Arthur Schopenhauer

ON LANGUAGE AND WORDS

[Translated by Peter Mollenhauer]

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THREE

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The word is the most enduring substance of the human race. Once a poet has properly embodied his most fleeting emotion in the most appropriate words, then this emotion will continue to live on through these words for millennia and will flourish anew in every sensitive reader. . . .

Not every word in one language has an exact equivalent in another. Thus, not all concepts that are expressed through the words of one language are exactly the same as the ones that are expressed through the words of another. . . .

Sometimes a language lacks the word for a certain concept even though it exists in most, perhaps all, other languages: a rather scandalous example is the absence of a word in French for "to stand." On the other hand, for certain concepts a word exists only in one language and is then adopted by other languages. . . . At times, a foreign language introduces a conceptual nuance for which there is no word in our own language. Then anyone who is concerned about the exact presentation of his or her thoughts will use the foreign word and ignore the barking of pedantic purists. In all cases where a certain word cannot render exactly the same concept in another language, the dictionary will offer several synonyms. They all hit the meaning of the concept, yet not in a concentric manner. They indicate the directions of meaning that delineate the boundaries within which the concept moves. . . . This causes unavoidable imperfection in all translations. Rarely can a characteris-

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tic, terse, and significant sentence be transplanted from one language to another so that it will produce exactly the same effect in the new language. Even in the realm of prose, the most nearly perfect translation will at best relate to the original in the same way that a musical piece relates to its transposition into another key. Musicians know what that means. Every translation either remains dead and its style appears forced, wooden, and unnatural, or it frees itself of the constraints of adherence to language, and therefore is satisfied with the notion of an *à peu près*, which rings false. A library of translations resembles a gallery with reproductions of paintings. Take translations of authors from antiquity: they are as obvious a surrogate as chicory for coffee. Poems cannot be translated; they can only be transposed, and that is always awkward.

Hence, when we learn a language, our main problem lies in understanding every concept for which the foreign language has a word, but for which our own language lacks an exact equivalent—as is often the case. Thus, in learning a foreign language one must map out several new spheres of concepts in one's own mind that did not exist before. Consequently, one does not only learn words but acquires concepts. This is particularly true for the learning of classical languages, since the ways in which the ancients expressed themselves differ considerably more from ours than modern languages vary from one another. This is most conspicuously evident with translation into Latin: expressions totally different from the original have to be used. Indeed, the ideas to be transplanted into Latin have to be totally reconstituted and remolded; the idea has to be dissolved into its most basic components and then reconstructed in the new language. It is precisely through this process that the mind benefits so much from the learning of ancient languages. One can only fathom the spirit of the language to be learned after one has correctly grasped the concepts that this language designates through individual words, and when one is capable of immediately associating each word with its corresponding concept in the foreign language. We will never grasp the spirit of the foreign language if we first translate each word into our mother tongue and then associate it with its conceptual affinity in that language—which does not always correspond to the concepts of the source language—and the same holds true for entire sentences. If one has properly grasped the spirit of a foreign language, one has also taken a large step toward understanding the nation that speaks that language for, as the style is related to the mind of the individ-

ual, so is the language to the mind of the nation. A complete mastery of another language has taken place when one is capable of translating not books but oneself into the other language, so that without losing one's own individuality one can immediately communicate in that language, and thereby please foreigners as well as one's countrymen in the same manner.

People of limited intellectual abilities will not easily master a foreign language. They actually learn the words; however, they always use the words only in the sense of the approximate equivalent in the mother tongue, and they always maintain those expressions and sentences peculiar to the mother tongue. They are incapable of acquiring the "spirit" of the foreign language. This can be explained by the fact that their thinking is not generated by its own substance but, for the most part, is borrowed from their mother tongue, whose current phrases and expressions substitute for their own thoughts. Therefore they use only worn-out patterns of speech (hackney'd phrases; *phrases banales*) in their own language, which they put together so awkwardly that one realizes how imperfectly they understand the meaning of what they are saying and how little their entire thinking goes beyond the mere use of words, so that it is not much more than mindless parrotry. Conversely, a person's originality of expression and the appropriateness of individual formulations used by such a person are an infallible indication of a superior mind.

From all this it becomes clear that new concepts are created during the process of learning a foreign language to give meaning to new signs. Moreover, it becomes clear that concepts that together made up a larger and vaguer one, since only one word existed for them, can be refined in their differentiation, and that relationships unknown until then are discovered because the foreign language expresses the concept through a trope or metaphor indigenous to that language. Therefore, an infinite number of nuances, similarities, differences, and relationships among objects rise to the level of consciousness as a result of learning the new language, and thus one perceives multiple perspectives of all phenomena. This confirms that one thinks differently in every language, that our thinking is modified and newly tinged through the learning of each foreign language, and that polyglotism is, apart from its many immediate advantages, a direct means of educating the mind by correcting and perfecting our perceptions through the emerging diversity and refinement of concepts. At the same time, polyglotism

increases the flexibility of thinking since, through the learning of many languages, the concept increasingly separates itself from the word. The classical languages effect this to a much higher degree than the modern languages because they differ more from ours. This difference does not leave room for a word-for-word rendering but requires that we melt down our thoughts entirely and recast them into a different form. Or (if I may be permitted to bring in a comparison from chemistry), whereas translation of a modern language into another modern one requires only disassembly of the sentence to be translated into its obvious components and then the reassembly of them, the translation into Latin often requires a breakdown of a sentence into its most refined, elementary components (the pure thought content) from which the sentence is then regenerated in totally different forms. Thus it often happens that nouns in the text of one language can only be transplanted as verbs in another, or vice versa, and there are many other examples. The same process takes place when we translate classical languages into modern ones. Thus is revealed the distance of the relations that we can have with classical authors, by way of such translations. . . .