PERSPECTIVES IN TRANSLATING POLITICAL CONCEPTS
(A CONCEPTUAL HISTORIAN AS TRANSLATOR AND TRANSLATED)

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Abstract

Issues of the translatability and transferability of concepts figure prominently among the concerns of social sciences and humanities today. This paper analyses the solutions offered to the challenge of translating political concepts by the work of conceptual historian Kari Palonen, a solution originating in classical rhetoric. Resorting to the Aristotelian conception of topoi, understood as the forms of argument capable of accommodating conflicting interpretations, rather than commonplace thoughts with fixed content, Palonen manages to transcend linguistic and cultural relativisms without having to resort to a search for a universal language. The topoi also reflect specific social and political contexts and authorial perspectives, and are analysed in a multilingual approach sensitive to the local stakes and contexts of his sources. Palonen's linguistic hospitality, although mediated in English, the undeniable lingua franca of the academic world, is also a strong argument for the need for translation and the importance of integrating the perspectives of various languages in attempts at understanding our own linguistic perspectives and concepts.

Keywords: translation, topoi, linguistic hospitality, perspectivism, conceptual history

One of the most significant works of conceptual history that came out in the past decade is Kari Palonen's *The Struggle with Time,*[1] an attempt at mapping the history of conceptualizations of politics in the British, German and French political cultures in the last three hundred years. It describes how politics was first understood as a scholarly discipline, then as a sphere of life, and then, in the twentieth century, as an activity. This latter conceptualization, the most current

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1 Kari Palonen. *The Struggle with Time. A Conceptual History of "Politics" as an Activity*, Politische Theorie, Bd. 3, LIT, 2006, Münster, Hamburg.

today, is analysed by the author using a methodology originating in classical rhetoric. He sets up a repertoire of topoi shaping the arguments on politics, and also serving as his main framework of interpretation, and gathers around them an impressive number of sources. Politics as an activity, he shows, has been variously understood in terms of irregularity, judgement, policy, deliberation, contestation, possibility, situation, and play/game.

Such an analysis encounters various issues of translation and translatability: how can the conceptualizations of the understood as politics, understood and described in different terms in the various linguistic, cultural and political contexts be contemplated together? How can sources written in different languages, published with different agendas, and with various effects, by authors who rarely if ever acknowledged each other's work, be treated in a single framework, as parts of a single conceptual history? When struggling with these issues, Kari Palonen offers a solution that has a significance well beyond the field of the conceptual history of politics, with implications on the general issues of translation and mediation between languages and cultures.

Although in mediating between three major linguistic cultures, the author indeed acts as a translator, the starting point of our analysis will be provided by the struggles of another translator, that of Kari Palonen himself. *The Struggle with Time* has been translated into Hungarian in 2009.[2] This paper originated in the reflections of the translator on dealing with a complex, multilingual text, and the need to introduce a fourth language to mediate between the three major discursive traditions originally analysed in English. Therefore, before turning to the answers conceptual history can provide to those struggling with issues of translation and intercultural communication in general, let us briefly discuss the challenges facing the translator of a work of conceptual history.

Translating *The Struggle with Time* is indeed a challenging task. As in all attempts at linguistic translation, the translator has to struggle with the fact that words of different languages divide semantic fields in different ways, that concepts and paradigms of concepts can never totally correspond to each other. Not to mention the various interplays of secondary meanings, connotations and different contexts.[3] These customary issues translators struggle with become even more emphatic when writing and translating works of conceptual history, when these differences or lacks of concordance raise not only issues of translatability, but also problems of comparative conceptual history.

To give but one example, among the central topoi of politics as an activity analysed by Palonen are descriptions of politics as *play* and *game*. These can be rendered with corresponding words, at least in a dictionary sense, relatively easily. However,

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2 Kari Palonen. *Küzdelem az idővel. A cselekvő politika fogalomtörténete*, trans. Vincze Hanna Orsolya, L'Harmattan, 2009, Budapest.

3 Cf. Paul Ricoeur. *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan, Thinking in Action, Routledge, 2006, London, New York, pp. 22-24.

in English, the terms possess connotations that are important in understanding the meaning of politics in Anglo-Saxon discourses, but which are not there in other languages. The corresponding Hungarian terms for example (in the published translation we used *játék* and *játszma*), do not possess an obvious theatrical component that would make them strong theatrical metaphors, as is the case in English. And this is no longer a technical problem of translation, it has a direct impact on the conceptions of politics articulated in the different languages. Moreover, in Hungarian, as in various other languages, describing politics with terms corresponding to the topoi of play and game involve much more negative connotations than the English terms – if we were to translate them back, in a political context we would probably need to use *ploy*.

When translating academic works, one of the central expectations facing the translator is to render the keywords of the text with the same term, consequently and throughout the text. One of the solutions is of course to borrow the term from the original language, and use it as a foreign word in the target language, a solution frequently met in academic and scientific practice, and aiming at achieving conceptual coherence, clarity and uniformity. However, these "same" words, borrowed from the original language, could have different meanings in the target language. As Paul Ricoeur pointed out, words synthesize long textual traditions, were shaped by various contexts, and are in entangled in various intertextual relationships.[4] For example, the English expression *gentleman-politics,* analysed by Palonen, carries with it in English a rich social and textual history, which cannot be rendered in another language by simply taking over the English word. The term may exist in several languages, and even the ideal of the English gentleman may be present, but the social history behind the term and the ideal, and thus the meaning of the word, will be very different in each linguistic context.

An even more pertinent example is the difference between the meanings of the English term *deliberative* and its Hungarian correspondent, going back to the stem (*deliberatív*). In English, expressions like *to deliberate* or *deliberation* are used in common speech, and means „to weigh in the mind; to consider carefully with views to decision; to think over,"[5] actions that can be undertaken by various persons and bodies without any political implications. In Hungarian on the other hand, the term *deliberatív* is not an everyday one. It is primarily familiar to readers of political theory, who will most likely be familiar with it from the work of Jürgen Habermas, where deliberation free of economic and social constraints is a necessary element of the public of democratic polities.[6] This intertextual connection, although coming from the field of political thought, and necessarily introduced into the Hungarian text by

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4 *Idem,* p. 6.
5 Oxford English Dictionary, second edition, 1989; online version June 2011 (http://www. oed.com/view/Entry/49346, accessed 13 September 2011.)
6 Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* trans. Thumas Bürger and Frederick Lawrence, Polity Press, 1992, Cambridge.

the choice of word, is not taken into account by Palonen's otiginal text. Moreover, when the author does discuss Habermas in his other works, Palonen criticises the ideal deliberative speech situation of Habermas for not taking into consideration the existential differences between participants, the conflicts these differences give birth to, that is the inherently political nature of all interpersonal relationships. Another criticism levelled at Habermas is that he does not take into account the fact that key concepts like freedom or democracy have their own history, and are subject to debates and differing interpretations. [7]

The above references to the struggles of the translator, however, were not meant to highlight some unavoidable "pitfalls" or "weaknesses" of translating analyses of political discourses, or limitations of articulating conceptualizations of politics in various languages. They were rather meant to point out that languages bring their own perspective to everything they articulate, including political discourses. These perspectives are defined by the historical, textual and intertextual traditions crystallized in the words that also carry them.

In his "conceptual history of politics as an activity", as the subtitle describes the aim of *The Struggle with Time,* Kari Palonen himself undertakes challenging tasks of translation, as he proposes to analyse conceptualizations of politics in three major languages and political cultures, British, French and German. Thus, the questions of linguistic perspectives, like those of translation, are central to the original book itself. In the following part of this paper, we shall try to understand how Palonen, an analyst of political discourses and writer of comparative conceptual history, struggles with linguistic differences, how he tries to bridge these, how he searches for solutions that allow him to compare conceptualizations of politics articulated in different languages. In other words, we shall look at the translation practice of the author himself, and the consequences of his translation solutions on the possibilities of translation as a linguistic mediation between contexts, languages and cultures.

In the rich and varied European translation culture, one of the most important traditions requires that the translator and the act of translation remain unnoticeable. This tradition has been analysed in detail by Lawrence Venuti's monograph on modern Anglo-Saxon translation culture, tellingly entitled *The Translators's Invisibility.* The ideal of the invisible translator requires that the reader should not become aware of the acts of mediation, of the presence of a translator's voice or perspective. It requires that the language of the translation be transparent, "giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the original."[8] This tradition, defining the present-day Anglo-

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7 Kari Palonen. "Translation, Politics and Conceptual Change," in *Redescriptions. Yearbook of Political Thought and Conceptual History* vol. 7, 2003, p. 16, 29.
8 Lawrence Venuti. *The Translator's Invisibility: a history of translation,* Routledge, 1995, London, New York, p. 1.

Saxon editorial practice, regards translation as a mere copy of the original, moreover a secondary and inferior one.

Kari Palonen uses English as the language of his analysis. However, he does not adopt the mediation tradition of the invisible translator: he rather quotes, in the body of the main text, the German and French sources in their original language, resulting in a markedly multilingual book. This gesture makes *The Struggle with Time* difficult to translate not only because of the linguistic competence it requires of the translator, but also because of the difficulties of integrating this practice within the various national translation traditions. The editorial requirements of the Hungarian translation for example made it impossible to maintain the multilingual aspect of the book.

The author explains his preference for a multilingual approach as follows:

> These linguistic nuances offer both certain chances for and obstacles in writing on politics. Another obvious problem, of course, is writing on the conceptualization of politics in several languages by using just one of them, English, as the linguistic medium of presentation. My solution is to treat the English as the *lingua franca* of the academic world in the early twenty-first century, but to quote German and French expressions in their original linguistic form accompanied by an explanation of their main ideas in the text proper. By taking this kind of multilingual approach I also emphasize the role of translation in the process of presentation, the possibility it affords the reader to check the original formulation and, is she wishes, to deny the role of English as having linguistic authority over the other languages presented.[9]

The solution could be interpreted as an individual variation of the alienating translation, known from the German and French translation traditions. Alienating translations, as opposed to the practice of rendering the act of translation invisible, try to preserve the difference of the original and translated texts, the otherness of the other. The ethical subtext of the practice, as with Palonen, is the struggle against Anglo-centrism. Palonen's solution could also be interpreted as an act of linguistic hospitality towards the foreign texts, as discussed by Paul Ricoeur:

> Just as in a narration it is always possible to tell the story in a different way, likewise in translation it is always possible to translate otherwise, without ever hoping to bridge the gap between equivalence and perfect adhesion. Linguistic hospitality, therefore, is the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own home, one's own dwelling.[10]

Preserving the otherness of the other, made possible by the multilingual approach, makes it possible to avoid a trap that seemingly monolingual texts find it difficult to cope with. In a study dedicated to the issues of translating political concepts, Palonen

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9 Palonen. *The Struggle with Time,* pp. 29-30.
10 Ricoeur, *op.cit.,* p. 10.

analyses in detail the complex problems of conceptual history raised by English-language translations of Weber, embedded as he was in a rich and complex German tradition of social and political thought. [11] Therefore, when deciding to quote the object of his analysis in the original, he manages to avoid a whole series of problems originating from the earlier translations of the source texts' keywords.

However, if one is to preserve the otherness of the other, as Palonen does when he preserves the wordings of his sources, how can one bridge the difference between languages so that a comparative conceptual history should become possible?

In dealing with this issue, Palonen turns to the topoi concept of classical rhetoric. Ever since the books of Ernst Robert Curtius, the various European studies on culture treated topoi as commonplace thoughts, similes or general truths with well defined content. The formal, Aristotelian concept of topoi, on the other hand, a concept taken up in *The Struggle with Time,* refers to the general form of the argument, without any fixed content. In Palonen's usage, topoi are open loci, which can include varying interpretation of politics, even views opposing each other. They provide frameworks or perspectives through which politics as an activity can be considered, interpreted and understood. Such and understanding is all the more necessary as there is no single conceptualization of politics that could encompass the discipline and practice of politics in its totality.

From the perspective of the problem of conceptual translation and translatability, one of the most important implications of the turn to the topoi as the forms of argument is the claim that the topoi are not bound to or defined by vernacular languages. The claim challenges assumptions of linguistic perspectivism and cultural relativism, and is an attempt at creating frameworks of understanding linguistically vehiculated discourses translinguistically. Through the prism of topoi, the conceptions of politics formulated in various national and political languages can be connected, or at least contemplated together. [12] A further important point is that the concept of politics as an activity developed, Palonen claims, transcending the languages and political cultures discussed, moreover the most interesting conceptual shifts and rearticulations did not occur along national boundaries. [13] On the relationship between languages and political cultures he adds that:

> The conceptualization of politics in English, French and German does not strictly correspond to definite political cultures, and the role of some Austrian, Swiss and Belgian authors is highlighted and mentioned when appropriate. The point is not to compare the political cultures through their conceptualizations of

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11 Palonen. "Translation, Politics and Conceptual Change," pp. 22-24.
12 On the difference between national and political languages cf. J.G.A. Pocock. "The State of the Art, in *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century,* Cambridge University Press, 1985.
13 Palonen. *The Struggle with Time,* p. 23.

politics, but, contrarily, to discuss the differences between the political cultures as a further specific intervening factor in the conceptualization of politics.[14]

Palonen's approach is novel because the major traditions in which historians of political though have been working in the past decades, the conceptual history practiced by followers of Reinhardt Koselleck and the study of political languages as practiced by followers of Quentin Skinner and John Pocock rarely transgress boundaries of national languages. Koselleck for example understands concepts as words with fixed, stabilized meanings, implying a strict connection between signifier and signified:

> A word becomes a concept when the plenitude of sociopolitical context of meaning and experience in and for which a word is used can be condensed into one word. (…) Signifier and signified coincide in the concept insofar as the diversity of historical reality and historical experience enter a word, such that they can only receive their meaning in this one word, or can only be grasped by this word.[15]

Pocock in his turn specifically defines political languages as „idioms or modes of speech, existing within a given vernacular."[16] Palonen, when trying to solve the issue of the transferability of conceptual tools, and turning the topoi as frameworks or perspectives that can be applied translinguistically, also proposes a way to bridge the two main traditions of writing the history of political thought. In defining the topoi as horizons of understanding politics, he uses the horizon-concept central to Koselleck's approach. However, throughout his analysis he also takes into account to importance of contexts in creating meaning, as well as the illocutionary force of various expressions in given speech situations, that is the central tenets of Skinnerian intellectual history.

When dealing with the problem of bridging linguistic differences, of transgressing linguistic perspectivism, one of the greatest traditions one could turn to is that of finding or creating common structures, or a universal framework of reference. Palonen's solution, however, is not a search for the universal language. He is well aware of the fact that his position as a translator and mediator is after Babel. What he opposes to linguistic perspectivism are not universal structures, but further perspectives. Because the topoi do not make up a "common" or "universal" language, and do not represent a "tertium comparationis", but are themselves particular perspectives. One could say that the perspectivism of languages is superseded using the perspectives of topoi.

In Palonen's work, perspectivism refers to the Weberian insight that what can be known is a function of the interpreter's choices and approaches. As concerns

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14 *Idem*, p. 27.
15 Reinhart Koselleck. "Begriffsgeschichte and Social History," in *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time,* trans. Keith Tribe The MIT Press, 1985, Cambridge, MA – London, UK, p. 84.
16 Pocock. "The State of the Art", p. 7.

the practice of writing the conceptual history of politics, it helps Palonen explain Quentin Skinner's opposition between the truth and the novelty of an idea, and his focus of understanding the ideas' "historical point and value."[17] With reference to the different conceptualisations of politics, perspectivism also refers to the fact that "at least since the 1920's, no conception of politics has been able to comprehend politics as a totality."[18]

The topoi as specific perspectives can be understood with reference two central aspects. One the one hand, they represent specific points of view or frameworks of interpretation with the help of which the phenomenon of politics can be understood. On the other hand, the repertoire of topoi set up and analysed by the book itself the results from the application of a strong authorial perspective. Topoi as specific perspectives not simply focus the attention on different aspects of the same phenomenon. They open up new horizons, and point to new phenomena as relevant. [19] Moreover, as frameworks of understanding and argumentation, they possess an inherently open nature: in various debated, the same topos can possess different meanings and local stakes.

In politics, the varied nature of perspectives also means that the phenomenon of politics cannot be grasped and described with the help of a single narrative. The languages used to describe politics have an individualizing and profiling character, defining politics in individual ways. This makes the concept of politics chameleon-like, which only partial definitions depending on specific perspectives, perspectives that cannot be synthesized into a uniform, single definition. All the more so as the topoi of politics are sometimes are formulated in opposition to each other, as for examples in debates on the role of competitive or cooperative nature of politics and polity. This perspectivism of the concept of politics helps explain why it has been so widely disputed throughout the twentieth century, when politics has become not one, but many: a concept and a phenomenon that implies various perspectives and understandings.

Apart from the perspectivism of the concept of politics, the attempt at understanding conceptualizations of politics vehiculated in different languages via a repertoire of topoi also involves a strong authorial perspective. Palonen refuses to discuss the „truth" or „authenticity" of the views analysed, preferring to focus on „the illocutionary or performative dimension of linguistic action.[20] The latter in this case mean new phenomena that can be grasped by new ways of using the topoi. At the same time, the articulation of the possibilities of conceptualization in the form of topoi – or the categorization used –, as well as the names of the individual topoi are results of the authorial perspective, and, as he claims, of authorial imagination. [21] This means

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17 Kari Palonen. *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric,* Polity Press, 2003, Cambridge, p. 2.
18 Palonen. *The Struggle with Time,* p. 10.
19 *Idem,* p. 12.
20 *Idem,* p. 16.
21 *Idem,* p. 23.

that the topoi bring together conceptual changes and new contributions which, at the time, did not appear as contributions to the conceptual history of politics as an activity, neither for contemporaries, nor for the authors of the texts analysed. At the same time, the different authors whom the topoi as specific interpretive perspectives bring together generally did not make reference to each other's works. Bringing them together as users of the same topoi thus reveal hidden intertextualities and second-grade debates, the creative revelation of which are an important component of Palonen's work as a translator, a mediator of perspectives.

Describing this approach as translation is appropriate not only because the work itself mediates between three languages and political cultures, but also because Palonen discusses translation as a method in conceptual history. One the one hand, the changes of linguistic and cultural context implied by a translation necessarily add new, unintended shades of meaning small shifts of which students of politics should be aware. [22] On the other hand, conceptual changes themselves can be understood in translation and during the act of translation: „We could even speak, with Koselleck, of translation as a 'method' of conceptual history, not just as a metaphor, but as a procedure that renders conceptual changes from past to present as well as the inevitable use of contemporary language in the analysis of such changes intelligible."[23] Translations and the act of translating make us better understand not only past conceptualizations of politics, but also our own, contemporary language. And of course, all such translation is a matter of perspective, and there will always be alternative translations and alternative interpretations. Therefore, at a time when English is the undisputable academic *lingua franca,* multilingual approaches, as well as the practice of translating academic works may yet have to add something to our understanding of our disciplines and concepts.

In the last chapter, when discussing the possible uses of such a work, Palonen claims that it should be useful not only to historians of political thought, but also to normative political theorists and political actors who, as an „innovating ideologist", try to introduce a new concept of politics. For in doing so they will always need the resources of earlier views. The modest comment refers to one of important, though undiscussed stakes of writing conceptual history and engaging in the work of conceptual translation. The power of the changing conceptualizations of politics, always in need of translation and always changing in the act of translation, opposes the "Gallup-democracy" of the power of numbers or the power of bureaucracies resting on stable definitions.[24] Disputing, redescribing, reconceptualizing are central elements of all searches of political alternatives. And this adds to the practice of

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22 For a detailed discussion of the possibility see László Kontler, "Translation and Comparison: Early Modern and Current Perspectives", *Contributions to the History of Concepts* vol. 3, no.4., 2007, pp. 71-102.

23 Palonen. "Translation, Politics and Conceptual Change," p. 18.

24 *Idem*, p. 31.

translating conceptualizations of politics a normative and ethical stake that goes a long way to defining the joys and stakes of translation, disputable and perspectivist as it will always be.

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