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Dossier Ludwik Fleck

Translation collective, translation styles: On the experience of translating Ludwik Fleck into Brazilian Portuguese

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Abstract:

In this contribution I intend to describe the experience of translating Fleck's *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache* into Brazilian Portuguese, an endeavor carried out alongside Prof. Georg Otte and with the technical revision and foreword by Prof. Mauro Condé, published in Brazil in 2010. As the first translation of this author into Portuguese, we had the extraordinary responsibility of setting Fleck's concepts in the new language, a crucial goal in philosophical translations. Beyond creating a glossary, it was necessary to preserve part of Fleck's style and what he produces in the source language. On a lexical level, this meant considering expressions frequently used, as well as neologisms, archaisms, *mots rares*, self-references or references to a tradition. After this translating experience, it does not seem unfounded to suggest that translations are not exempt from what Fleck formulates concerning the development of science. Furthermore, it may be possible to develop a translation theory based on Fleckian grounds.

Keywords:

Ludwik Fleck; translation studies; translation of theory; German-Portuguese translation; thought style; thought collective

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Introduction

A translation of a work does not merely consist on *passing* from one language to another.² Besides its narrow notion of language, such assumption becomes especially relevant in Ludwik Fleck's case (1896-1961): a Polish-Jewish microbiologist and later a classic author in philosophy of science, epistemology and sociology

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² Generally speaking, this observation refers to translation studies based on communication theory. Those tendencies claim that translating consists simply on communicating the same message in another language. And it also understands a language as a plain relationship between signs. As we shall see, some authors, including Fleck, allows us to think otherwise.

of knowledge, who remained unknown for decades (Schäfer; Schnelle, 1980). Moreover, since Fleck wrote his ideas in both Polish and German, it is not possible to be certain whether he formulated his concepts in one of the two languages first or in both of them simultaneously (cf. Jarnicki, 2016). Either way, it is a challenging aspect for readers and translators of Fleck's legacy.

Translating and thus referencing Fleck's legacy can impact the reception and circulation of his ideas, as well as the history and theory of science itself. As experts point out, his later appearance in the context of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* led to a retroactive consideration of Fleck not only as Kuhn's forerunner, but also as a pioneer of a broad-spectrum social constructivist epistemology.³

In this paper I intend to describe the experience of translating Fleck's 1935 *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache* [*Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*] into Brazilian Portuguese, an endeavor carried out in cooperation with translator Professor Georg Otte, and with the technical revision and foreword by Professor Mauro L. Condé. The translated version of the book was published in Brazil in 2010.

On philosophical and theoretical translation

Translating Fleck was an opportunity to ponder carefully about the issues connected to the translation of theory. Moreover, it was an opportunity to reflect upon the relationship between *thought* and *translation*. The Argentinian author and translator Mariana Dimópulos once established, in a very accurate and clear way, one of the differences between theoretical and literary translations. Literary translations allow a shortcut: fiction. This means they allow translators leeway and flexibility through fiction. In contrast, translating theory offers no such shortcut. The *concept* is mainly considered the crucial point of a philosophical translation. According to Dimópulos, translation of theory highlights the fact that a concept is basically a word (or syntagma) that does not have synonyms⁴ and thus cannot be paraphrased. Also, in a twentieth-century-diction definition, philosophy is precisely the art of inventing concepts (Deleuze; Guatarri, 2005 [1991], 8). As the first translators of Fleck's work into Portuguese, we were given the extraordinary responsibility of establishing words for his concepts in the target language. The implication is that the way in which concepts are established in the target language interacts with the theory in question. They will be amalgamated, in Fleckian terms, into a "thought collective".

Translators of theoretical texts always have a responsibility and, when they work on a text that is often translated, they must take into account all of the established uses of a term in the target language. That is to say, they cannot just choose a word or phrase carelessly.⁵ With Fleck our responsibility was even greater, as we were the very first translators of his work into Portuguese. In a way, we are the initiators of a tradition: the tradition of transposing Fleck's words into Portuguese. Future translators will have the opportunity to establish a dialogue with our translation (metaphorically, a translating palimpsest). They will certainly have to read earlier versions of the text in their own language, something that is not necessarily essential in literary translation. On the contrary, in the latter, a certain freshness and *naïveté* can in fact contribute to one's craft.

To some extent, someone who translates ideas into Portuguese determines how one thinks in Portuguese. The translator provides the basic tools for thought in the specific terminology related to an author and sometimes even the very terminology for a whole field of knowledge. This process differs from the exchange of ideas in the present scientific community, for example, an exchange that is increasingly filled with borrowings from English. Nevertheless, some philosophers often advocate the idea of "untranslatability", which prescribes the use of a given term in the language in which it was coined. The

³ An extensive discussion (whether Fleck was discovered by Kuhn or how this "rediscovery" implied a domestication of Fleck to be in a line that arrives in Kuhn, as some experts would say) or simply a comparison between Kuhn's and Fleck's thoughts exceed the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is worth referring the reader to an article that goes beyond the common key to interpret Fleck related to Kuhn's rediscovery, which emphasizes the sociological aspects of his work. (Cf. Egloff, 2014, 69-85)

⁴ Dimópulos, Mariana, interviewed by Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno, Museo del libro y de la lengua, Buenos Aires, 16 April 2015.

⁵ As Dimópulos points out, philosophical translations need to take into account the whole path of a term in both the source and target language. (Dimópulos, Mariana, interviewed by Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno, Museo del libro y de la lengua, Buenos Aires, 16 April 2015)

notion of “untranslatability” is a *locus communis* in the translation of poetry, in a different way. Although that idea is somewhat attractive, as a translator I like to bet on the possibility of translation. As Dimópulos says, alluding to some theoretical tendencies, translations do not seek identity but equivalence. And there are of course thorny concepts or difficult fragments, but it is precisely because of those that translators exist.⁶ If a translation aims for equivalence, everything that is said is thus translatable. The unspeakable and ineffable surely exists,⁷ but if something is in fact said, it can be translated.

Translating Ludwik Fleck’s *Entstehung...*

After laying down these considerations on theoretical and philosophical translation, I would like to describe the process and some of the challenges we faced when we translated Fleck. The translation was made under privileged circumstances due to the fact that the team had native speakers of both the source and the target language. Perhaps these were not ideal conditions, since we did not have a Polish speaking translator, but they were surely privileged ones. We used to joke that Fleck, as someone who wrote so much about the *collective*, would have certainly approved of our method. Such privilege allowed us, for example, to make use of the *Sprachgefühl* in both languages and seek equivalence in the terms we used. However, it also required considerable agreement among us, and the establishment of a work dynamic that revolved around the document’s needs. Our terminology database, our “glossary”, was built collectively, which involved preliminary discussions before taking decisions with regards to the terms we used. In addition to the translation of concepts, as mentioned above, there was a concern with Fleck’s writing style, which presented us with various degrees of difficulty depending on the excerpt.

This refers us to an essay entitled *On difficulty*, by George Steiner, in which he addressed the difficulties of understanding a poem or any of its fragments. The author identified four types of difficulty: *contingent*, *modal*, *tactical* and *ontological* (Steiner, 1978, 27, 29, 33 and 41 respectively). It does not seem unreasonable to think that, *mutatis mutandis*, some of these difficulties were also present in our translation of Fleck. The analogy between translating from a foreign tongue and understanding an opaque passage is alluded by Steiner in this essay, which stems closely from *After Babel* (1975). On a lexical level, some of the factors we had to consider involved not only expressions frequently used by the author, idioms, but also neologisms, archaisms, self-references or references to a certain tradition, which gave rise to a number of unforeseen difficulties and challenges.

In addition, Fleck uses complex technical vocabulary originated in microbiology, which in turn required a lot of further research. For example, the third chapter of *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* contained technical terms like *Bakteriolysine* or *Hämolysine*, which were followed in the fourth chapter by several anatomical descriptions. Moreover, Fleck referred to Latin sources that were not translated into Modern German. Dr. Antonio Martinez de Rezende, professor of Latin at Federal University of Minas Gerais, later joined the team and subsequently translated each of those uses.

Fleck created many other neologisms besides *Denkkollektiv*. In fact, he is responsible for the introduction of a whole terminological texture/textile containing the morpheme *Denk-* as a prefix (e.g. *Denkzwang*, *Denkverkehr*, *Denkexperiment*, *Denkgebilde*). The terms Fleck created that had the prefix *Denk-* make them particularly illustrative of one of Primo Levi’s ideas on translation, mentioned in the “Postfazione” of his Kafka’s *Der Prozess* translation. He remarked that translating is tracking the tissue of the book under the microscope, penetrate it (Cf. Levi, 1983). Quite similar to the work of a microbiologist, one might add. It exposes the contrast between the minimalist nature of the translator’s craft – seeing the text’s entrails –, on the one hand, and the perception of the whole afterwards, on the other.

Of all the neologisms that introduce new concepts in Fleck, the idea of a *Denkkollektiv*, a thought collective, was the one that caused a productive discussion among our team and the publishers. Translating

⁶ Dimópulos, Mariana, interviewed by Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno, Museo del libro y de la lengua, Buenos Aires, 16 April 2015.

⁷ A monumental work on this matter – that brings up inexpressibility *topoi* (*Unsagbarkeitstopoi*) in European literature – is Ernst Robert Curtius’ *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. As Curtius mentions: “the root of the *topoi* to which I have given the above name is ‘emphasis upon inability to cope with the subject.’ From the time of Homer onwards, there are examples in all ages. In panegyric, the orator ‘finds no words’ which can fitly praise the person celebrated.” (Curtius, 2013, 159)

Denkkollektiv as “thought collective” (in Portuguese, *coletivo de pensamento*) may have made it sound a bit less natural than something along the lines of “collective thought” (*pensamento coletivo*), but we decided to propose it as the translation in order to keep the semantic originality we observe in Fleck. This was also motivated by the fact that in German compounds, the main idea is contained in the last root morpheme of the word, thus *-kollektiv*.⁸ It is instances like these that remind us that translating always involves making a decision, be it diverging from the original text or maintaining a certain conformity to it. After the *International Conference Ludwik Fleck’s theory of thought styles and thought collectives*, entirely dedicated on Fleck’s translation and reception, that took place in Wrocław, Poland, on March 10th and 11th 2016, some new considerations could also be made in the translation of the morpheme *Denk-* in this concept. David Östlund’s insights on the Swedish translation brought up the philosophical terms that denote thought as an object or state and as an act or flux, *noēma* and *noēsis*. The last one highlights human thought as an action. Should the morpheme in question be translated into Swedish as a verb (*att tänke*) or a noun (*tanke*)? In the final Swedish title it was decided for the noun. However, Östlund presents analytical evidence for the verb (*tänkekollektiv*) (Cf. Östlund, 2016; Lang, 2016). It is surely a pertinent discussion also in the Portuguese language: on the assumption that the action should be emphasized in Fleck, the translation “coletivo de pensar” (verb) should be considered, even though “coletivo de pensamento” (noun) might sound more natural or produces a bit less noise to native speakers ears.

Some other terms that, for different reasons, demanded specific consideration were *Lustseuche*, *Lehre*, *Syphidologie*, *Heißhunger*, *Brustkorb* and few others that are worth addressing individually. *Lustseuche*, which we translated as “venereal epidemic” (i.e. *epidemia venérea*), was given in English the translation of “carnal scourge”. To some, our equivalent of “venereal epidemic” implied more of a morality connotation than the original German term because of the wide semantic range of the word *Lust*. At last we came to the conclusion that issues of morality were indeed relevant in Fleck, which corroborates our choice. Pre-scientific and moral issues surrounding syphilis had an important impact in the direction of the researches, as Schäfer and Schnelle highlight in the “Einleitung” (Schäfer; Schnelle, 1980, XXX).

The translation of *Lehre* as *doutrina*, “doctrine” (could also be “theory”, lit. “teaching”) also gave rise to a relevant discussion, for the vocable “doctrine” implies something of a more strict nature in English as well as in the Portuguese equivalent, *doutrina*. Another point highlighted by Schäfer and Schnelle was that to Fleck, the introduction of young scientists to a domain of knowledge does come with a sense of indoctrination (Schäfer; Schnelle, 1980, XXXVI).

As other examples of challenging aspects for the translator, it is worth mentioning an eloquent metalinguistic term: the emphasis at the composing elements *Sinn*, “sense”, and *Bild*, “image” of the term *Sinnbild* (symbol), in conjunction with “Ideo-Gramme” spelled with a hyphen, highlighting as well its compounds. Also, the author uses the interesting archaism *Begeistung*, which once referred to alchemists, but has now fallen out of use, and demands special attention while translating. *Gestalt*, *Stimmung* and many others require time and careful reflection. These last words recall Ricœur’s allusion to the so-called *Grundwörter*, which not always can have a corresponding term in the target language, as they condense many contexts and extensive textuality:

And the difficulty is at its height with the primary words, the *Grundwörter*, which the translator sometimes wrongly makes it a rule to translate word for word, the same word receiving a fixed equivalent in the target language. But this legitimate constraint has its limits, insofar as these great primary words, *Vorstellung*, *Aufhebung*, *Dasein*, *Ereignis*, are themselves summaries of long textuality where whole contexts are mirrored, to say nothing of the phenomena of intertextuality concealed in the actual stamp [*la frappe*] of the word. Intertextuality which is sometimes equivalent to revival, transformation, refutation of earlier uses by authors who fall within the same tradition of thought or opposing traditions. (Ricœur, [2004] 2006, 6)

⁸ A discussion about the translation of “Denkkollektiv”, as well as “Lehre” and “Lustseuche” – where some of these ideas were also mentioned – and other aspects of this translating experience can be found in Portuguese language in an interview made by Miriam Junghans to the translators. Cf. Otte, Georg; Camilo de Oliveira, Mariana, interviewed by Junghans, Miriam. JUNGHANS, Miriam. “Traduzindo Fleck: entrevista com Georg Otte e Mariana Camilo de Oliveira”. *Hist. cienc. saude-Manguinhos*, 2011, vol.18, n.4, 1151-1158. ISSN 0104-5970. Available in: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702011000400011> Consulted December 5, 2015.

In turn, George Steiner believed that every act of reading necessarily implies some kind of translation. “Understanding as translation” is an eminent subtitle inside *After Babel. Aspects of language and translation* (Cf. Steiner, [1975] 1998). Indeed, a number of operations done while someone is reading could easily be called translations. For instance, whenever we read a text written hundreds of years ago, we translate. To that effect, isn't reading itself an act of translation? It is a point of contention in translation theory.

The famous theoretician of language and translator Henri Meschonnic would perhaps disagree with that assertion; he stated that translating is not understanding, it supposes understanding, but it is something different (Meschonnic, 2009, 8). Without getting into too much detail, the crucial point made by Meschonnic is that translation is politics and it is ethics. What does he mean by that? Translation is not a science, nor it is an automatic operation; it is imbued with issues of various kinds. What impact does a text generate in a tongue? And conversely a tongue in a text? With the choice of language, one also chooses one's interlocutors. What are the effects of writing in German at that time? These aspects explicit translation as ethics and politics.

Discussion

I have highlighted the issues regarding the establishing of concepts in theoretical and philosophical translations; it is undoubtedly a most central point. Nevertheless, we must not forget the topic of writing style in our task as translators. A classic example in theory of translation could be Schleiermacher's translation of Plato into German. It is a point of discussion whether he rendered Platonism more or less hermetic in German. Without getting too much into the discussion of possible convergence between 20th Century philosophy and literature, such choices are extremely important. If an author writes in long sentences, if they create any friction for the reader, it is all related to the theory one wishes to transmit.

One can ask whether writing style is a matter of philosophy. I am led to think of Fleck's response, who understood the importance of the style, and made his own *Denkstil*, for some perhaps an oxymoron. Can thoughts come with a style? What implications would this idea have for someone who translates texts about thoughts? These are some of the issues that remain with us after this experience. Fleck mentions, referring to styles of thought: “if a thought style is so far removed from ours as this, no common understanding is any longer possible. Words cannot be translated and concepts have nothing in common with ours” (Fleck, [1935] 1979, 139).

Fleck uses the term *übersetzen* to refer to our inability to understand a style of thinking from a time much earlier than our own. Even though the verb meaning “to translate” is used here descriptively rather than conceptually, it begs the question: if it is so that we can hardly understand a thought much different from our own style of thinking, if our own thoughts coerce our interpretation in such powerful ways, how can a translator thus do his job? How can he make readable a text in another language, space and time? It would not be an understatement to say that our job implies a certain rate of failure.

But perhaps and also with Fleck we could say that the translations are a part of history: some translations remain for very long. Some translations were made when the author was still alive, even centuries ago. Others have an expiration date; they require revisions or new translations altogether.

However translating encompasses a certain degree of failure, Ricœur claims that it demands remembrance and mourning. For him, it is bereavement for the perfect translation, the one that bridges all the gaps in interlinguistic communication: “to give up the ideal of the perfect translation” (Ricœur, 2006, 8). At the same time Ricœur says that our task is not just to mourn painfully. Those who venture in this craft experience something of a distinctive moment of happiness in translating, *le bonheur*, the good times, a momentary joy which is historically circumscribed. Ricœur proposed the phrase “linguistic hospitality”, which is defined as the place “where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming house” (Ricœur, 2006, 10).

Finally, I would like reassert that translating a text interferes with the target language. The classic and extreme example is Luther's translation of the Bible, which, according to some, established and standardized the German language. Without going that far, I reiterate that translating a document into a new language affects the way of thinking in that language; it interferes with thought collectives that work in the target language. Translating Fleck came with the good news that the author is increasingly talked about in other languages; Fleck is progressively spoken about in Portuguese (Cf. Condé, 2016). His audience and his

interference with thought collectives are extended. One must add that it brings additional joy to know that the Portuguese language is being enriched, for it also expresses Fleck's concepts.

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