in other words, either the loss is not too great or not too distorting. Is it not the case, moreover, that every entry in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* starts precisely with the self-undermining waving of a white

flag, namely the offer of several translations in a number of distinct languages, adding a touch of irony to the oxymoron of the title?

These considerations seem ideal ingredients for a very interesting and fecund philosophical puzzle. On the one hand, natural languages seem to bear little resemblance to one another; in fact some of them appear quite significantly different, such that they do not correspond *simpliciter*, either lexically or grammatically. Additionally, natural languages not only exhibit differences across linguistic barriers, but also diachronically along the history of a single natural language. The intelligibility of Shakespeare is, for instance, deceptive to the modern English speaker which does not have knowledge of the vocabulary or cultural context of the works. The same may be said about a contemporary Italian speaker reading Dante. As shown by George Steiner, it is not only the translatability of texts which varies with the passing of time, but also their comprehensibility, even in languages, like English or Italian, which have changed relatively little.¹ This internal diachronic variability of language potentially fragments it into several temporally and spatially distinct language-stages.

But natural languages are not only demarcated by vocabulary; it is not only the case that *words* do not always have an equivalent across languages. Though it is true that some words are hard to translate, such as the German ‘Geist’ or the Greek ‘λόγος’, mostly due to the use they have been subjected to in the philosophies of these languages, such difficulties might well be clarified by an informative footnote or introduction. But natural languages may also be distinct in the way they organize things: that is, inasmuch as they contain classification systems. Kinship structures are sometimes cited as examples of radical difference. But they could also be done away with quite readily by equivalent – though clunky – constructions such as ‘older sister’ for the Hungarian ‘nővér’ or ‘co-in-laws’ for the

¹ George Steiner and Umberto Eco argue, respectively, for the difficulty of understanding Shakespeare and Dante in modern English and Italian despite the apparent intelligibility of their language. Cf. Steiner 1998 [1975], 1-50; Eco 2004, 82-84.

Romanian ‘cuscri’. Colour terms are perhaps a better example, as not all languages divide the chromatic spectrum in the same way: some of them, in fact, do not even have colour terms, like the Pirahã language.² The more remote the culture, the more radical the differences; and the more radical the differences, the less they are translatable. Such differences, when coupled with the claim that language somehow influences the way we think about the world, makes the following proposition appear plausible: different languages conceptualize the world in different ways; they are expressions of different viewpoints on the world.

But some philosophers have argued that we may not accept such a picture so readily without making some undesirable concessions to truth and rationality. If languages embody different viewpoints on the world and they are at least partially untranslatable, is there a way we could say which viewpoint is true? Is there a way of rationally deciding the truth value of two untranslatable statements made in two incommensurable languages? Is there even a way to recognize an untranslatable language *as a language*? Such are the objections Donald Davidson makes, who claims that it is very difficult for any sense to be made of the idea that such differences are ineradicable, i.e. untranslatable. In fact, it is puzzling that there could exist a language, or even just a part of a language, which we would not be able to translate into a familiar one. But if that is the case, then it would appear that the differences were not so great to begin with. Davidson perhaps said it best when he stated that ‘[d]ifferent points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability’ (Davidson 1984, 184). So either translation is impossible at least in some cases, or, if it isn’t, the differences between natural languages are not so great after all.

Adherence to either position seems to me quite strenuous and to require us to make certain concessions to the use of the words. My aim in this thesis is to unpack the puzzle of

² Cf. Eco 2004, 183 *sqq.* for a very informative and in-depth discussion of the various segmentations of the chromatic spectrum. Cf. Everett 2005 for a discussion of the Pirahã language.

semantic incommensurability and argue against the idea that incommensurable languages are *ipso facto* untranslatable. My aim here is not to prove the incommensurability thesis, nor to argue for it: this is an assumption which I will leave uncontested. My goal is merely to drive a wedge between semantic incommensurability and untranslatability.

My strategy towards this goal is an analysis of Friedrich Schleiermacher's philosophy. This Romantic pastor, theologian, and philosopher holds a rather paradoxical position: namely that utterances from different languages are translatable *in spite of* their being part of incommensurable languages. I hold this to be a tenable position, but Schleiermacher never argues for it. I will therefore build on Schleiermacher's intuitions to ricochet past him and construct an argument that builds on them.

The plan for my discussion is as follows. In Chapter 1, I will summarize the modern debate around the incommensurability thesis. In Chapter 2, I will argue that Schleiermacher's concept of linguistic 'irrationality' is consistent with the modern notion of semantic incommensurability and can be coherently discussed within this modern framework. In Chapter 3, I will present Schleiermacher's radical position on translation, namely that it is possible *in spite of* semantic incommensurability, and construct an argument on his behalf. Finally, in Chapter 4, I will argue that Schleiermacher's suggestion is inconsistent due to other commitments made in another part of his system and that do not bear on this particular problem. Hence, I will show that the argument for translatability still stands.

Chapter 1 – The Incommensurability Thesis

The word ‘incommensurable’ means ‘having no common standard of measurement’³. This is a mathematical notion which originates in Ancient Greek mathematics, where it was used to describe the relation between magnitudes which admit of no common measure, such as the ratio between the side and the diagonal of the square (Oberheim & Hoyningen-Huene, 2018).⁴ In modern mathematics, the relation between incommensurable lengths is represented by irrational numbers (such as π , which expresses the ratio of the circumference of the circle to its diagonal).

The philosophical use of this notion enjoyed a recent surge in popularity when it was introduced in the philosophy of science. In this field, the notion describes the semantic relations between the languages of theories (Sankey 1994, 1). Such languages are said to be incommensurable when they fail either completely or partially to be translatable in terms of the other. Hence, in the former case, a relation of complete incommensurability obtains and in the latter one of partial incommensurability. Partial incommensurability is understood as an asymmetrical relation: one language is conceptually richer, which is why it is partially untranslatable, but the relation does not hold the other way around.

1.1 The origin of the thesis

The debate around the notion of incommensurability arose in the year 1962, when Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend independently proposed the incommensurability thesis

³ Oxford dictionary.

⁴ Oberheim, Eric and Hoyningen-Huene, Paul, "The Incommensurability of Scientific Theories", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/incommensurability/>>.

for scientific languages. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Kuhn introduced the notion⁵ to characterize the relationship between scientific traditions before and after a scientific revolution. More specifically, the relation of incommensurability was multi-dimensional and included methodological, semantic, as well as perceptual components (Kuhn 1970 [1962], 148-150). Based on a historical analysis of the development and succession of scientific theories, Kuhn argued that the proponents of differing theories fail to completely understand one another, therefore they always talk past each other to a certain degree. The metaphor of the lack of a common measure illustrated the reasons for this failure in communication: the use of different concepts as well as methods to answer to different problems. In this sense, Aristotelian physics is incommensurable with Newtonian physics.

Paul Feyerabend, on the other hand, in his *Explanation, Reduction and Empiricism* (1962) employed the concept of incommensurability in a narrower sense: to describe the relation between two fundamental and universal scientific theories claiming to be descriptions of reality. In this formulation, fundamental theories are those that have ontological implications, whereas universal theories, those which apply to all entities in the universe. Between incommensurable theories '[t]he main concepts of one could neither be defined on the basis of the primitive descriptive terms of the other, nor related to them via a correct empirical statement' (Feyerabend 1962, 74, 90). For Feyerabend, therefore, the concept of incommensurability described the lack of logical relations between theories based on semantic variance of their terms, which resulted in the failure of direct content comparison for such theories. Like Kuhn, Feyerabend also illustrates his claim by describing instances of fundamental theory change in the history of science.

Primarily reacting against the empiricist philosophy of science prevalent at the time, both Kuhn and Feyerabend especially rejected the idea of an 'independently meaningful and

⁵ Kuhn continues to use the word 'incommensurability' with its mathematical connotation; cf. Murthi & Sarukkai 2009, 297.

theory-neutral observation language' (Sankey 1994, 2). Specifically, Feyerabend leveled his critique primarily against the concept of reduction, i.e. the notion that earlier theories are reducible to later ones, in the sense that they can be logically derived from them.⁶ Kuhn, on the other hand, reacted particularly to the idea of *cumulative* scientific progress. In other words, if the languages of theories are incommensurable and there does not exist a language of observation independent of theory, then there are no means by which arbitration between scientific theories might be carried out; hence, they could not be reduced to one another and the idea of scientific advance no longer made sense.

1.2. The criticism of the thesis

It is not hard to see why such an idea became controversial. It sparked such a widespread debate, in fact, to have even warranted the claim that 'the doctrine of incommensurability needs no introduction' (Pearce, 1987, p. 1). Additionally, since the introduction of the thesis, it has been taken up by anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, psychologists and has permeated many other branches of study (Wang 2007, 6). Within the discipline of philosophy, the attacks against the notion were motivated by a set of highly undesirable consequences. First of all, since no statement of one language can formally contradict a statement of another language with which it is incommensurable, due to semantic variance, they do not stand in logical conflict. And since these languages do not share common meaning, their content cannot be compared (Sankey 1994, 1). Additionally, since there is no language of observation independent of theory, neither can the consequences

⁶ The specific model of reduction Feyerabend criticized in his 1962 was Nagel's model. It may be described like this: the relation of reduction is the kind of explanation relation between two theories which holds iff one can be derived from the other (shown to be a logical consequence thereof) with the help of certain bridge laws under certain conditions (van Riel, Raphael and Van Gulick, Robert, "Scientific Reduction", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/scientific-reduction/>>.)

of those theories be compared. Many have found this conclusion more than objectionable. First of all, it ‘threatens to undermine our image of science as a rational and progressive enterprise’. And secondly, on some interpretations, it paints a picture of sciences as dominated by communication failure and by utterly irrational theory choice (Sankey 1994, 3).

Despite an apparently common adversity, however, the participants to this debate still talked somewhat at cross-purposes and did not grasp the notion in quite the same way; mostly due to inherent ambiguities in Kuhn and Feyerabend’s initial accounts. Therefore, couched in a variety of terms such as the incomparability of content, meaning variance, translation failure or absence of standards of theory choice, the debate also had to bear the weight of imprecision (Hoyningen-Huene & Sankey, 2001, viii). Still, two main directions may be identified, informed either by semantic or epistemic considerations (Hoyningen-Huene & Sankey, 2001, xiii; Baghramian 2008, 244). But the strand of the debate relating to semantic incommensurability, the one that interests me here, is often associated with a more specific notion: incommensurability as untranslatability due to meaning variance (Wang 2007, 25; *cf. also* Sankey 1994, 1; Putnam 1981, p. 114; Davidson 1984).

Untranslatability is, some say, completely indissociable from the incommensurability thesis. It has been claimed, in fact, by commentators of Kuhn, that in Kuhn’s early writings on the topic, incommensurability and untranslatability were equivalent, because essential to both was the idea of communication breakdown (Murthi & Sarukkai 2009, 298; Malpas 1989, 234). Even Kuhn himself had to contend later in his career that perhaps ‘untranslatability’ would have been a better word for the idea (Kuhn, 1970a, 1970b, 1976, 1979, 1989). At any rate, this interpretation has dominated the debate ever since (Wang 2007, 49).

Historians of the debate discern two ways in which this interpretation of incommensurability has been attacked. The first line of argument, called by some the

standard response, has been to allow for meaning variance between theories but insist that there is no change in reference (Sankey 1994, 4; *cf.* Hoyningen-Huene & Sankey, 2001, x;). Such an approach was introduced as a critique of the incommensurability thesis by Scheffler and it was championed by philosophers such as Putnam or Kripke.⁷

The second line of argument has been dubbed the *translational response* and argues that the notion of an untranslatable language is unintelligible. Such were the critiques made by Putnam (1981) and Davidson (1984 [1973]). Putnam, for instance, has accused the incommensurability thesis of incoherence: ‘To tell us that Galileo had ‘incommensurable’ notions and then to go on to describe them at length is totally incoherent’ (1981, p. 115). Davidson makes the same objection in his *On the very idea of a conceptual scheme*: ‘Kuhn is brilliant at saying what things were like before the revolution using – what else? – our post-revolutionary idiom’ (1984, 184). But Davidson’s critique is more far-reaching than this and more general. He shifts the focus, in fact, from merely scientific languages to languages generally and thus brings the problem into the mainstream. This will be the topic of my next section.

To take stock, for the moment, the specific region of the debate in which we find ourselves is the following. There are two main varieties of incommensurability, namely semantic and epistemic, and I have taken the former route. Along my way, I have been faced with a crossroads where the debate took two different courses: a referential direction which accepts change of meaning between theories but maintains that such theories still co-refer to the same entities, and a translational direction, which attacks the notion of an untranslatable language. I align myself to this latter strand of argument.

⁷ *Cf.* Scheffler 1967, Putnam 1973 & 1975 and Kripke 1980. For a summary of the referential response to the incommensurability thesis, *cf.* Hoyningen-Huene & Sankey, 2001, x *sq.*; Sankey 1997, 110 *sqq.*

1.3. Towards natural language

In his 1973, Davidson attacks the incommensurability thesis by analysing the very notion of a conceptual scheme, which he defines as a set of intertranslatable languages (Davidson 1984 [1973], 185). The possibility of an incommensurable conceptual system, on this definition, would require the existence of a language untranslatable into our own. Davidson therefore also works with the interpretation of incommensurability which equates it to untranslatability. But he doesn't limit his attention to scientific theories, as stated, but rather expands the concern to languages generally.

So what about natural languages like French, English, or Chinese? Can they be incommensurable with one another? There are a number of factors here which could raise doubts regarding the proposition. For one, as any good dictionary entry will make plain, natural languages exhibit polysemy: the words or phrases of any natural language carry many possible distinct meanings. The central terms of scientific theories have their meanings fixed through definitions, a fact foreign to natural languages. Additionally, natural languages are essentially historical: the meanings of their words, phrases and expressions tend to change: words go out of fashion or come back into use; phrases are forgotten or imported from other languages. Meanings in natural languages are capricious and unpredictable in this way. Not even syntax is immune from change. Accordingly, dictionaries, due to the amount of time it takes to compile them, are always a step behind actual linguistic use. They do not fix the meaning of words, as do definitions in the case of theories, but merely record and preserve past meanings, like archives.

What is more, natural languages, as opposed to scientific languages, do not function only according to semantics and syntax. They also have a *pragmatic* aspect, which prescribes rules of use for a variety of contexts or circumstances, and which allows for rhetorical usage,

puns, metaphors, sarcasm, etc. Furthermore, natural languages, unlike scientific theories, are not a finite collection of statements with a definite meaning. In fact, many authors have argued that what characterizes natural languages most is precisely the extent to which they seem unlimited, without any boundaries. This idea was called the *principle of effability*, ‘according to which a natural language can express anything that can be thought’ (Eco 1995, 23). The name of the principle originates from J. J. Katz⁸, who defines the notion in the following way: ‘each human thought is expressible by some sentence of any natural language’ or otherwise ‘[e]ach proposition can be expressed by some sentence in any natural language’ (Katz 1972, 19; Katz 1978⁹, 209). Such an account, then, would seem to exclude incommensurability from being predicated of natural languages and simultaneously to affirm universal translatability. This is the one side of our puzzle.

In the period I will discuss in this thesis, namely Early German Romanticism, such an idea would have perhaps been criticised. This is the period which saw the birth of anthropology, historicism, comparative philology and many other disciplines which placed more emphasis on the difference between cultures rather than on their similarities. In fact, many other relativistic themes were developed during this period. When it comes to the philosophy of language, this is a period of a great revolution (*cf.* Forster 2015). Chiefly influenced by Herder and Hamann and carried on by Schlegel, Humboldt and, of course, Schleiermacher, the philosophical developments which have taken place at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century in Germany have left a considerable mark in the history of philosophy.¹⁰ Forster identifies the two main theses of this revolution as follows: (1) thought is dependent on language and bounded by it and (2) concepts and meanings are

⁸ Katz traces the origin of the idea back to Frege (Frege 1963, 1) and sees versions of the same principle in Searle’s principle of expressibility (Searle 1969, 19-21) and Tarski’s principle of universality (Tarski 1956, 164); *cf.* Katz 1972, 19.

⁹ Effability and Translation

¹⁰ For a plausible French influence in Herder’s ideas on the issues relevant to cultural and linguistic relativism, *cf.* Forster 2015, 33.

not some language-independent entities, but rather word-uses. Forster identifies the origin of the first thesis in Leibniz' *Dialogus de connexione inter res et verba*, which he argues was taken over by Wolff, Herder, and Hamann. The latter introduced the stronger thesis of the identity of thought and language, which, as we will see, Schleiermacher shares with him. Thesis (2) originated with Spinoza and its lineage extends through Wettstein, Ernesti¹¹, Herder and Hamann all the way to Schleiermacher (Forster, 2015, pp. 24-29).

It is no surprise then that this period has been credited, particularly because of the work of Hamann, Herder and Humboldt, for giving birth to what is now called the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis or (more rarely nowadays) the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis¹². Roughly, the statement of this postulate goes as follows: 'each language embodies a worldview, with quite different languages embodying quite different views, so that speakers of different languages think about the world in quite different ways' (Baghramian & Carter 2018). Coupled with the idea that thought somehow depends on language, this position appears to preclude translatability between languages. And this is the other side of the puzzle.

In many ways, Friedrich Schleiermacher stands, as would be expected, in the Hamann/Herder lineage. It would only be reasonable, therefore, to assess his point of view and the possible insights he might have against the backdrop of the debate around linguistic relativity. The textual evidence for such an endeavour would not be, I'm sure, in short supply, in fact much of it could go either way. But the way in which I would like to take such evidence, on this occasion, is to include it in the debate for which I have provided a brief cartography here; and more specifically in the wake of Davidson and the debate around the semantic incommensurability of languages generally.

¹¹ Cf. also Forster 2018, originally published in 2007, p. 32, footnote 11, where Forster claims that Ernesti didn't hold this thesis, but rather the weaker version, that meanings merely *depend* on use.

¹² Edward Sapir actually wrote his MA thesis on Herder's *On the Origin of Language* (Baghramian, Maria and Carter, J. Adam, "Relativism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/relativism/>>.)

But what does a Protestant pastor from the turn of the eighteenth century have to contribute to a contemporary debate in analytic philosophy? Other than being a good candidate for a pun, the reply to such a question would seem to have to be brief. I do believe, however, that although Schleiermacher came too early in the history of philosophy to positively contribute to the debate, a contribution can still be made on his behalf. But due to the fact that such an effort is still to be attempted, as far as I know, it requires quite a lengthy preparatory argument. And this will constitute the next chapter of my thesis.

*

For now, a preliminary comment is in order before proceeding. I do not propose this thesis as a historical analysis of the development, in Schleiermacher, or other German philosophers, of the reflections dedicated to the question of translation, linguistic incommensurability or conceptual relativism. Given the sheer size of Schleiermacher's writings, that would be a monumental task, requiring much more than the space I have here. I will not track, therefore, the evolution of the claims or the influences other philosophers might have had on Schleiermacher's thought. Although historically a worthwhile pursuit, I believe philosophically it is less so. And it is a shame that a lot of Schleiermacher scholarship is devoted to just this: consigning him to the role of an eclectic.

But I do not share this view. Schleiermacher's work is neither a plagiarism of the foregoing nor a compilation of other's ideas. Though I believe he moves past his influences in significant ways – as some recent scholarship is beginning to show (Bowie 2005) – I hold that even on the contrary assumption he should at least be credited for providing a systematic treatment of received ideas or cultural commonplaces, and, in the case of translation, the very first such treatment (Berman 1995). However, I will not argue for these claims here.

Furthermore, I do not suggest that Schleiermacher held at all times the position I present in this dissertation, as many philosophers amend their views over the course of their

careers. My intention here is merely to consider the arguments offered in support of the position and mainly to reconstruct them, chiefly due to the fact that Schleiermacher's philosophy is pretty much a work in progress figured out primarily in his lectures, all of which were published posthumously (Arndt 2015, 27). Hence, I do not claim anything more of my reconstruction than that it is a plausible and charitable interpretation of Schleiermacher's thought.

A note on the primary sources is also needed here. Given the fact that Schleiermacher's dedicates more work to this specific philosophical problem later in his career, and accordingly the way in which he elaborates and expresses his position only becomes clearer with time, the texts I will use tend to be later texts. I mostly use the courses on dialectics from 1822, namely the *Dialektik* edited by Odenbrecht in 1942 (Dial O), but also the 1814/5 courses on the same topic edited by Jonas in 1839 and later by Frank in 2001, with some differences (Dial J & Dial F). Especially useful, in the case of the 1814/5 courses, are the clarifications added in by Jonas from Schleiermacher's 1818 and 1822 courses on dialectics and the *Randbemerkungen* from 1828, as well as the so-called Beilage D, added by Frank in his 2001 edition of the 1814/5 courses (Dial F 407-440). However, for the reasons just stated, the most useful text in reconstructing Schleiermacher's position on linguistic incommensurability is the *Einleitung in die Dialektik*, written by him in the year 1833 (Dial O 1-44); also partially reproduced in HK 421-443) the very first text he ever wrote on the topic of dialectics with the expressed intention of publishing it (Frank 2001, 34), one year before his unexpected death. As regards Schleiermacher's views on translation, I use mostly his celebrated essay *On the different methods of translating* of 1813, the only paper he dedicated to the topic. All translations are my own, apart from those appearing in DM, which are made by Susan Bernofsky.

Chapter 2 – Schleiermacher on incommensurability

Obviously, before even attempting to bring Schleiermacher to bear on a contemporary debate, I first need to establish that it is not an anachronistic *dialogue des sourds* and the participants are not talking at past each other. This task is complicated by the fact that Schleiermacher chose a different word to express the idea of semantic incommensurability. Although he uses the word once in his *On the different methods of translating* (M 77), he chose to use the notion of *irrationality* instead. A very unfortunate choice, it would appear, due to the obvious confusion that might arise. In fact, the primary meaning given in dictionaries of the mid-1800 for the German ‘irrational’ is precisely ‘contrary to reason’. But one of the meanings of the word comes from mathematics, where it is used precisely to describe the ratio between magnitudes which have no common measure.¹³ It is therefore synonymous with *incommensurable*, as defined at the beginning of Chapter 1. And there is no doubt that Schleiermacher’s use conforms to this definition.

Of course, if we are to take the incommensurability thesis seriously, this will not suffice to bridge the gap of two centuries separating Schleiermacher from the present. I will therefore begin by circumscribing Schleiermacher’s notion of the *irrationality* between natural languages. The observation that there are significant differences between natural languages is uncontroversially true and even trivial to some extent. And in such a formulation it is not always of philosophical interest. In fact, Schleiermacher’s notion of linguistic ‘irrationality’, especially in the literature dealing with his traductology, has most frequently been taken in a somewhat weaker sense than intended, as mere significant difference or conceptual gulf. This, I believe, takes away from the significance and depth of his thought.

¹³ Cf. *Herders Conversations-Lexikon* (1854-) and *Pierer’s Universal-Lexikon* (1857-) which give this definition and also refer to ‘incommensurabel’ in their respective entries for ‘irrational’.

Therefore, in the following, I will argue that linguistic *irrationality* has the same features attributed to semantic incommensurability in the preceding Chapter, namely incomparability of content, lack of logical relations between languages and semantic variance.

2.1. Linguistic ‘irrationality’

Schleiermacher defines *irrationality* in terms of non-correspondence (M 70, Dial O 15 = HK 422, Dial O 375 = HK 461), non-resolvability (KGA II.10, 2, p. 336; KGA I/11 711), non-reproducibility (Dial O 15 = HK 422) or non-equivalence (Dial O 15 = HK 422; Dial O 169) between the elements of two languages. It is a complete relation, since ‘no word which carries within it a logical unity corresponds to another word in another language’ (Dial O 375 = HK 461; *idem.* in M 70). The irrationality relation is also not one of anisomorphism¹⁴, characterized, that is, by the absence of a word-for-word equivalence, since Schleiermacher claims that there are elements in every language which could not be accurately reproduced in another language even with a whole succession of words (Dial O 15 = HK 422). Nor is the irrationality between languages quantitative; it is not a difference in the richness of vocabulary (Dial H 416), which would only amount to an asymmetrical incommensurability, where the poorer language could be expressed in terms of the richer, but not necessarily the other way around.

In the next sections I will reconstruct the arguments leading to this view.

¹⁴ I borrow the term from Glock 2007, 388.

2.1.1. Language and the mind

For Schleiermacher, linguistic irrationality is not a matter of mere so-called ‘external’ differences – such as grammatical or lexical differences – between natural languages: these differences ‘could even be seen as incidental if only the internal side were in harmony’ (Dial F 334 = Dial J 228; *cf.* Dial O 15 = HK 421; Dial O 375 = HK 461; Dial H 416; M 70). For it might be objected, he observes, that the only difference lies in the organization of the linguistic material, and that the thoughts expressed by means of incommensurable expressions are in fact the same: but ‘linguistic forms’ are for him intimately connected with the ‘forms of thinking’ (Dial O 167/8). Hence there is also a difference and a ‘relativity of knowing’ [*Wissen*] which is expressed in the difference between languages (Dial O 375 = HK 461). In fact, as we were able to see above, Schleiermacher maintains that thought and language are *identical* (PhE 97 = HK 361; HK 77, 84, 160; Dial O 170; Dial F 414 = Dial J 448; KGA II/4 196; *cf.* also HK 235, M 71)¹⁵ and that thought is inner speech (PhE 97, 164 = HK 361, 367; HK 78, 382; Dial O 140; Dial F 414 = Dial J 448; KGA II/4 196). The identity of thought and language is indeed supposed to constitute a fundamental tenet of his philosophy (Schnur 1994, 168).

Schleiermacher’s claim about the identity of thought and language is not merely about the ability of speech generally being somehow constitutive of the ability to think (*cf.* M 71), but it is also a claim about the ability to speak a *particular* language being somehow constitutive of the ability to think (*cf.* HK 78). ‘The human being’, Schleiermacher claims, ‘is so embedded in his language that it is not much easier for him to get out of his language than out of his skin’ (KGA II/4, p. 244). And, even if one did, one would not remain the same:

¹⁵ It has been argued, chiefly by Heinz Kimmerle in the introduction to his own edition (1959) of Schleiermacher’s *Dialektik*, that Schleiermacher eventually abandoned this identity thesis (*cf.* Birus 1982, pp. 56-57, footnote 123; Keil 2016, p. 202, footnote 15). Since there are passages which suggest that Schleiermacher was still convinced of this identity in the texts I’m examining (for instance Dial O 170, and especially in the M 85), I will not accept Kimmerle’s suggestion.

‘Whoever is convinced of the inner, essential identity between thought and expression – and this conviction forms the basis for the entire art of understanding speech and thus of all translation as well – can he wish to sever a man from his native tongue and still believe that this man, or even so much as a train of thought, might turn out the same in two languages?’ (DM 56; on the latter point *cf.* also Dial O 14 = HK 421).

Hence, a ‘difference in language presupposes a difference in thought itself’ and naturally ‘there can be no greater difference than between those who speak different languages’ (Dial O 168). In fact, this difference leads to a certain ‘irrationality in thinking’, the counterpart to linguistic irrationality (Dial O 169; *cf.* Dial O 15 = HK 422; Dial O 375 = HK 461). ‘Grotius and Leibnitz could not, at least without having been other people entirely, have written philosophy in German and Dutch.’ (DM 57).

2.1.2. Meaning variance

At the root of linguistic incommensurability, according to Schleiermacher, is the way we *acquire* concepts and language. Schleiermacher distinguishes between the ‘organic function’, a term he uses interchangeably with *sensation* [*Sinn*], and the ‘intellectual function’, by which he means *reason*. The difference in concept acquisition is grounded in the organic function (Dial F 236 = Dial J 107; Dial O 230, 233 *sqq.*; Dial O 375, 377 = HK 462, 463). But the concepts themselves and the whole ‘conceptual system’ found in every rational being has to be the same, as otherwise there could be no ‘understanding [*Verständigung*] through signs between those who, in language, have nothing in common with one another’ (Dial F 236 = Dial J 107; *cf.* Dial O 374 = HK 460). The conceptual apparatus is meant to be innate in all humans not in the sense that concepts exist within reason *qua* concepts, but rather merely as a ‘vital drive’ [*lebendiges Trieb*] towards

schematizing all true concepts (Dial F 236 = Dial J 107; *cf.* Dial F 311 = Dial J 200). For Schleiermacher, therefore, innate just means ‘preceding thinking’, namely that ‘there is in everyone the same orientation towards the same system of concepts’ (Dial O 151). This innate conceptual scheme common to all rational beings seems therefore to exist *as a disposition* (Frank 2001, 44). I will return to these claims later (*cf.* section 3.1.3.).

Thus, in acquiring language, and thereby consciousness (*cf.* HK 235)¹⁶ and thought (Dial O 168; Dial F 414 = Dial J 448), we ‘schematize’ reality (Dial O 373). Concepts emerge as a result of this schematizing process and their function is to fix universals (general images) in language. Language, therefore, is conceived by Schleiermacher as a system of designations relating general images to particular ones through signs (Dial O 372; *cf.* PhE 161 = HK 364). Words are precisely such signs which serve to fix general images so they can be later called back to consciousness (*cf.* Dial O 372; Dial F 333 = Dial J 226).

But if all rational beings are assumed to be predisposed, by the very fact of possessing reason, to the same conceptual system, how does the difference arise then? Well, each image is fixed by the individual, as every general image is derived from a particular image, which is irrevocably tied to perception, to which the individual is passive (KGA II, 10.2, p. 303/4). Hence concept acquisition depends on the particular experience of the world, which is different in different parts of it. Obviously, the language one speaks never offers sufficient warrant for possessing certainty with regards to the identity of this process in all speakers (Dial O 373; *cf.* Dial F 332, 334 = Dial J 225, 228). Since objects are differently experienced in different parts of the world, concepts are therefore differently schematized, they have a different content: hence, in use, words are differently meant. This, in Schleiermacher’s terminology, represents the exercise of the ‘organic function’, and from it ‘there results a difference in the material upon which the “intellectual function” applies in

¹⁶ *Cf.* also Frank 2001, 44 & 46, who claims that Schleiermacher conceives of consciousness as linguistic, based on Dial F 320 = Dial J 211.

order to form the “general images”, i.e. the images that are “fixated” in their more stable contours precisely in language, that is to say, in each specific language’ (Justo 2016, 11). Hence attaining that innate conceptual system is always hindered by the ‘organic’ side of our existence (Dial O 376 = HK 462).

One is never certain, therefore, that it must be so that ‘whoever utters the same word as me also constructs the same inner image and therefore the same individual organic affections’; that these are identical in different speakers ‘appears obviously as an assumption’ (Dial O 373; *cf.* also Dial F 334 = Dial J 228; Dial O 375 *sq.*). Language is for Schleiermacher, in this sense, opaque: it does not allow for a view of the speaker’s mental states. Notice however that this leads to the so-called ‘irrationality of the individual’, restricted to the individual sphere (Dial F 360 = Dial J 259). According to Schleiermacher, this is supposed to slowly level out through the use of language, and individual word-uses are slowly modified by experience in speaking a language, which confirms the assumption of identity of meaning we were forced to make above (Dial O 373).

However, it is still the case that all linguistic elements depend on this ‘organic’ side of conceptual acquisition (Dial O 372 *sqq.*; *cf.* also Dial F 333, 335 = Dial J 227, 229), and one is never certain of an interlocutor’s intended meaning. In this sense, language has a ‘sensible’ (*sinnlich*; Dial O 380 = HK 466) beginning, particular to each, and ‘there must always be some difference where something depends on certain organic impressions’ (Dial O 377). Concepts, according to Schleiermacher, always bear the stamp of their ‘sensible’ origin (Dial F 318 = Dial J 209): they are a ‘relative opposition of general and particular’ (Dial O 194; *cf.* also Dial O 342; Dial F 217 = Dial J 84; Dial F 307 = Dial J 195/6) and language is ‘tinged’ (Dial O 225) by the particular [*das Eigentümliche*] (*cf.* also Dial O 166, 167) even with respect to the universals (DM 60), irrespective of whether all human beings are predisposed to the same conceptual system.

Importantly, then, the identity of thought between speakers of the same language seems to always remain an assumption (Dial O 165, 171; *cf.* also HK 151; PhE 98 = HK 361/2; Dial O 18 = HK 424): not in the sense that reason, or the ‘intellectual function’, is not the same in all peoples (as then ‘there would be no truth’; Dial O 375 = HK 462), but rather in the sense that the content of thought (*das Gedachte*; *cf.* Dial O 129) is different, due to the fact that concepts contain a mix of individual and universal content. Hence, in distinguishing between what is common to a linguistic community and what is merely individual, ‘from the very beginning, the main rule is to apply the skeptical method without ever letting go of the assumption that there is identical thinking going on between us’ (Dial F 361 = Dial J 260).

2.2. The ‘linguistic circle’

Schleiermacher recognizes, as seen above, that since this process of constructing the identity of meaning between speakers of the same natural language is dependent on linguistic use, and linguistic use is dependent on the actual interactions a speaker has with other speakers, there is still a threat of internal incommensurability within the same (natural) language. He therefore restricts the notion of language to ‘Sprachkreis’ (*cf.* Dial O 16 *sqq.* = HK 423 *sqq.*), which I will translate henceforth as ‘linguistic circle’. Within the same (natural) language, therefore, there can exist different ‘concentric spheres in which there is a greater or a lesser community of experience and construction of thought’ (Dial O 168, *cf. sq; cf.* also Dial F 360 = Dial J 259, where the ‘eccentric circles’ partially exclude each other; and Dial F 361 = Dial J 260). Obviously, the variability in size of such linguistic circles inside the same natural language terminates, at its minimal extension, at the level of the gifted individual, the genius able to renew linguistic usage and thus (‘necessarily’, Schleiermacher will claim) create a new linguistic circle (Dial O 18, 19 = HK 424, 425). This is a rare kind of linguistic

irrationality which separates extraordinary individuals from the rest of the linguistic community of a single natural language (Dial F 334, 335 = Dial J 228; Dial O 106 *sqq.*).

It is clear, given the special relation Schleiermacher sees between language and thought, that internal incommensurability gives rise to difficulties in the communication across linguistic circles. Like between natural languages, ‘between these different linguistic organizations, be they simultaneous or successive (...) understanding (*das Verständnis*) is always obstructed’ (Dial O 17 = HK 423). The less the speakers of different linguistic circles are aware of this, ‘the more abundantly and acutely misunderstandings develop’ (*ibid.*). Communication therefore involves, for Schleiermacher, making hypotheses about the way other speakers construct the world: it involves making guesses as to the meaning of their words (Frank 2001, 38). It is important, however, to remember that due to the innate conceptual system, such communication and understanding remains possible, even across natural languages (Dial O 169).

In this sense linguistic circles represent, I submit, grammars employed by specific communities of linguistic *use*, grammars which govern what it makes sense to say in a given linguistic community. A linguistic circle corresponds therefore either to a ‘*Denkgemeinschaft*’, a ‘community of thought’ (Dial O 10; *cf.* Dial F 334 = Dial J 228) – which needn’t, of course, be the size of a natural language – or it corresponds to the style of an individual, to the ‘expression of his person, i.e. of his peculiar way to exist as a thinking individual’ (Dial O 19 = HK 425). Therefore, since there can be several linguistic circles within the same natural language, and because of the inference from ‘linguistic forms’ to ‘forms of thinking’, it is also the case that the ‘relativity of thought in one and the same language (...) is an indisputable fact (*unleugbare Erfahrung*)’ (Dial F 360 = Dial J 259; *cf.* Dial F 361 = Dial J 260). It is important to note, however, that linguistic circles may also be extended beyond the ambitus of a particular natural language, for instance, the Western

European languages when it comes to the domain of science, as these languages have developed out of Latin (Dial O 17 = HK 423; KGA I/11 712).

The breadth of linguistic circles, therefore, ranges from individual speakers all the way to scientific languages. Schleiermacher's position here should be distinguished from his other – milder – view, namely intentionalism about meaning. This claim isn't merely that we need to know a speaker's intention in uttering a sentence to fully understand it; it is that individual speakers – especially gifted ones, to be sure – can make sense of the world on their own, given the account of conceptual acquisition detailed above: they can develop different and systematic ways to conceptualize the world. Both these positions are very important features of Schleiermacher's philosophy, as they explain, especially the latter, the possibility of linguistic innovation, something fundamental to Schleiermacher's position on translation.

2.2.1. Semantic holism

These considerations reflect Schleiermacher's commitment to a certain variety of semantic holism. First of all, he 'holds that the nature of any particular concept is partly defined by its relations to a "system of concepts"' (Forster 2010, 329). '[E]very [linguistic] element always receives its determinate content only through the network [*Verknüpfung*] in which it appears. Hence the ordinary wealth of language in so-called synonyms and word-meanings' (PhE 164 = HK 366). Concepts, therefore, are determined by their connection with each other through 'judgments' or propositions¹⁷, which make up the logical relations between them: the relations of genus-concept to species-concept, vice-versa, and the horizontal relation between different genera and species (*cf.* Dial O 187 *sqq.*). A concept is

¹⁷ I will henceforth translate *Urteil* as proposition.

more determinate the more it rests on a system of propositions (*cf.* Dial F 216 = Dial J 83; Dial O 192), the more its connection to other concepts is more stable and precise.

2.3. 'Irrationality' as incommensurability

Recall that I defined incommensurability as more than meaning variance between theories. We also saw that the statements of differing theories may not be compared with each other due to the lack of logical relations between them. The following sections trace the same features in Schleiermacher.

2.3.1. Lack of logical conflict

Consider the following two statements of relativity theory (RT) and Newtonian theory (NT)¹⁸.

(RT) 'The mass of a particle increases with the velocity of the particle.'

(NT) 'The mass of a particle does not change with the change of the speed of the particle.'

As mentioned in Chapter 1, one of the main features holding between incommensurable languages is the absence of logical relations. Given meaning variance, we may not say that conflicting statements logically contradict one another. The statements above are not contradictory, since the term 'mass' has a different meaning in RT than it has in NT.

¹⁸ I borrow the example from Wang 2007, 28.

Schleiermacher gives a similar example. Imagine the statements ‘A is b’ and ‘A is not b’. The ‘A’ in one of the statements, Schleiermacher claims, ‘is obviously a different one, namely one compatible with b or including it within itself, whereas the A of the other excludes b’; hence, ‘there could be no dispute’ (Dial O 21 = HK 427). ‘For the dispute requires something shared [*ein Selbiges*] by both disputing parties, and only with reference to such a thing may it be said that the different thinking of both is not compatible, but rather it cancels out’ (Dial O 21 = HK 428).

2.3.2. Incomparability

Given meaning variance between *irrational* linguistic circles, their statements can therefore only be properly compared within a single linguistic sphere – be it a natural language, a sub-language thereof, or a linguistic circle extending beyond it – due to the absence of logical relations between them. For ‘any promising method (*Verfahren*) in a dispute presupposes that the dialectical rules have become common to the disputants’ (Dial O 13). Indeed, it is inconceivable that there be a dialogue ‘without coherence (*Zusammenhang*) of thought having been established’, something achieved precisely through rules of communication (Dial O 59). Hence, comparison requires an overarching language, which contains the two languages the statements of which need to be compared.

But this again presupposes some external system of rules, a third language such as a universal one, which could facilitate comparison. But such a universal language does not and cannot exist, since any communication and understanding in it would be irrevocably ‘subordinated to the individual [natural] languages’ (Dial O 374 = HK 461).¹⁹ In this respect,

¹⁹ Indeed, it has been claimed that Schleiermacher actually introduces the term *irrationality* ‘precisely as the counterpart of the historical attempts at a universal language’ (Justo 2016, 7).

Schleiermacher's point mirrors Feyerabend's arguments sketched out above: just as there can be no language of observation independent of theory, similarly, there can also be no universal language for communication across individual natural languages. 'For the peculiar character [*Eigentümlichkeit*] of a language is also involved in the conception of any other' (Dial O 15 = HK 421). Because in learning a foreign language one invariably has to translate it into one's own.

2.3.3. Incommensurability in the sciences

Additionally, it is difficult to arrive at some sort of consensus over the rules of communication even in the sciences, 'as even in this domain there are elements in every language that are irrational with respect to other languages' (Dial O 15 = HK 422). This is again due to the fact that the 'organic function' always intervenes and differently schematizes reality even with respect to empirical categories. For '[a]ny communication about external objects is a constant perpetuation of the trial (*Probe*) of whether all humans construct their representations identically' (Dial O 373 = HK 460), and at different times, different systems may prevail.

As a matter of fact, 'the history of all sciences is nothing but the history of reshuffles of the conceptual system (*Umbildungen des Begriffsystems*)' (Dial F 330 = Dial J 223). This is a phrase, uttered in a course on dialectics in 1818, which would perhaps not be out of place in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Schleiermacher even claims the same about mathematics: '[f]or the difference between modern and ancient mathematics is such that in the one an entirely different conceptual system of actions is presupposed as in the other' (*ibid.*). A similar suggestion is made concerning Euclidian geometry, namely that it ought to be seen and understood from Euclid's specific worldview (HK 181; for relativism in the

sciences *cf.* also KGA II/10.2 102, KGA I/11 711, 715, Dial O 235, 332, 381, 455 *sq.*; Dial O 374, 378 = HK 460, 464).

It is very important to note, however, that Schleiermacher never becomes a relativist of the Kuhnian variety. Though it is true that even on the assumption of an identical construction of thought, this construction is still no ‘complete guarantee of the correctness [of thought]’, Schleiermacher still claims that truth and error are not relative. The possibility of error rests on two commitments: the picture of conceptual acquisition and semantic holism. First of all, given that concepts are constituted by some particular and some universal content, error arises in the schematizing process, namely because the connection of the particular image to the universal image has been severed too quickly, and the concept is therefore too individual. So there can be error in spite of an innate drive towards a unique system of concepts.

Because of Schleiermacher’s commitment to semantic holism, since concepts are determined by the ‘judgments’ or proposition into which they are included and the other concepts in the system, different *reshuffles* of the system can give rise to incommensurable branches of the sciences. The incommensurability in this case will not be merely partial, because no matter how small the change, as soon as a part is changed, the whole is changed as well (*cf.* Fodor & Lepore 1992, 42; *apud* Goldberg & Rellihan 2008, 152). So we are dealing with complete incommensurability. And though consensus is reached, ‘incorrect thought may also become shared, so that thinking does not correspond to what is thought’ (Dial O 374/5 = HK 460/1). Therefore, inasmuch as it is conceived as a system of designations, and concepts can themselves be false, language has truth-value.

*

My claim here is that the above considerations justify us in treating Schleiermacher’s notion of ‘irrationality’ as synonymous with the modern notion of ‘incommensurability’

outlined at the outset of this thesis. My arguments in the remainder of this dissertation do not presuppose a subscription to all of Schleiermacher's commitments. My aim here in fact was not to assess the tenability of his position. As mentioned at the outset of this thesis, I do not which to argue for the incommensurability thesis. Rather, my intention in this part of the discussion was merely to argue that there is sufficient ground for considering Schleiermacher's position to be outlined in Chapter 3 as a credible contribution to the debate around the incommensurability thesis. My interest was only in showing that Schleiermacher's conception of *irrationality* is made along sufficiently similar lines with the modern conception of incommensurability to warrant comparison.

To summarize, we have seen, first of all, that there is the mathematical origin of the terms 'irrationality' and 'incommensurability'. Secondly, we noted that comparison between 'irrational' linguistic spheres is impossible, due to the lack of a neutral, universal language as well as Schleiermacher's holistic conception of meaning. Additionally, we have seen that there is no dispute between two conflicting – and perhaps even seemingly contradictory – utterances which do not belong to the same linguistic circle. Hence two utterances containing the same string of words uttered by two speakers do not necessarily mean the same if the speakers belong to different linguistic spheres (M 67, *cf.* also HK 318; Dial O 373 = HK 460; Dial F 334 = Dial J 228). Consequently, there is no logical conflict between incommensurable linguistic spheres.

Chapter 3 – Schleiermacher on translation

Let me now turn to Schleiermacher's position on the question of translation. His only systematic treatment of the topic was delivered in an epochal lecture entitled *On the different methods of translating* in front of the Berlin Academy of Sciences in 1813. Leaving aside the importance of this paper for the discipline of translation studies, and the 'groundbreaking legacy' (Bernardo 2015, 40) it left, as well as its more practical importance for actual translators, as an instruction manual, it is difficult to see what philosophical importance it might have outside of Schleiermacher scholarship. In fact, Schleiermacher himself calls it, in a letter he wrote to his wife, 'really trivial stuff'.²⁰ The fact that he wrote the lecture in less than three days and that it was initially read in front of an audience of just seven, lends credence to the idea that it was indeed, for him, something trivial (Justo 2016, 3; Cercel & Şerban 2015, 3).

In my view, however, Schleiermacher's lecture is philosophically significant because it does not dismiss interlingual translatability at the outset. As we were able to see at the beginning of this thesis, incommensurability is, more often than not, synonymous with untranslatability. Hence the fact that most critiques of the incommensurability thesis have come precisely as criticisms of the notion of an untranslatable language. Now, although Schleiermacher defines *irrationality*, as I have discussed above, in terms of non-correspondence, non-resolvability, non-reproducibility or non-equivalence, this never entails untranslatability for him, as I will argue in the following. Additionally, I have shown in the preceding chapter that his account of *irrationality* retains all the definitive features of the incommensurability thesis: incomparability, semantic variance between languages and lack of

²⁰ Letter from the 24th of June 1813, in Schleiermacher (1860, vol. 2, p. 300) cited in: Berner, (2015, p. 44). [my translation]: 'I was unable to write you yesterday, since I still had my hands full with the paper I read today at the Academy. It's actually really trivial stuff, but that's exactly why people found it insightful and very good, and why they want that I should read it in the public session.'

logical conflict. But regardless of these features, far from dismissing translatability, Schleiermacher goes on to praise it as an art in itself (Dial F 360 = Dial J 259) or even a solution: translation is supposed to keep the irrationality of languages and the consequent ‘relativism of thought’ at bay [*beherrschen*] (Dial F 361 = Dial J 260; *cf.* also KGA I/11 717).

It is now clear where Schleiermacher’s originality lies: namely the assumption that utterances from different languages are translatable *in spite of* their being part of incommensurable ‘systems of designation’ (*cf.* Dial O 372). I claim that, for Schleiermacher, linguistic *irrationality* is not at all synonymous with untranslatability (*pace* Frank 2001, 35). The radicalism of Schleiermacher’s assumption, however, seems to border on inconsistency. Let me first consider the account.

3.1. Translatability despite incommensurability

Schleiermacher begins his lecture on the different methods of translating by emphasizing the universality of the phenomenon of translation. Not only do we translate from one language to another, but ‘(...) we need not [...] even go beyond the bounds of a single language to encounter the same phenomenon’ (DM 43). Schleiermacher points out that even within the same language (defined locally, not nationally, as local dialects might even be seen as individual languages) differences in education, or even ‘opinions and sensibility’, make it so that we need first to *translate* what our interlocutor says in order to really understand what they mean: the same words uttered by someone else carry a different meaning or at least have a stronger or a weaker content as they would if they were uttered by us (DM 43). This leads him to conclude that we would have to use other words or expressions to convey the same intended meaning. Indeed – Schleiermacher goes on to say – after some time has passed, we have to translate even our own utterances, in order to ‘make them truly our own again’ (DM

44). Such a process of intralingual translation is in fact a necessity (M 67, 68). A similar claim is made in the lectures on hermeneutics: interpretation [*Auslegung*] becomes necessary the moment one fixes one's thoughts in language, even if one does so only for oneself (HK 76).

This fragment emphasizes a familiar point, i.e. Schleiermacher's view that 'the meanings of words and the pertinence of the rules of connection [*Verbindungsregeln*] are ultimately determined by the thinking individuals' (Frank 2001, 37). What is interesting and perhaps unexpected is the fact that communication between different linguistic spheres can only occur through translation and *as* translation into one's own idiom, be this translation either interlingual or intralingual.²¹ And since communication, for Schleiermacher, undoubtedly does occur, there is only one conclusion to draw: the fundamental translatability of all utterances.²²

It seems therefore, that Schleiermacher sees at least some varieties of ordinary linguistic understanding and communication as representing a kind of intralingual translation. In fact, it is a commonplace occurrence (M 67). It is important to keep this in mind, because although he goes on, in this lecture, to define interlingual translation as 'the stricter notion of translation' (DM 48), the difference between these notions is one of degree, not kind. There are enough similarities between intralingual and interlingual translation to not dismiss this characterization as merely rhetorical. Although the difficulties of intralingual translation should not be dismissed, Schleiermacher takes on the challenge and discusses what he calls 'translation proper': from one natural language to another (DM 46).

Schleiermacher's strategy in specifying this 'stricter notion' is to define it negatively, and he first delimits it from *Dolmetschen* / interpretation (the kind of interpretation, for

²¹ I'm borrowing Roman Jakobson's terminology (Jakobson, 1959).

²² Cf. Siever 2015, p. 153. This point reflects a commitment to what Antoine Berman called the romantic ideal of a '*traduisibilité de tout en tout*' (Berman, 1995, p. 132).

example, a UN interpreter does), a type of interlingual translation he restricts to commercial affairs and business transactions. In the German of the time, as Schleiermacher himself notes (DM 44), and indeed in contemporary German, the term is more or less synonymous with *übersetzen*, ‘to translate’, although it tends to refer rather to oral translation²³. In these types of interactions – not exclusively oral, although when they are written, they are usually the record of a verbal transaction – linguistic utterances are directed by two main principles: (1) they ‘involve readily apparent, or at least fairly well defined objects’ or (2) where they don’t, and meaning is uncertain, as in those concepts that are ‘indicated by a graded series of terms that vary in ordinary usage [...] habit and convention soon serve to fix the usage of the individual terms’ (DM 45). In this case, since the words have clear physical referents, that is to say since the interaction is about ‘matters of fact’, to borrow a Humean term, the meaning of linguistic expressions is not contingent on the speaker, as was the case presented in Schleiermacher’s introductory words. This makes *dolmetschen* a mechanical activity, which means that it is governed by rules which can be learnt and automatically applied to cases, based on the fact that commercial interactions form an area of linguistic communication which is meant to represent states of the world in a clear and unambiguous way. The reason to introduce this distinction is to define translation proper as not a case of mechanical conversion.

A second reason for the distinction is that Schleiermacher wants to restrict the field of his reflections on translation and operate within the confines of a literary genre, albeit one defined very broadly and more in terms of its content than its textual form: the domain of ‘art and science’. This restriction parallels one of his hermeneutical ideas, namely that just as not all linguistic utterances are of equal interest to hermeneutics (KGA II/4 381) and not all require an ‘art of understanding’ to be understood, but only those who demonstrate an ‘art’

²³ Cf. ‘dolmetschen’ in Duden online. URL: <https://www.duden.de/node/809344/revisions/1743708/view> (accessed: 1/26/2019).

themselves (HK 76, 82), similarly not all texts require 'translation proper' (DM 46). Thereby, what is characteristic of this genre of texts is first of all the author, his 'own particular way of seeing' (DM 44) and his 'free individual combinatory faculties' (DM 45). This emphasis placed on the author makes it so that in the domain of art and science 'the object no longer dominates in any way, but rather is governed by thought and feeling; indeed, it often comes into existence only through being uttered and exists only in this utterance' (DM 45). Here, the author makes a conscious and self-reflective decision not only regarding what to express but also, and this is crucial, *how* to express it.

A second characteristic of the works of art and science is the fact that they are innovative: they constitute 'a new moment in the life of language itself', and indeed these are for Schleiermacher the only works that are entitled to live on (DM 46; *cf.* also HK 82 *sq.*). Of course, this depends on the author, inasmuch as 'it is the living force of the individual that causes new forms to emerge' (DM 46). But the third and most important reason for the *dolmetschen* – *übersetzen* distinction is to identify simultaneously the grounds for this difference in translatability – and translation practice alike (the mechanical and simple *dolmetschen* and what he goes on to call the 'the art of translation'): namely linguistic *irrationality*.

Given the analysis presented in Chapter 2 regarding the notion of *irrationality*, this is not a surprising account. In this introductory passage, in fact, Schleiermacher provides a very clear exposition of the ultimate consequences of his picture of language and concept acquisition, and the restriction of the concept of language to the 'linguistic sphere'. As a matter of fact, he constructs the task of 'translation proper' along the same lines and emphasizing the same key features which we saw give rise to linguistic irrationality in the previous section. The point about linguistic innovation, the renewed commitment to the thesis of the identity of thought and language (DM 56) and the emphasis on the individuality of the

author all suggest that Schleiermacher is preparing precisely an account of how to translate from one natural language to another with which it is incommensurable.

The task of the translator, described in this way, appears insurmountable. In a passage that deserves to be quoted in full, Schleiermacher puts the point this way:

‘If [the translator’s] readers are to understand, then they must grasp the genius of the language that was native to the writer, they must be able to observe his characteristic manner of thinking and sensibility; and all he can offer them as a help for achieving these two things is their own language, corresponding in none of its parts to the other tongue, along with himself, as he has recognized his writer now the more, now the less lucidly, and as he admires and applauds the writer’s work now more, now less. Does not translation appear, viewed in this way, an utterly foolish undertaking?’

(DM 48)

So how is such an undertaking to be achieved? Schleiermacher’s reply has become famous: ‘[e]ither the translator leaves the writer in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him’ (DM 49). The first method is, for Schleiermacher the only one which does not distort the author’s view and opinion and consequently the only one I will analyse here. Using this method, the translator is supposed to ‘bend the language of his translation to accord to the greatest possible extent with the language of the original so as to give as full a sense as possible of the system of concepts [*Begriffssystem*] inherent in this other language’ (DM 60, translation slightly altered).²⁴ The strategy, therefore, is to conceptually enrich the

²⁴ For Schleiermacher’s debt to Herder for the ‘bending approach’, see Forster (2010, p.339 *sqq.*). For his development of it farther than Herder, see Forster (2010, p. 152 *sqq.*). For Herder’s debt to Thomas Abbt for the approach, see Forster (2010, p. 161).

target language, a common idea at the time, found already in Novalis' writings on translation, and a project Schleiermacher shared with Leibniz, Herder and Lessing (Berman 1995, 61, 242). In other words, the translation is meant to enrich the target language until it may engulf the source and, 'bent to a foreign likeness' (DM 53), become able to *express* it.

We may reconstruct the argument in the following way. Recall that the task a translator is faced with is to make something intelligible to her readership which their native language is unable to express; and something, precisely because of this latter reason, which they themselves are unable to conceive. I will deal with these two issues separately in the following sections.

3.1.1. Expanding effability

Let us assume now that natural languages may be conceptually or terminologically enriched. I hold this as being uncontroversial and there are certainly many claims to this effect in Schleiermacher.²⁵ I will call this process as language L becoming L+. This may either take place (1) by means of the import of foreign terms or (2) the modification/expansion of the meaning of already existing terms. This implies that a language's *effability* will also be expanded. In case (1), if L+ has numerically more concepts, it will be able to formulate more propositions. The same is true, on the other hand, in case (2), i.e. if L+ merely contains new meanings associated with terms already existing in L. Assume α to be a term which acquires new meanings in L+ such that it becomes predicable of more other terms. Now, the task of translation would hardly be achieved if the enriched term α in

²⁵ Just as language may be enriched, it may of course also be impoverished. Through use, Schleiermacher claims, concepts become corrupted and lose meanings previously possessed: cf. Dial F 358 *sq.* = Dial J 256; PhE 165 = HK 367. This is precisely the danger posed by philosophical and scientific terminology and jargon, namely that it becomes meaningless and corrupted: cf. PhE 165 = HK 367; Dial O 25 = HK 431; KGA II/4 41 *sq.*, 551; KGA I/11 713.

L+ became incompatible with its former meanings in L and thereby incomprehensible to the reader. I claim therefore that there is no reason why the meaning(s) α possessed in L would have to be discarded. Hence, in L+, α remains predicable of the same terms it was predicable of in L, but, since its meaning is expanded, *ex hypothesi*, it is now predicable of even more terms. And the more terms a concept is predicable of, the greater its scope (Dial O 207). Thus, in case (2) as well, L+ will be able to formulate more propositions. Hence, its effability will be expanded.

3.1.2. Expanding conceivability

Now, if a language's effability is expanded, the number of propositions a speaker is able to understand will also expand, such that more thoughts will become conceivable by her. In case (1), the issue is straightforward. Given that for Schleiermacher language is a 'system of designations' (Dial O 372) and we are only ever able to conceive the thoughts which already have their designation in our language (HK 78), it stands to reason that more conceptual resources lead to greater conceivability. The point may be put in the following way: assume a speaker has the concepts 'GUITAR', 'BLUE' and 'OUT-OF-TUNE' and has actually entertained thoughts with all of them. Now, although this individual never entertained a thought with the concept 'OUT-OF-TUNE BLUE GUITAR', such an idea and other similar combinations will nonetheless be conceivable by her and intelligible to her.²⁶ Now, assume the concept NEW is added. As soon as the language is enriched and a concept is added to the system, this will expand not only the realm of actual thoughts entertained, but also the realm of conceivability and intelligibility. If OUT-OF-TUNE BLUE GUITAR was

²⁶ I modify here an example given in Goldberg & Rellihan 2008, 148-149, who defend the incommensurability thesis.

conceivable by an L-speaker although it had never actually been conceived, NEW OUT-OF-TUNE BLUE GUITAR would have not been conceivable by her. However, a speaker of L+ would be able to conceive of new out-of-tune blue guitars without any difficulty.

The expansion of conceivability in case (2) can be made sense of in much the same way, given that for Schleiermacher concepts are not some extra-linguistic entities, but rather are differentiated in the meanings and uses of words (Frank 2001, 29; Forster 2015, 24). Let me modify the example like this. In the same conceptual system of ‘GUITAR’, ‘BLUE’ and ‘OUT-OF-TUNE’, the concept ELECTRIC GUITAR is introduced. Hence the previously inconceivable OUT-OF-TUNE BLUE ELECTRIC GUITAR is now conceivable. Therefore, the expanded meaning of GUITAR to contain ELECTRIC GUITAR in L+ counts as a new concept.²⁷ Due to Schleiermacher’s adherence to semantic holism, every minor change of this nature will affect the meanings of other words, since any modification in the meaning of a part of the system affects the meaning of all other parts (Fodor & Lepore 1992, 42; *apud* Goldberg & Rellihan 2008, 152).

We are now able to see precisely the reasons behind Schleiermacher’s requirement (M 67, 68) of intralingual translation. On the assumption that languages are historical and change through use (*cf.* Dial O 374), and that any semantic change, no matter how minor, affects the meanings of the whole, then L and L+ are completely incommensurable stages of the same natural language. Of course, this doesn’t entail that everything which was previously expressed in L is now unintelligible in L+. We can perfectly well understand authors from our past in an idiom enriched with concepts like TRAIN or BLENDER. Schleiermacher will claim, however, that what we actually do is *translate* into our enriched language, for the reasons just expressed.

²⁷ *Cf.* also Dial O 25, where the point is made that terms such as ‘An sich’ and ‘Für sich’, which have acquired new philosophical meanings, count as new ‘linguistic elements’.

In translating from a different natural language, given the fact that a natural language may be apportioned in many distinct smaller fragments (*cf. supra* 2.2.), what this enrichment has achieved is to create a linguistic circle L_+ , incommensurable with L , but commensurable with the linguistic circle from which the source text originated. This clarifies why Schleiermacher saw translation as a solution to incommensurability; but I will return to this later (section 3.2.).

3.1.3. Indefinite enrichment

As we have seen, for Schleiermacher, conceivability is related to effability, namely in such a way that whatever is thinkable is sayable. We may recall on this occasion the formulation of the effability principle for natural language mentioned above: ‘each human thought is expressible by some sentence of any natural language’ (Katz 1972, 19) (*cf.* section 1.3.). However, we have also seen that for Schleiermacher all natural languages are incommensurable at least with respect to certain words, therefore limited with respect to the expression of certain thoughts. Hence, the effability principle should be limited to: ‘each human thought is expressible by some sentence of *some* natural language’.²⁸

One might suppose, consequently, that there are *a priori* limits to the expansive and hence expressive possibilities of languages. If this is the case, translatability would then also

²⁸ Katz himself suggests a similar restriction as the *principle of local effability*: ‘for any thought T of a native speaker of a natural language L , there is a sentence of L whose sense expresses T , but for some thought T_1 of a native speaker of a natural language L_1 and some different natural language L_2 , there is no sentence of L_2 whose sense expresses T_1 ’ (Katz 1972, 20). He goes on to give the example of the vocabulary of modern physics and ‘the vocabulary of the languages of what are sometimes called primitive peoples’ and to suggest a strategy of enlarging the latter language with new vocabulary by a process of education.

Sankey (Sankey 1997, 115-117) builds on this restriction in order to defend the claim that not everything learnable and understandable is thereby necessarily translatable. He proceeds to provide an objection to the distinction between understanding and translation, not altogether dissimilar from Schleiermacher’s account: everything is translatable into any natural language, provided its vocabulary has been sufficiently enriched. He dismisses such a strategy for the case of scientific theories and goes on to argue for local cases of untranslatability. He simultaneously argues for an *infinite enrichability* of natural languages, a claim I hold paradoxical, as I argue in the following.

have to be limited, i.e. it would only be possible between languages or linguistic circles which could potentially become enriched enough to express the other. Hence, if there are limits to how much a language can be enriched, we can conceive of cases of asymmetrical translatability, where language A can translate language B but not vice-versa; and cases of complete untranslatability, where neither language can be sufficiently enriched to express the other.

I have previously touched upon Schleiermacher's doctrine of the 'innate system of concepts', an idea Schleiermacher himself recognizes as easily misleading and causing misunderstandings (Dial O 232) and which gives pause even to his most famous commentator, in my view: Manfred Frank.²⁹ I have suggested that it might be understood as an innate *disposition* (cf. section 2.1.2.). Recall that the rationale Schleiermacher provides for such a view is that it guarantees an 'understanding through signs' (Dial F 236 = Dial J 107; cf. Dial O 374 = HK 460) between those who didn't *schematize* reality in the same way. In other words, it makes speakers interpretable by other speakers, making linguistic understanding possible. We have also seen that this innate conceptual system precedes thought (cf. Dial O 151). Hence it is pre-linguistic, since it must also precede language. I hold, therefore, that it ought not to be understood as a conceptual scheme, but merely as a disposition to acquire it. Its acquisition, however, as we have seen above (section 2.1.2.) is always perturbed and disrupted by sensation, or 'the organic function'.

On this minimal interpretation and the assumption that reason is the same in all individuals (Dial O 230; Dial O 375 = HK 462; Dial F 360 = Dial J 259), it follows that all rational beings ought to be interpretable in whichever language they express themselves in. For if there were inherent *a priori* limits to the expressive possibilities of a particular

²⁹ Cf. Frank 2001, 44 *sqq.* & Frank 2005, 20 *sq.* for an in-depth analysis. Michael Forster considers it 'dubious'; cf. Forster 2010, 346.

language X, this would pose limits on the mind's ability to conceive certain thoughts in language X, which contradicts the universality of reason. I will return to these issues in the next section (3.2.).

I propose, therefore, that languages may be thought of – on the interpretation of Schleiermacher's position that I submit here – as *indefinitely enrichable*. I don't commit to an *infinite* capacity for enrichment as that would entail a commitment to there being nothing beyond human comprehension, nothing *inconceivable*. I hold such a position to be paradoxical. For just as positing a limit to conceivability already involves transcending it – 'for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought)', as Wittgenstein put it (Wittgenstein 2001, 3) – similarly, to claim that there *cannot* be limits to thought seems to fall prey to the same paradox.

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I have argued in this section (3.1.), based on Schleiermacher's position, that linguistic utterances are translatable *in spite of* their being part of incommensurable languages. But does this not make the incommensurability thesis assume a rather different proportion? Does it not lead even to a collapse of the notion of incommensurability? After all, it seems uncontroversially true to say that '[d]ifferent points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them' (Davidson 1984, 184). But the existence of any sort of conceptual common ground undermines the claim to incommensurability.

3.2. Incommensurability despite translatability

In a lecture given in 1831, on the topic of Leibniz' project of a universal language, the *characteristica universalis*, Schleiermacher criticizes Leibniz for his belief in conceptual primitives and the idea that there would have to be a common conceptual system shared by all rational human beings. Schleiermacher observes that the evidence of linguistic *irrationality* is overwhelming and even within the same language, the value of the individual words is never to be recognized clearly, and meanings are *indeterminate*, they change and oscillate (KGA I/11 711, 712). In fact, he even ironizes the belief that words might be reduced to stable meanings, a belief caused by 'the intoxication of mathematical enthusiasm' (KGA I/11 711) and explained by the fact that mathematics is the discipline in which language is used the least (KGA I/11 712). He goes on to express ideas I already discussed previously, such as the relativism apparent in the sciences (KGA I/11 711, 715), the temporary success but ultimate failure of the Latin language in transcending language barriers (KGA I/11 712) and the individual character of national languages (KGA I/11 712, 713).

However, a common conceptual ground may nonetheless be *achieved* in the sciences and in philosophy, Schleiermacher will go on to claim, though conceptual import or translation, i.e. precisely the kind of enriching translation we saw above (KGA I/11 717). The *irrationality* between languages is, in other words, reconcilable: namely, not so 'that all languages gradually vanish into a single one which would be left as the absolute victor in this battle' (KGA I/11 714)³⁰, but such that a kind of multilingualism is achieved. This will produce a new language, a *Kunstsprache*, in virtue of which the differences between the original texts and their translations will slowly vanish, as every language will start to possess

³⁰ In Dial O 16, Schleiermacher argues that if such a goal were ever achieved and all humans would speak a single natural language, it would constitute a poor gain for human knowledge, as it would deprive us of all the different ways of thinking, 'which only taken together exhaust the thought [*das Denken*] of the human mind'.

the expressive and conceptual resources of all the others (KGA I/11 717). This language, therefore, is not the *pasigraphy* of Leibniz, but rather a kind of *polyglossia*. In my interpretation, this language of science and philosophy – of which Schleiermacher presents here a sketch – is a universal language; not only in the sense that all rational human beings would be able to understand one another in it, but also in the sense that it contains within it all natural languages, which are to be seen as fragments of it.

I claim, on the interpretation I have argued for above (3.1.3), that this position is consistent with the doctrine of the innate conceptual system. In fact, I maintain that it is a clarification of Schleiermacher's innatism.³¹ It also clarifies why translatability does not entail commensurability. For, as long as we accept that there can be internal incommensurability within the same natural language (an assumption this thesis leaves uncontested) – such that it may be fragmented into several incommensurable 'linguistic circles' (*cf. supra*, section 2.2.) – we might also accept the idea that natural languages are *disposed* to be integrated, as parts, into a larger whole. After all, just as we can take slices of a given natural language and end up with incommensurable pieces of it – in fact, both Newtonian and relativity theories can be formulated simultaneously in most natural languages, indeed using pretty much the same vocabulary – similarly, we could divide an *a priori available* universal language (the innate conceptual system) in such a way to end up with incommensurable natural languages.

A plausible objection to such an argument is that, as opposed to natural languages, which may be indefinitely enriched, scientific theories are clearly defined and delimited conceptually. As I have argued, in order to be tenable, Schleiermacher's position on translation requires natural languages to not have *a priori* boundaries (*cf. supra*, section 3.1.3.). At the same time, however, his claim that languages are incommensurable rests

³¹ I do not share Forster's view, who sees this 1831 paper as a refutation of the doctrine of innate concepts; *cf.* Forster 2010, 346.

precisely on some thoughts not being conceivable in certain languages; i.e. it rests on boundaries placed on cognition. Schleiermacher may be defended in the following way.

Recall that on his picture of concept acquisition presented above (section 2.1.2.), the way reality is *schematized* depends on the ‘organic function’, i.e. sensation. But the content of sensation depends on geography. In different parts of the world, humans have access to different natural phenomena; hence they conceptualize the world in a different way. This not only suggests that languages may be *accidentally* incommensurable, in the sense of not having enough knowledge of the world, but rather that certain concepts remain *inaccessible* to certain languages. For, if not all rational human beings have access to the same natural objects and events, they will neither have access to all concepts and will schematize the world in a different way. Such ways of schematizing will therefore be limited precisely in the sense of being fragments of a potential whole to which access is limited, fragments ‘which only taken together exhaust the thought [*das Denken*] of the human mind’ (Dial O 16).

Schleiermacher’s position of universal translatability of natural languages does not therefore entail their commensurability because no language has within it the resources to expand. In order to become commensurable, natural languages need to be enriched, raised to a common denominator – so to speak – which requires translation. This interpretation helps to understand Schleiermacher’s claim that languages are not invented, but rather discovered (DM 51): they are discovered precisely *through* each other. This is the role of the *foreign* in Schleiermacher’s account, this is its *mediating nature* (DM 62): mediating, that is, towards a reconciliation of the different ways of making sense of the world, and an integration of them into one. In other words, towards a discovery of the *unity of reason* without which the *irrationality of language* cannot be reconciled [*ausgeglichen*] (Dial F 360 = Dial J 259) in spite of the apparent diversity and incommensurability of the conceptual resources of different languages.

To summarize, in this chapter I have presented Schleiermacher's account of the method of translating he advocates for and I have, on the basis of it, provided an argument for the universal translatability of natural languages which is consistent with their incommensurability. I have also argued that the notion of incommensurability does not collapse as a result of universal translatability. I strongly believe that, as it stands here, this argument holds; and I submit it as a valid argument. Considered theoretically, Schleiermacher's suggestion of how to overcome semantic incommensurability through translation is an important contribution, though *avant la lettre*, to the debate surrounding the incommensurability thesis.

However, the argument fails if we consider the account practically, i.e. if we trace the steps necessary in order for a human being to achieve the translation suggested. In the next chapter I will argue that the account is inconsistent with Schleiermacher's views regarding the relation between language and the mind and that he is ultimately incoherent. I will also argue, however, for a way in which the account may be defended from a practical perspective as well.

Chapter 4 – Schleiermacher's practical flaw

I have previously made reference to Schleiermacher's commitment to the thesis that language and thought are identical (section 2.1.1.). Adherence to this principle, inherited from Hamann, as mentioned, makes the argument inconsistent for the following reasons: (α) it makes second language acquisition very difficult; and – even in the miraculous cases of actual bilingualism – (β) it makes translation impossible. The following argues for why this happens. I will first consider case (α).

Learning a first language modifies the mind, Schleiermacher claims (HK 79) and the comprehension of any other language is determined by one's native tongue: '[f]or the peculiar character [*Eigentümlichkeit*] of a language is also involved in the conception of any other' (Dial O 15 = HK 421). Though Schleiermacher doesn't argue for this view, it is not hard to see why he holds it: learning a second language involves translating it into one's native tongue. Hence one only understands a foreign language, at first, via the translating language. In such a case, we only understand what our own language was able to translate; we only understand, therefore, what our own language was able to express. In other words, we can only learn what, in the foreign language, was commensurable with our own. On the assumption that natural languages are incommensurable, learning a foreign language is therefore impossible.

A plausible objection to such claims is that they only hold true for the first stages of second language acquisition. After reaching a certain level, the first language may progressively be abandoned and the second language may therefore be learned and understood *in its own terms*. However, on the assumption that language and thought are identical, the way the first language modifies the mind is *irreversible*. If (a) thinking is only

possible in and through language and arises simultaneously with the acquisition of the first language (Dial O 168), if, moreover, (b) thinking is only possible in one's own language, then (c) one may never think in a foreign language. Therefore, one may never understand any language different from one's own. I do not mean to say here that when learning a foreign language one is forced to assume the position of an *interpreter* – at any rate, interpretation and understanding are synonymous for Schleiermacher (HK 71, 75) – but rather that, if language and thought are identical, one always *misunderstands*. Language acquisition seems to be, for Schleiermacher, a one-way-street leading to a dead-end: one is positively held prisoner in one's language.

To be sure, Schleiermacher recognizes the existence of those 'extraordinary men such as Nature is in the habit sometimes of producing, as if to show herself able to destroy even the barriers of national particularity in individual cases', individuals which 'are able to grasp foreign works free from the influence of their mother tongue, and to perceive their own understanding not in their mother tongue but with perfectly native ease in the original language of the work' (DM 50-51)³². Let me assume, for the sake of argument, that such bilingualism is the norm, rather than an extraordinary occurrence. But even on this assumption, Schleiermacher's position is untenable due to the thesis of the identity of thought and language. Let me now consider case (β).

As recognized by Schleiermacher himself, the greatest threat to translation is the incommensurability between the translator's thinking, dependent on her native language and shaped by it, and the foreign language in which she reads (M 77). Recall that for Schleiermacher a translation is meant to convey an understanding of the foreign text from an incommensurable language to the reader, i.e. to make something intelligible to her reader which his native language was unable to express. On the assumption of bilingualism, i.e. that

³² Such extraordinary individuals are perhaps also the writers of the New Testament, which, writing in Greek, succeeded in also thinking in Greek, as opposed to their native Hebrew; cf. KGA II/4 242.

the translator is actually able to understand the text she is meant to translate, it seems that before possessing in her own language the very understanding she wants to convey it, she first needs to carry it over an unbridgeable gulf. In other words, she needs to translate it.

Let us consider two incommensurable languages A and B, and a text (T) written in A expressing a certain content (C). C is *ex hypothesi* (i.e. on the assumption of incommensurability) inconceivable in B. Therefore, if C is to be made intelligible to a speaker of B, B needs to be conceptually enriched, i.e. becoming B+. Now, on the assumption of bilingualism (and, again, *only* on this assumption), C is intelligible to the translator, because she is able to think in A. But she will not be able to express C in B, because B does not have the conceptual resources. Hence, she must produce B+, such that C becomes effable. The issue here is that if a language's ability to express and a speaker's ability to conceive are *identical* in the relevant sense, then how is the translator to expand B into B+ (in order to make C effable) without being able to conceive of C in B? For if a translator is supposed to express the inconceivable, she first has to be able to conceive of it, and that only takes place either in A or B+. Hence, the translator has to produce B+ *before* being able to conceive of C in B. Or she must conceive of it in a language commensurable to both, such as a transfer idiom. But, as seen already, Schleiermacher greatly criticizes the notion of a universal language. And his own polyglottic alternative does not help either, as it is built entirely on the assumption of universal translatability, which I have now shown to be practically impossible, due to Schleiermacher's commitment to the thesis of the identity of thought and language.

From a practical standpoint, therefore, Schleiermacher's position crumbles under the excessive weight put on the idea of identity between thought and language. As I have argued, adherence to this thesis entails that the translator either never understands the source text, or she does so in an incommensurable idiom and cannot translate it at all. In case (α) the content

remains ultimately ungrasped, whereas in case (β) there is no vehicle for verbalizing it in an intelligible idiom other than the originating language: in both cases the content is prisoner to the form.

But the practical impossibility of Schleiermacher's account does *not* undermine the argument I have constructed on his behalf. Recall first the work this principle does in Schleiermacher's own exposition of his views on the topic discussed by this thesis. We have first encountered it in Chapter 2, in the inference from 'linguistic forms' to 'forms of thinking'; and its role was to grant the conclusion that a difference in language presupposes a difference in thought. As confirmation of the validity of the inference, we have also seen that it leads to a certain 'relativity of knowing' which is expressed in linguistic difference (Dial O 375 = HK 461). As such, the communication between incommensurable linguistic circles is obstructed (Dial O 17 = HK 423). Finally, we saw that as a consequence of this thesis, speakers of a particular language are only capable of thinking what their language is able to express (HK 78).

On the other hand, in the arguments I provided on Schleiermacher's behalf in Chapter 3, such a principle was never required. In fact, we can do without it, and I believe Schleiermacher could have too. To be sure, Schleiermacher commits himself to this principle again in *On the different methods* (...), claiming that not a single 'train of thought' may be expressed – or 'turn out the same' [*werden*] (DM 56; M 85) – in two languages. But the work the principle does here is merely to explain why the target language needs to be *bent* towards the source and not the other way around.

I claim, therefore, that a weaker version of the principle is sufficient for making sense of Schleiermacher's position on translation: the thesis that thought is dependent on language and that one may only think what one may express linguistically. This was Herder's innovation in the philosophy of language and shared by most philosophers contemporary with

Schleiermacher (Forster 2010, 16 *sqq.*). This principle also captures very well the restricted principle of effability I introduced above (*cf.* section 3.1.3.), namely that ‘each human thought is expressible by some sentence of *some* natural language’.

But, with this minor modification, we can now make sense of the practical possibility of the account as well. To start from Chapter 2, substituting the principle of the identity of thought and language with that of the dependence of thought on language, as defined, we see that it accomplishes the same philosophical task. Namely, if one may only think what one may express linguistically, then, if languages have different structures and conceptual resources, this will imply a corresponding difference in thought. All else follows from this: the ‘relativity of knowing’, the difficulties in communication between different languages and finally the fact that speakers of a particular language are only capable of thinking what their language is able to express. When it comes to the arguments I gave in Chapter 3, as mentioned, the principle does no work.

The difference lies in the way this new principle impacts case (α). Though it is still true, and I believe uncontroversial, to say that in learning a second language one first understands it via the translating language, the dependence principle does not entail that such an influence may not be shed. It does not entail, in other words, the impossibility of bilingualism. If one’s thought merely *depends* on the language one expresses it in then it is not *constituted* by one’s first language and a second language may thus be acquired.

With respect to case (β), as mentioned, the issue there was that if a language’s ability to express and a speaker’s ability to conceive are *identical* in the relevant sense, the translator had to expand the source language *before* being able to understand in it the content to be translated. In the modified version of the account, however, if the translator’s ability of conceive merely *depends* on the language’s ability to express, then, once understood, the content of the source text can continue to be understood across languages. Hence, the

translator can conceive of what she aims to express in the source language and therefore can expand it to make the content intelligible to other speakers.

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To summarize, in this chapter, I have argued that Schleiermacher's account fails *in actual practice* because of the thesis that language and thought are identical. I have subsequently argued that this principle is overqualified for the task it is meant to perform and suggested a plausible restriction which might save the account.

Conclusions

My aim in the present thesis was to discuss the puzzle of semantic incommensurability and to argue for the thesis that incommensurable languages are not *ipso facto* untranslatable. Towards this purpose I have discussed and reconstructed Friedrich Schleiermacher's position on the relevant issues. First of all, I have argued that his concept of linguistic 'irrationality' is consistent with the notion of semantic incommensurability employed in the debate surrounding the incommensurability thesis. Secondly, I have suggested that Schleiermacher's treatment of the problem of translation is philosophically significant in that it comes *against* the contemporary tradition and debate, by not equating incommensurability with untranslatability. Subsequently, I have provided an argument on Schleiermacher's behalf showing that, despite this apparent incoherence, Schleiermacher's suggestion can be made sense of theoretically and that translatability and incommensurability are properties which may hold simultaneously between languages. Then, I have provided a *practical* critique of Schleiermacher's account of translation arguing that, on his views on the relationship between language and the mind, no rational human being would ever be able to rise to the challenge posed by the incommensurability between languages. Finally, I have defended the argument against these critiques by weakening Schleiermacher's views on the relationship between language and the mind and showing them to be consistent with his own and succeeding where his views had failed.

So what has been my achievement? First of all, I have introduced Schleiermacher in a debate in relation to which he had never been examined before, at least to my knowledge. I have not only shown thereby that he can be adequately discussed outside of the domestic disputes of historians of philosophy – concerned with the proper succession of dead ideas – but I have also shown that he may be considered as having a genuine and original voice in the

debate. I believe that Schleiermacher's great insight into the nature of translation is this: translation is not undermined by incommensurability precisely because it doesn't presuppose *commensurability*, but rather it *produces* it. Translation is more of a transplant than the simple transfer of an invariant meaning. It is a *grafting* procedure which alters both linguistic bodies.

Secondly, I began my thesis by outlining a puzzle and suggesting that both ways of solving it left a lot to be desired. On the one hand, in accepting the thesis that different languages conceptualize the world in rather different ways, we were forced to accept – on the face of it, at least – that such languages are ultimately untranslatable. An unpalatable concession! On the other hand, in affirming translatability over difference, we were compelled in accepting a similar compromise. Backed into a corner by the unappealing alternatives, we were on the horns of a dilemma. I believe that my reconstruction of Schleiermacher's position with respect to this puzzle offers much in the way of making progress in thinking about it and providing perhaps less unattractive alternatives. At any rate, this thesis gives sufficient reasons to generate an opposition to the *lieu commun* in recent trends of conceptualizing translation in contemporary philosophy.

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