

Revisiting the Question: Insights from Linguistics, Semiotics, Philosophy



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“To Be, or Not to Be” in Translation:
Ay, There's the Point

GIOVANNI GOBBER

Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy

Abstract

In this contribution, the sentence type (declarative or interrogative), the disjunctive *or*, the infinitive mode of the verb *to be* as well as the lexical meaning encoded in it are addressed with regard to some translations of the move that opens Hamlet's soliloquy, in the Third Act of the tragedy named after him. In the description, the translated passage is quoted and a retranslation into English is proposed, so that the choice made by the translator is better understood. As is evident, this choice is partly related to the architecture of the language into which the text is translated, and partly motivated by the translator's own interpretation. Moreover, certain features of the language structure deserve to be considered in order to ask whether and how a language system influences the interpretation itself. The legacy of Coseriu's insights invites us to rethink the activity of translation as a form of knowledge that can access a truly interlinguistic level (*übereinzelsprachliche Ebene*).

Keywords: translation, interpretation, interrogative structures, disjunction, infinitive mood, verbal noun, static and dynamic dimensions, *Hamlet*

Some reflections are proposed here on the famous move with which the Prince of Denmark opens his soliloquy, in the Third Act of the tragedy named after him. More specifically, I consider some translations into various languages (for a detailed overview of Shakespeare's translations in

Europe see <shine.unibas.ch/translators.htm>). As for the English text, I rely on the annotated version by Burton Raffel. The original formulation was in Early Modern English (for this period in the history of English, see Barber); but as regards the original text, there are at least three versions: the so-called First Quarto (1603), the Second Quarto (1604-5) and the First Folio (1623) (see Tronch-Pérez 31-47). The formulation used in the title of the present article is that found in the First Quarto, which is thought to be a copycat of a theatre performance rather than an early draft of the play (hence the term *Bad Quarto* used to denote it, in opposition to the Second or *Good Quarto*). The contemporary versions are usually based on the last two. In none of these versions is the famous dilemma formulated by means of an interrogative structure. But it is possible to interpret *to be, or not to be* as a disjunctive question. So do many translations.

The sentence type (declarative or interrogative), the disjunctive *or*, the infinitive mode of the verb *to be* as well as the lexical meaning encoded in it are considered here with respect to the translations of Hamlet’s initial move of his soliloquy. These preliminary, tentative analyses aim to verify the validity of the assumption that investigating translations is a key to a better understanding of Hamlet’s dilemma outlined in the original English text. In the various formulations considered here, linguistic structures can be found that conceptualise the meaning differently from the English version considered. In the present article, sense (Coseriu’s *Textsinn*) is approached in the light of the linguistic conceptualisation: the different encodings (Shaumyan 21-42) show different semantic aspects of the text.

Questions in Translations of *To Be, or Not to Be*

The sentence expressing Hamlet’s dilemma is not easy to describe: the printed text lacks a question mark and in terms of grammatical structure it may be a declarative – or, precisely, a coordination of two declaratives related by the disjunctive *or* which is preceded by a comma in the printed text. Yet, the sentence is often interpreted as an interrogative, and the speech act is accomplished with a pragmatic function (as in Stati, *Transphrastique*) other than a statement. The structural under-determination allows for different interpretations – and intonations – in the

theatre performances. In the translation, the ambiguity between declarative and interrogative makes it possible to opt for the interpretation as a question.

Thus, in some Italian versions the question mark is used: e.g. *Essere o non essere? Ecco il quesito* “To be or not to be? Here is the question” (Cesare Garboli). In other versions, the disjunction connector is omitted: *Essere, non essere, qui sta il problema* “To be, not to be, here lies the problem” (as in the translation by Luigi Squarzina). The question is also found in the French translation by Pierre Antoine de la Place (published in 1746): *Etre, ou n’être plus? Arrête, il faut choisir!* (333), where *that is the question* is translated in the tradition of *belles infidèles*. But the most authoritative French version is that of François-Victor Hugo: *Etre, ou ne pas être, c’est là la question*. Hugo also translated another version of Hamlet which was based on the text of the quarto copy discovered in 1825 and belonging to the Duke of Devonshire (“sur le texte de l’exemplaire in-quarto découvert en 1825 et appartenant au duc de Devonshire,” as we read on the title page of the volume). Of this version, the translation is: *Être ou ne pas être, voilà le problème* (139).

The question mark is also found in several Polish translations: e.g. *Być albo nie być? Otóż to jest pytanie* (“to be or not to be? Well, this is the question,” Wojciech Bogusławski, published in 1797), *Być czy nie być? ... oto jest, co rozważać trzeba* (“to be or not to be? This is what must be considered,” Franciszek Dzierżykraj Morawski, 1830), *Być albo nie być? Oto zapytanie* (“this is the enquiry,” Cyprian Norwid, 1862), *Być czy też nie być? Oto jest pytanie!* (“this is the question!,” Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, 1954). But in the most recent translations no question mark occurs, e.g. in Barańczak’s version: *Być albo nie być – oto jest pytanie* (Diuna Group).

The choice to translate Hamlet’s move with an interrogative structure reveals the feeling of an audience who considers the alternative question as the discourse move in which the dilemma is appropriately placed. In a usual yes-no question (e.g. *Is p the case?*) there is also a disjunction of the type “p or not p is the case” (where *p* stands for a propositional content), but it is presupposed and not expressed (in the sense of Ducrot 40). But in an alternative question *p or not p?* the alternative is not presupposed: it is expressed. As a possible pragmatic effect, the disjunctive question can be

felt as more urgent (“plus péremptoire,” says Nicole Fernandez-Bravo, 52) and can serve to more clearly formulate the horns of the dilemma, as in this case. The alternative question gives preference to a choice “in terms of polar opposites” (Bolinger 125). The interrogative structure in *to be or not to be?* emphasises absence of decision, irresolution and uncertainty. According to Nehring, a question in general is an uncertain utterance (*eine unsichere Aussage*, Nehring 42). In fact, the prototypical pragmatic function of a question is a request for an answer. But in this translation of Hamlet’s move the question is posed, not asked (as in Lyons 755), because the request for an answer remains in the background, whereas the ‘undecided’ (i.e. neither asserted nor denied) status of the proposition comes to the foreground.

Three elements make it possible to interpret *to be, or not to be* as an alternative question: 1) the linguistic structure of the passage is unmarked with respect to the distinction between declarative and interrogative, and it is therefore possible to read the passage as a question; 2) in the meta-discursive comment that follows, the word *question* occurs, whose meaning in Shakespeare’s English is probably different from the meaning of *question* in contemporary English (see LEME, the historical database of the Toronto University), but whose spelling remains identical; in the soliloquy Hamlet goes on and describes the dilemma by means of an alternative question expressed with two subordinate interrogative clauses that are coordinated by the correlation *whether...or?*, with a final question mark (I use the annotated edition by Burton Raffel):

Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them?

Structurally, these interrogatives are subordinate clauses, but they are independent discourse moves and therefore do not require a main clause. Similar structures are found in German, and Marga Reis calls them *selbständige Nebensätze* (“independent subordinates,” cf. Reis 283).

The correlative disjunctive *whether... or* is a marker that reinforces the meaning of a disjunctive alternative (“aut... aut”); as for the form, *whether* corresponds to the German word *weder*, which occurs in *weder...*

noch “neither... nor” and in *entweder... oder* “either... or.” As regards its etymology, *whether* has the same Indo-European root as the Latin interrogative pronoun *uter?* “which of the two?,” as well as the Russian *kotoryj* “which.” The I.E. root is *Q^UE- which has the basic meaning of interrogativity and indefiniteness (cf Frei, *Interrogatif*); it is followed by the affix *-TER- which is a marker of “choice.” In Middle High German the form *wēder?* (which was originally a pronoun form in the nominative singular) was used as the marker of an alternative question in the correlation *wēder... oder?* – perhaps a loan translation from the Latin *utrum... an?* (Gobber, *Pragmatica* 145-150). The same probably applies to the correlation *whether... or* which occurs in the quoted passage from Hamlet’s monologue.

The Translation of the Disjunctive *or*

In the Polish translations another element deserves our attention: it is the disjunctive expressing the opposition between “to be” (*być*) and “not to be” (*nie być*). In most versions *albo* occurs; it expresses a disjunctive alternative, i.e. the choice of one element precludes the choice of the other. In some other versions *czy* is used, with a similar meaning, e.g. *Być, czy też nie być – oto jest pytanie* (translated by Władysław Tarnawski, 1953). It can occur with this meaning also in questions, e.g. in Stanisław Barańczak’s translation of Hamlet’s soliloquy we find:

Kto postępuje godniej: ten, kto biernie
Stoi pod gradem zajadłych strzał losu,
Czy ten, kto stawia opór morzu nieszczęść
I w walce kładzie im kres?

‘Who acts more worthy: he who passively
Stands under the hail of fate’s fierce arrows
Or he who resists the sea of misfortune
And puts an end to them in battle?’ (92, my translation)

But *czy* has other functions: it is a (non obligatory) marker of a Yes-No question, e.g.: *Czy masz czas?* “do you have time?” (*Masz czas?* is also used, without the particle *czy* that in spoken language can give this question an insistent note, cf. Gobber, *A Proposito* 697-705). There is also the

correlation *czy... czy...* which corresponds to "either... or..." in declarative sentences, e.g.: *Czy być, czy nie być: w tym jest treść zagadki* ("either to be, or not to be: that is the content of the riddle," in Andrzej Tretiak's translation, 1922). A correlation with similar form, but different function can occur in alternative questions, e.g. *Czy Anna studiuje fizykę czy matematykę?* "does Anna study physics or math?" (Bittner, 25), where the opening *czy* is an interrogative marker and the other has the function of a disjunctive. The use of *albo* points out that Hamlet understands the alternative he is faced with; the interpretation of Hamlet's move as a question tends to be excluded, but if *czy* occurs, this interpretation is admitted and not excluded.

To Be, Not to Be: The Infinitive as a Bridge between the Verb and the Noun

In Hamlet's move, the verb has the form of the infinitive preceded by *to*. In Indo-European languages, the infinitive indicates a state or a process which is not anchored to the *hic et nunc* of the situation, and no grammatical features of person and number occur in it. The infinitive indicates that the verbal content is not activated ("non-actualisation du contenu verbal" (Fernandez-Bravo 83)). This feature of the infinitive is consistent with the absence of the decision, which is a meaning component of questions (Gobber, *Una nota*). The grammatical meaning of the infinitive is, however, at odds with the need to work out the question, and this reflects the tension between indecision and decision which is a fundamental element in Hamlet's soliloquy.

In translation, *to be* and *not to be* are usually rendered as infinitives; but the design of the infinitive may differ depending on grammatical systems. In the Romanian version *A fi sau a nu fi: iată-ntrebarea* (by Leon Levițchi and Dan Duțescu) we find the analytical form *a fi*, which is explained in the light of Balkan areal contacts (see Banfi, *Balkanica*). In other Romance languages like French, Italian and Spanish a synthetic form (resp. *être, essere, ser*) is used, which can be compared to the English bare infinitive *be*. This is also the case in the German (*sein oder nicht sein*) and

Russian translations (*byt' ili ne byt'*). Both are registered as elements of the respective folk culture, as a cursory search on the internet can show.

It may be interesting to note that the English form *be* and the Russian infinitive *byt'* have the same IE. root *BHEU- / *BHU- of the Latin perfect *fui* "I was" which is also found in the ancient Greek verb *phýo* "to generate, to give birth," with the middle voice *phýomai* "come into force, become" (Buck 635-636). The basic meaning of this root is a process of becoming. Perhaps the root appears also in the Latin verb *feri* "to become," which seems to be continued by the Romanian form *a fi*. Instead, a static semantic design emerges in the IE. root *ES- that is found in the German *sein* and the Romance verbs *être*, *essere* and *ser*, which continue the Latin infinitive *esse*. The dynamic and the static components of these two IE. roots can be found in the lexical meaning of the verbs considered above. On the one hand, they express "subsisting," on the other hand they designate "existing," i.e. stretching in time.

From the Infinitive as a Verbal Noun to the Substantive Infinitive

Among the many translations into German, two are historically important, one by Christoph Martin Wieland, from the late 18th century, the other by Friedrich August von Schlegel, from the early 19th century. We also choose them because *to be* and *not to be* are translated in different ways. In Wieland's translation we find: *Seyn oder nicht seyn – Das ist die Frage* "to be or not to be – that is the question / the problem," where two infinitive forms are retained in the translation. But Schlegel's choice is different: *Sein oder Nichtsein; das ist hier die Frage. . . (79)*. The use of the initial capital letter and the univerbation of *nicht* and *sein* into *Nichtsein* show that this is taken as a noun, more precisely, as a substantive infinitive. In German, the transition from the infinitive mood of the verb to a substantive infinitive is very frequent. From an Aristotelian perspective, which is also Coseriu's perspective, there is a difference: the feature 'becoming' characterises the *modus significandi* of the verb. Aristotle says that the verb, insofar as it is a verb, also signifies time, *consignificat tempus (prosemáinei chronon)*. The substantive, on the other hand, has the *modus significandi* of substance;

“it denotes a substance having a property” (*significat substantiam cum qualitate*), according to Priscian’s well-known formulation (Rigotti and Cigada 203-204).

Not to Be as Absence of Existence: Concerning a Finnish Translation

As regards the verbal noun, Finnish translations are interesting. A quick and cursory google search shows that in the folk culture various formulations for *to be, or not to be* are found. But two of them should be excluded, as they are translations of film titles: *Ollako vai eikö olla* refers to a movie directed by Ernst Lubitsch, where *-ko* after the first occurrence of the infinitive *olla* is an interrogative affix and *ei* is the negation particle, followed by the interrogative marker *-kö* (a variant of *-ko*, occurring after front vowels). Another film title, with a more colloquial formulation, is *Olla tai ei olla*, a Mel Brooks film, in which no interrogative affix occurs.

As for Hamlet’s soliloquy, perhaps the most authoritative translation is Paavo Emil Cajander’s *Ollako vai ei olla, siinä pulma*. . . (“to be or not to be, that [is] the problem,” published in 1879, and available online on WebLitera). Nely Keinänen has compared two recent translations into Finnish: Eeva-Liisa Manner’s *Ollako vai eikö, siinä pulma* “To be or not, that [is] the problem” and Matti Rossi’s *Olla vai ei? Siitä on nyt kyse* “To be or not? That is here the question.” As Keinänen observes,

Manner’s text is very close to the first translation done of the lines into Finnish (by Paavo Cajander in 1879) whereas Rossi tries out a new version, removing the particle *-ko* from the first words, changing *pulma* (problem, dilemma) to Shakespeare’s English “question” (*kyse*) . . . (38)

Let us add that in Rossi’s translation the adverb *nyt* “here” occurs, which recalls Schlegel’s German version, *das ist hier die Frage* (“that is here the question/ the problem”).

In addition to these, a rather frequent expression in the folk culture is the following: *Olla tai olla olematta, se on kysymys*. It does not occur in the most cited translations, but its particular formulation deserves our attention. *Olematta* is the abessive of the third active infinitive of *olla* “to be” (*olla* is

the first infinitive – or base form – of this verb). In the Finnish grammar, the abessive case is a marker of ‘absence’ and can occur in nouns, as well as in nominal forms of verbs, like the infinitives. The term *abessive* is derived from the Latin verb *abesse* – which is formed by the prefix *ab* “away” and the verb *esse* “to be.” According to vowel harmony, the abessive case is expressed here by the affix *-tta*. It occurs after the affix *-ma-* which is added to the root element *ole-* “be.” The form *olematta* means “without being” and *olla olematta* corresponds to “being without being.” We could say that “not to be” is codified as a state of being, i.e. the state of being characterized by ‘absence of being.’ Negation is codified as lack or absence of something.

A Conclusion: Translation as a Form of Knowledge

Translations are interpretations that result in new texts, designed according to the architecture of the language chosen. These interpretations are characterised by the human intervention of the translator, who re-writes the source text, giving rise to a new perspective on text sense.

A text is an instance of *energeia*, in the Coserian sense. It is constituted by the individual speech creativity, which Coseriu regards as a fundamental object of investigation for linguistics. As Emma Tãmâianu-Morita puts it, a Coserian text linguistics “will take creative texts (primarily, but not exclusively pertaining to literary genres) as a privileged object of investigation” (84).

To understand Hamlet is to understand the drama of individuals faced with decisions that are fundamental to their own existence. In *to be, not to be*, human existence is presented in an abstract dimension, conceptualised through the infinitive mood, which can be seen as a bridge between the verb and the noun (the grammatical tradition treats the infinitive as verbal noun). This abstract dimension is conceptualised as a concrete process in Oriental languages. In Zhū Shēngháo’s translation into Chinese (*shēng cún hái shi huī miè*) (qtd. in Liu and Meng 21), *to be* is interpreted as *shēng cún* “living, surviving” and *not to be* is rendered as *huī miè* “perishing,” “go annihilated.”^{vi} In the Japanese version of Tsubouchi Shōyō (qtd. in Gallimore 79), the dilemma is formulated as the opposition between “in the

world” and “not in the world.” The later Japanese translation by Shoichiro Kawai is *Ikiru beki ka, Shinu beki ka, Sore ga mondai da* (qtd. in Maxwell 106), “to live or to die, that is the question” – perhaps echoing Zhu Shenghao’s translation into Chinese.

A question emerges from the analysis of the Finnish translation considered above: is the interpretation of the contrast between *to be* and *not to be* influenced by the conceptualisation that characterises the language in which it is formulated? Does language influence the structure of human knowledge? *Ay, there’s the point.*

In his *Betrachtungen im Sinne der Wanderer (Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre oder die Entsagenden, 1829)*, Johann Wolfgang v. Goethe claims (513): “*Alles Gescheite ist schon gedacht worden. Man muss nur versuchen es noch einmal zu denken*” (441 Hecker) “Everything clever has already been thought: we must only try to think it again.” On a closer look, translating is a form of knowledge.

Notes:

ⁱ I want to express here my thanks to my PhD student Sandro Shi Dou for his precious help in analysing and understanding the Chinese translation.

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