

APPLYING ARENDT TO TRANSLATION DISCOURSE

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This paper applies Arendtian reflections to fundamental aspects of translation. We begin by considering linguistic diversity in connection with Arendt's notion of human plurality and inquiring what that means for translation. As each person exists only as one of many, each language exists only as one of many languages. As human plurality necessitates mutual understanding among people, linguistic diversity necessitates translation. We go on to explain the relationship between a text and its translation through the concepts of 'appearance' and *doxa* (opinion). If the existence of the world is contingent on plural individuals and their *doxa*, a text exists fully through its different translations, or appearances of the text via the *doxa* of different translators. Finally, we analyze the nature of translational practice in terms of 'labor', 'work' and 'action'. We argue that the task of the translator should not remain at the level of labor, which is driven solely by the need for survival and self-preservation, nor at the level of work, which serves instrumental purposes; we propose instead that translating should culminate in action, with a keen awareness of others and the good of the entire community.

Keywords: Human plurality – Linguistic diversity – Appearance – Translation – Action

Introduction: Arendt, Translation, and Translators

It may seem strange to link Arendt to translation. Although Arendt's philosophy certainly encompasses profound observations on humanity, it has been discussed primarily from the perspectives of political philosophy and phenomenology. In what ways can we speak of Arendt's unique theorizations on translation? Indeed, some previous studies have touched on Arendt's thoughts on translation. One prime example is Knott's research (2014) on the issues in translation that Arendt herself encountered, in which

Knott offers significant insight into Arendt's thoughts on translation by referring to the works of Buber, Rosenzweig, and Benjamin.¹

It must be stated that this paper does not set out to discuss Arendt's approach to translation; rather, our aim is to explore various issues concerning translation through some key Arendtian concepts. In particular, how does Arendt's meditations on the 'human condition' relate to translation, a text-based activity? We demonstrate in the following pages that Arendt's ideas on human plurality, appearance, and *doxa* have a surprising yet natural affinity with the relationship between a text and its translation(s). Arendt's distinctions between labor, work, and action prove equally useful in enriching our understanding of translation. Can and should the translator's practice, often considered a mere mediation between languages and cultures, be elevated to the level of 'action'? These questions were the starting point of our research.

1. Human Plurality, Linguistic Diversity, and Translation

In Arendt's philosophy, the notion of human plurality carries just as much weight as *Dasein* and *In-der-Welt-Sein* do in Heidegger's philosophy.² The best way to understand Arendt's notion of human plurality is to start from the opposite end. Antonymous to the notion is 'Man'—i.e., one singular man. Arendt argues:

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings. Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness (Arendt 1958, 175 – 176).

According to Arendt, human plurality means that each person exists not as a singular entity but as one of many. The notion does not simply indicate that people exist in relation to 'each other' in the present. Rather, they also exist in relation to earlier

¹ Cited below is a passage from Knott's *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt* that best conveys Arendt's thoughts on translation: "Like Mendelssohn, Buber and Rosenzweig had performed more than a simple act of linguistic transfer. Through their translations, they had provided a new home for an alien spirit—one from a distant time and different cultural sphere. When the here and now into which this act of cultural transport occurs is open to dialogue, such a transfer has the power to impart new impulses to the receiving culture and to open new images and spaces for thought" (Knott 2014, 32).

² Though human plurality is as central to Arendt's philosophy as *Dasein* and *In-der-Welt-Sein* are to Heidegger's, it is closer in meaning to Heidegger's *das Man* or *das Mitdasein*.

and later generations. Moreover, people are equal in that they must understand one another through action and speech. Nobody is exempt from such conditions of plurality. People act and speak in manners that are distinct from others in the past, present and future, and this is the only way to acquire “unique distinctness”. To sum up, “the concept of plurality has the twofold meaning that there exist a multitude of people and that each existing person differs from all the others, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (Auestad 2005, 262). This is based on the premise that people do not exist in the world constantly, but newly enter the world through birth and then exit through death.

Language bears a striking resemblance to human plurality. The idea that no human being has ever existed in the singular can be directly applied to language. No language exists on its own. Equality and distinctness, mentioned above with regards to human plurality, are also relevant concepts. Just like human beings, languages must understand one another, as well as those of the past and future, respecting the fundamental equality of each. Languages must make themselves understood as they are distinct from one another. To this end, translation becomes necessary. Just as human “plurality is disclosed, as well as realized, in speech and action” (Auestad 2005, 262), linguistic diversity is disclosed, enhanced, and realized in translation. If not for translation, different languages would not be able to make themselves understood; it may even be impossible to distinguish one language from another. “Human plurality is the basic condition of both action and speech” (Arendt 1958, 175), and in the same manner, linguistic diversity is the basic condition for translation.

Let us now examine human plurality and linguistic diversity in connection with translation. Exposure to a language other than one’s mother tongue is almost inevitable in this age of globalization. Translation has become a prerequisite for societies around the world to coexist. Here, we would like to quote a tendentious yet humorous passage from St. Augustine:

For if two men meet, and are forced by some compelling reason not to pass on but to stay in company, then if neither knows the other’s language, it is easier for dumb animals, even of different kinds, to associate together than these men, although both are human beings. For when men cannot communicate their thoughts to each other, simply because of difference of language, all of the similarity of their common human nature is of no avail to unite them in fellowship. So true is this that a man would be more cheerful with his dog for company than with a foreigner” (St. Augustine 1984, 861).

If St. Augustine is right in his assertion that linguistic diversity may cause antagonism and conflict, why did so many languages come into existence in the first

place? As Steiner asks, “Why should *homo sapiens sapiens*, genetically and physiologically uniform in almost all respects, subject to identical biological-environmental constraints and evolutionary possibilities, speak thousands of mutually incomprehensible tongues?” (Steiner 1998, 10)

Steiner questions why humans have come to use such a variety of languages despite their biological uniformity. His answer is that “Each human language maps the world differently. When a language dies, a possible world dies with it” (Steiner 1998, 11). According to Steiner, each language is a map of the world in which its users live, containing the metaphysical and literary potential unique to that world. Therefore, the extinction of a language entails the loss of a universe it could have revealed. In order for people who map the world differently to, as St. Augustine puts it, “communicate their thoughts to each other”, what solution is there but translation?

In a similar vein, Ricoeur defines translation as a kind of ‘task’ (‘*choses à faire*’) that is necessary for the persistence of ‘action’ in the Arendtian sense – “not in the sense of a restricting obligation, but in the sense of the thing to be done” (Ricoeur 2006, 19). Ricoeur emphasizes that translation is vital for the global community to continue engaging in dialogue and mediation, given that linguistic diversity is an undeniable human reality. As long as more than four to five thousand different natural languages exist in the world, translation is essential in responding effectively to such trans-national matters as climate change, epidemics, nuclear damage, large-scale wars, and subsequent issues of refugees and immigration. Ultimately, humanity has drawn various world maps in different languages, which can only be shared via translation. This is precisely what Ricoeur means when he concludes that to translate is “to say the same thing in another way” (Ricoeur 2006, 25).

Further, if natural languages are maps of the world, then translating one map crafted in one language into another language creates another map of the original. Consequently, the original gives rise to multiple maps. Each language is a map of the world to which it belongs, and each translation a map of the original written in another language. This provides an apt basis for applying Arendt’s notions of ‘appearance’ and *doxa* to translation.

2. Applying ‘Appearance’ and ‘*Doxa*’ to Translation

How can we use Arendt’s ideas to explain Steiner’s perception that each language conveys its own world and maps the world in a unique way? Before we answer this question, let us briefly explore ‘appearance’ and ‘*doxa*’, concepts that illustrate Arendt’s philosophical stance just as well as the aforementioned human plurality. At least within the tradition of Western philosophy, ‘being’ has usually taken precedence over ‘appearing’. While ‘being’ has been described as ‘true’, appearance has always been

nothing more than mere *Erscheinung*. Plato, too, regarded *doxa* as a notion inferior to *epistēmē*. However, this traditional hierarchy between being and appearance was challenged by Arendt, whose approach to the world's phenomenal or appearing nature is evident in the following passage:

In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*. Dead matter, natural and artificial, changing and unchanging, depends in its being, that is, in its appearingness, on the presence of living creatures. Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a spectator. In other words, nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is meant to be perceived by somebody. Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth" (Arendt 1978, 22, emphasis in the original).

Arendt equates 'being' with 'appearing' on the grounds that one cannot exist without anyone to perceive them; they exist only in the manner in which they appear to their spectators. This ontological approach has implications for the discourse of translation, which must take into consideration the existence of texts. Texts cannot exist in any way other than appearing and being perceived. Just as nothing can exist without presupposing spectators, no text can enjoy full existence without presupposing readers. In fact, texts are a set of appearances perceived by plural readers. The source text is perceived differently by every reader and, by extension, every translator.

Do such multiple appearances have nothing in common? They do. If they did not, it would have been impossible for people to reach any understanding or agreement, or to even exist in the public realm as unique personal identities, distinguishing oneself through speech and action. The same can be said about textual appearing. There exist different translations of the same text. The source text may be perceived differently by translators A and B, but the two emerging translations cannot possibly appear as two completely divergent texts. Instead, as Berman accurately observes, translation reveals "another side" of the source text in the target language: "There is another level where something of the original *appears* that does not appear in the source language. The translation turns the original around, reveals another *side* of it" (Berman 1992, 7; original emphasis).

As shown above, Berman does not believe that any one translation can wholly convey the source text. In essence, translators simply transfer a certain side of the source text as perceived by them into the target language.

Let us now return to the aforementioned dynamics of 'the world vs. language vs. translation' and 'the world vs. a map vs. a map of the map'. In Arendtian terms, one does

not exist in and of itself but ‘appears’ – or more precisely, appearance is its *only* mode of existence. This ‘appearance’ of the world is perceived by plural spectators through their individual languages. What they perceive is their *doxa*, and each of their languages is a map of the world in the Steinerian sense. What is translation then? According to Berman’s observation mentioned above, when this map is translated into another language, a new side is revealed that was not perceived previously. In short, translation is a map of the map, or *doxa* of the *doxa*.

Berman has already explained this aspect of translation using the term ‘manifestation’. To Berman, the source text contains the “experience of a world” (“experience d’un monde”) (1999, 70), and therefore represents a kind of “manifestation of a world” (“manifestation d’un monde”) (1999, 78). It is important to note that Berman does not see “communication” as the ultimate purpose of language or translation. Nor does he consider translation to be the “communication of communication” (“communication d’une communication”) (1999, 76) but as the “manifestation of manifestation” (“manifestation d’une manifestation”) (1999, 76) – i.e., the process of revealing the world perceived in one language in another language, of remapping and reinterpreting.³

Arendt goes on to elucidate the notion of *doxa* as follows: “The *doxa* had as its topic not what Aristotle called the *eikos*, the probable, the many *verismilia* (as distinguished from the *unum verum*, the one truth, on one hand, and the limitless falsehoods, the *falsa infinita*, on the other), but comprehension of the world “as it opens itself to me” (Arendt 2005, 14). *Doxa* is how one perceives and talks about the appearance of the world “as it opens itself to” them. This particular phrase clarifies the epistemological nature of *doxa*. It is neither “subjective fantasy and arbitrariness” nor “something absolute and valid for all” (Arendt 2005, 25). Arendt concludes that *doxa*, or “*dokei moi*” (the it-seems-to-me) is “the mode, perhaps the only possible one, in which an appearing world is acknowledged and perceived” (Arendt 1978, 24). Everyone has their own *doxa*, their own opening to the world, and “the world opens up differently to every man according to his position in it.” Likewise, a text opens up differently to every translator, and a personal reading is perhaps the only mode in which a translator can perceive the text. However, arguing that *dokei moi* (the it-seems-to-me) or seeming is the only way one can perceive the world is not to say that one can question or deny the ‘reality’ of that world. Arendt explains:

The point is, rather, that we know from experience that no one can adequately grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own, because the world always shows and reveals itself to him from only one perspective, which

³ In this respect, it is safe to say that Arendt, Steiner, and Berman all belong to the same ‘thought of translation’.

corresponds to his standpoint in the world and is determined by it. If someone wants to see and experience the world as it “really” is, he can do so only by understanding it as something that is shared by many people, lies between them, separates and links them, showing itself differently to each and comprehensible only to the extent that many people can talk about it and exchange their opinions and perspectives with one another, over against one another. Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides. Living in a real world and speaking with one another about it are basically one and the same (Arendt 2005, 128 – 129).

According to Arendt, the appearing world is ‘inexhaustible’ in that it shows itself to not only one person but to many people. If reading or translating a text is understood not as one person’s *doxa* on a given text but as that of many people, then multiple translations of one source text cannot be the same. In fact, their difference makes them all the more inexhaustible. Indeed, this richness of meaning stems not only from the differences between various *doxa* but also from discord and conflict. Any dispute over mistranslation that continues to this day is based on the fact that all translations are appearances as well as *doxa*. Arendt posits above that people can only comprehend the “real” world by exchanging a wide range of opinions and perspectives with one another (2005, 128 – 129). By the same token, readers can only comprehend the “real” text by exchanging various interpretations and translations, which may converge or diverge. In Arendtian terms, the truth of a text is not just perceived by one person but shared by many, whereas in Ricoeurian terms, a text appears or “opens itself” differently with the passage of time.⁴ In other words, the truth of a text only exists in the form of multiple *doxa*, in the plural.

Yet, is this multiplicity always guaranteed? What kind of world threatens multiplicity and destroys pluralism? Arendt asserts that autocracy or a war of annihilation destroys human pluralism. Autocracy permits only the opinions and perspectives of the autocrat, while overlooking, marginalizing or oppressing the rest. A war of annihilation crushes individuals, ethnic groups, or dissidents, thereby resulting in the destruction of the world (Arendt 2005, 175 – 176, Arendt 1958, 202). It can be argued

⁴ Ricoeur explains the inexhaustible (“inépuisable”) nature of the world from a different perspective. He points out that the appearing world does not occur “all at once” (“d’un seul coup” (1949, 147)). In fact, various appearances are disclosed when we observe the world “by turns”. Yet, Ricoeur’s world appears differently “according to time”. The world is inexhaustible because it does not stop at appearing in response to the actual *doxa* or perception of the here and now, but appears differently in the past, present, and future. This idea can be applied to texts and translation to deduce that texts as appearances are not perceived by readers or translators at once by way of reading in the present. Re-reading or re-translating at intervals is essential because a new side of the text is revealed each time.

that autocracy and war destroy the world because its healthy existence depends on a diversity of words, perspectives, and *doxa*.⁵ Likewise, multiple readings, interpretations, and translations make it possible for texts to exist. Texts that have not yet been read, interpreted, or translated are ones that cannot exist in full. As Gadamer claims, “Thus every translation is at the same time an interpretation. We can even say that the translation is the culmination of the interpretation that the translator has made of the words given him” (Gadamer 1996, 406). According to Renan, “A work not translated is only half published” (quoted in Berman 1992, 178). Therefore, one might say that a text does not exist in its entirety if it is not conveyed “differently,” as Steiner puts it (“autrement” in Ricoeur’s words), by different people in different languages.

3. The Practice of Translation in Arendtian Terms: “Labor”, “Work”, or “Action”?

Every action taken under the conditions of the global community by speakers of different languages inevitably involves translation. The operation of the UN or EU without translation is simply unthinkable. Can translation, then, be regarded as ‘action’ in the Arendtian sense? Or is it no more than a kind of ‘pre-action’ that serves as a linguistic medium for action? In order to answer these questions, we must first examine the three types of *vita activa* (“active life”) proposed by Arendt, namely ‘labor’, ‘work’, and ‘action’.

Arendt understands ‘labor’ as human activity directed at acquiring necessities for self-preservation and survival. The ‘laboring’ person only works to maintain their physical existence and produces no other consistent output. Arendt gives “bread” (1958, 94) and “cultivated land” (1958, 138) as examples of fruits of labor. Although necessary for human survival, bread is consumed in just one day and disappears. In addition, cultivating land to grow wheat – the key ingredient for bread – is in a wider sense ‘labor’ that is used to sustain human life.

Arendt goes on to mention products of ‘work’ such as “a table” (1958, 94), “a chair” (1958, 137), and “the most flimsy pair of shoes” (1958, 138). A table, usually made from natural materials like wood, is not a one-off product like bread. Instead, it possesses durability and instrumental usefulness. Products of work require markets in order to be distributed, and as durable entities endorsing the world’s stability, they last for a long time. However, the durability of a table is but limited.

Lastly, Arendt alludes to the “great words” (*megaloi logoi*) of Antigone, and the heroic deeds of Achilles (1958, 194). Of course, “poetry” (1958, 169) as “work of art”

⁵ Benhabib describes post-World War II genocide as “the knowing and willful destruction of the way of life and existence of a collectivity” and “the destruction of human variety, of the many and diverse ways of being human.” (Benhabib 2004, 9, footnote 3). Although Benhabib does not mention linguistic multiplicity, it is clear that the way of life and the existence of collectivity, human variety, and the diverse ways of being cannot be separated from language.

(1958, 167) is on the border between work and action. Yet, great works of art or heroic deeds subsist in our memory, which means that fruits of action are not ‘consumed’ like those of labor or ‘used’ like those of work. Not only that, the products of action are handed down to future generations to be studied and emulated.

Given what we have established so far, we can further examine Arendt’s distinctions between labor, work, and action on three levels.

The first one is the temporal level. The existence of products of labor, work, and action goes from momentary (e.g. bread and cultivated land), to long-lasting (e.g. a table, a chair and shoes), and finally to immortal (e.g. Antigone and Achilles).

The second is the spatial level. Products of labor remain strictly within private homes (*oikia*). Products of work come into contact with the outside world but only to a limited extent. Products of action reach a public, communal space of plurality through “speech and action” in the presence of others.

The third is the nature of *vita activa* as observed from the perspective of human plurality. People who labor are driven by their desire for survival and self-preservation and are thus governed by nature. When it comes to work, human life is dominated by the usefulness of objects made from natural materials. Action goes beyond grappling with forces of nature; it involves leading an active life in which one reveals their unique personal identity by engaging with various people and demonstrates an “excellence” (Arendt 1958, 49) that distinguishes oneself from others. (Arendt 1958, 41; 176). In this stage, interest in and compassion for others and the world become truly imperative.

Let us now return to our earlier question. Of the three realms of *vita activa*, where does the practice⁶ of translation lie? If translators treat their activities as a means to fulfill the “necessities of life” (Arendt 1958, 83) and to accumulate financial wealth with little interest in turning it into “the thing-character of the world” (Arendt 1958, 93) or transmitting it to posterity, then the translations they undertake can only be transitory. As a result, their activities remain mere ‘labor’ in the Arendtian sense. In addition, if society willfully views the practice of translation as something that certain individuals carry out for a living, the path for translators to enter the public realm will be hindered. If a translator refuses to take the risk of venturing into the public realm and only focuses on the issues of livelihood, it can be seen as “a sure sign of slavishness” (1958, 36).

⁶ In this paper, we follow the definition of ‘practice’ as proposed by MacIntyre: “By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (MacIntyre 2007, 187). The translator’s “practice” in the MacIntyrian sense relates to Arendt’s “action” in that they both involve a) being “cooperative” with others, b) seeking to achieve “excellence”, and c) extending the conceptions of a community’s “ends and goods”.

How does translation rise above ‘labor’ and become ‘work’? In other words, when does translation transcend matters of survival and self-preservation? When the translator, through their practice of translation, leaves behind “things to be seen, heard and remembered” (1958, 95), which possess “durability” (1958, 136) and are deemed useful for the human world, they engage in “work” (1958, 94). For example, the production of translation can be preserved in various forms – texts, images, and recordings – and contribute to the establishment of a community, securing a kind of “instrumentality” (1958, 153), in which case translation falls under “work”.

When does translation become ‘action’ then? When the translator helps speakers of different languages communicate and interact with one another, and participates in handling the destiny and agenda of the community, they are elevated to the status of someone who takes ‘action’ – they are no longer laborers or workers who just perform their jobs with no regard for ethical or political consequences. For example, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, a number of studies have been published on the ethical dilemmas of translators working in war zones or other conflicted situations calling for ethical decisions. It has been argued that part of the “social responsibility” of translators is to provide linguistic service to the vulnerable.⁷ These empirical studies and data show that translators, regardless of their wishes, are placed in situations where they must take ‘action’ in the Arendtian sense.

Furthermore, there are some critical discussions of the existing discourse that has forced an invisible role and status upon translators.⁸ In the language of Arendt, the key message is that translators must take ‘action’ for the good of the entire community, rather than merely following the orders of their clients to “just translate” or hiding behind the cloak of anonymity to remain invisible. If translators use language as a medium to “support better living together” (Drugan and Tipton 2017, 121), they are taking “action” in every sense of the word. Practicing translation on this level is difficult to explain on the levels of ‘labor’ and ‘work’.

4. Conclusion: Intersection of Action and Translation

We have thus far explored human plurality, *doxa*, and the possibility of ‘action’. Moreover, by applying these concepts to translation, we have highlighted linguistic multiplicity and each language as *doxa*, not to mention translation as the convergence and divergence of languages and *doxa*.

If speakers of different languages lacked the “ability to stand outside a singular language” (Cronin 2006, 11), translation would be an impossible feat. The ability to stand outside oneself is indispensable not only in translation but also in action. Self-

⁷ Inghilleri (2008), Drugan (2017), Drugan and Tipton (2017), Chesterman (2008), Chesterman (2018).

⁸ Venuti (1994). For a more recent reference, please see Rafael (2012).

definition, or indeed existence, is contingent on one's relationship with others. Only through engagement with others can one translate and take action. Therefore, perhaps translation is itself an act of excellence both factually and metaphorically.

The English word 'idiot' is derived from the Greek word *idion*, which means 'private', 'one's own' or 'peculiar'. The antonym, *koinon*, means 'common' in the sense of 'public' or 'communal'. The word 'idiot' came to mean 'foolish' because, from the perspective of the *polis*⁹, to care only for *idion* and neglect *koinon* must have been deemed foolish and detrimental. Those who are only concerned with themselves without caring for the community is a fool – not in the sense that they lack intelligence but, rather, in that they cling to their opinions and are indifferent to others and the world, unable to view things from the community's perspective.

Arendt claims, "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world" (1958, 179). Translators must decide for themselves whether to place their practice of translation (and fruits thereof) on the level of labor, that of work, or within the realm of action that brings out their unique personal identities as human beings. This is the philosophical and ethical question that Arendt poses to the contemporary discourse on translation.

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⁹ According to Arendt, *polis* is "not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be" (Arendt 1958, 198).

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