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Translating Angst: Inhibitions and Symptoms in Anglo-American Psychoanalysis

Summary:

In this brief essay I tackle the thorny issue of the translation of Freud's texts into English. Specifically, why is it that Freud's *Angst* was translated as *anxiety* in English, instead of *anguish* or even *angst* itself, terms which actually exist in English? Or to ask a different question, what is the problem with *anxiety* as the English equivalent for Freud's German *Angst*? I argue that these (mis)translations of Freud's work, perhaps more obvious in English than in either French or Spanish, have generated real consequences for the actual practice of psychoanalysis in the English-speaking world, particularly the U.S.A., and moreover, have contributed to the cold reception that Lacan's work has garnered in English-speaking psychoanalytic circles. The translation of *Angst* into *anxiety* is a sort of stripping or negating of certain aspects of Freud's understanding of *Angst*, thereby making the remainder, understood in all its psychiatric glory, into an isolable problem worthy of being excised or medicated. This psychiatric resonance of the term *anxiety* has permeated Anglo-American psychoanalysis.

Furthermore, Lacan's take on *angoisse* provokes a real Freudian *angst* among Anglo-Americans; an apprehension and terror regarding an unknown danger that speaks an originary trauma that has been displaced into the future. An *angst* not easily dismissed and that is not in accord with the cultural and even geographical sensibilities of this place (the U.S.A) with a past masquerading as history. This is the kind of issue that must be dealt with if a Lacanian practice in English is to make any headway. It is not enough to translate Lacan into English. We must also make a cultural translation, and in doing so, address the *problem of anxiety* among Anglo-American psychoanalysts confronting the work of Lacan.

Several months prior to the writing of this paper, while searching for a text on Lacan, the friendly digital folks at Amazon.com recommended a book to me. Its title, *The Problem of Anxiety*. Its author, none other than Sigmund Freud. What? Of course, I was familiar with Freud's *Hemmung, Symptom und Angst* from 1926, and its translation into English as *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (Freud, 1936a). But I had never heard of this *other* text. My curiosity having been piqued, I ordered a copy, and in my fantasy I imagined that I had hit upon some hidden oeuvre of Freud's that the world was somehow only now coming to find out about.

A week later, I received the mysterious text. To my great surprise, however, I noticed that on the first page of the book was the title for yet another text, *The Game with Minutes*, by Frank C. Laubach, a North American Evangelical Christian missionary and mystic known as "The Apostle to the Illiterates." His most widely influential devotional work was the text I was holding in my hands, originally published in 1956. In

it, he encouraged Christians to attempt keeping God in mind every minute of every day. In this way Christians could attempt to approximate the attitude of constant prayer spoken of in the Epistle to the Colossians. The text extolls the virtues of a life lived with an unceasing focus on God (Laubach, 1956).

As I read on, I realized that Laubach's text was only the frontispiece to Freud's text, and that indeed, *The Problem of Anxiety*, was nothing other than an alternative translation of *Hemmung, Symptom und Angst*, accomplished by a certain Henry Alden Bunker, and having been originally published by *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly Press* in 1936. I could find no information on the translator and nothing of note about the publisher except that *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* was not well regarded by Ernest Jones in England, who saw in it a competitor to his *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (Jones to Freud, 2 June 1932 [1993], p. 697).

This text, or rather, this series of texts left me perplexed. Why had an alternative translation been done? And why was it named *The Problem of Anxiety*, instead of *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*? Moreover, why was Laubach's text included with Freud's text and put prior to it in this 2012 edition of the book? [1] Were the publishers of this latest edition, Martino Publishing, hoping to bring psychoanalysts and other readers of Freud into a Laubachian sphere of obsessional adoration of God? I felt that I had fallen into an episode of the North American television series, *Lost*. And indeed, I had... but more on that later.

Despite some careful sleuthing, including a call to Martino Publishing[2], I was not able to find answers to these questions. However, this perhaps uncanny experience did open up the space for an exploration of another question I have held for some time. Namely, why is it that Freud's *Angst* was translated as *anxiety* in English, instead of *anguish* or even *angst* itself, terms which actually exist in English?[3] Or to ask a different question, what is *the problem with anxiety* as the English equivalent for Freud's German *Angst*?

As Bruno Bettelheim (1984, p. 5) has pointed out:

The English translations of Freud's writings are seriously defective in important respects and have led to erroneous conclusions, not only about Freud the man, but also about psychoanalysis... The number of inadequacies and downright errors in the translation is enormous.

Indeed, these (mis)translations of Freud's work, perhaps more obvious in English than in either French or Spanish, have generated real consequences for the actual practice of psychoanalysis in the English-speaking world, particularly the U.S.A., and moreover I would say, have contributed to the cold reception that Lacan's work has garnered in English-speaking psychoanalytic circles.

Granted, the issue begins early. As the German-speaker knows, Freud was fond of using ordinary German words that are highly suggestive (Gay, 2006, p. 741); a fact that is lost on English-speaking ears who received not English versions of these ordinary German words, but highly technical, non-ordinary terms with no room for the linguistic playfulness so alive in the original German. I myself came to discover this after a friend, who happens to be German and not a psychoanalyst, told me that one of the funniest authors he had ever read was Freud. I found his comment quite strange, accustomed as I was to Freud's rather dry translations in English. It was only after he explained to me some of the suggestive humor in the German original did I come to realize how much of Freud's passion and almost ribald vernacular was lost to his English translators. A loss that has had grave consequences for Anglo-American psychoanalysis.

Diving deeper into Freud in the German, we see that he distinguishes between *Realangst* (angst about something real) and *neurotische Angst* (neurotic angst). *Realgefahr* is a known danger, and *Realangst* is the real angst we might experience in the face of this danger we know. *Die neurotische Angst*, however, is angst we experience regarding a danger we do not know, in other words, a neurotic danger that Freud regards as "a pulsional danger" (*eine Triebgefahr*) (Cassin et al, 2014, p. 39).

What complicates matters, however, is that the German word *Angst* can mean both "anguish" and "to be afraid of" (Ibid). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud makes it a point to distinguish between *Furcht* and

Angst. *Angst* is the state where danger, known or unknown, is expected and perhaps prepared for. Whereas, in the case of *Furcht* (fear), a definite object is needed (Freud, 1961). The issue, however, is that this distinction that Freud encourages in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is not widespread in either German common-usage nor in Freud's own work.[4] Sometimes *Angst*, as used by Freud and other German-language speakers is more of the *Die neurotische Angst* variety, and at other times it is more in line with *Furcht* (Cassin et al, 2014).

Faced with this issue, translators of Freud's work have chosen different solutions for the issue of *Angst*. French translators have mostly chosen *angoisse* or even *angst* in some cases. Spanish-language translators have generally chosen *angustia*, but will also use words such as *miedo* depending on the context. Interestingly, English-language translators chose to translate *angst* as *anxiety*, and use *fear*, *alarm*, and *afraid* depending on the context (Ibid). So what's the big deal? What's the problem with using *anxiety* as the English-language rendering of the German *Angst*?

Simply put, there is a real question as to whether or not the English word *anxiety* adequately renders into English the semantic resonance implicit in the German term *Angst*. While the German *Angst* and the English *anxiety* both derive from the Latin *angere* which means "to strangle" and *angustus* for "narrow" (Editors of the American Heritage Dictionaries, 2011), the terms have come to signify different things. *Angst* captures both *fear* and *anguish*, despite Freud's earnest and worthwhile attempts at distinguishing the two; while *anxiety* is a duller, less primitive and more psychiatric and medical a term.

And it is the psychiatric resonance of the term "anxiety" that catches our attention. The historian of psychiatry G.E. Berrios (1996, p. 265) reminds us that:

[T]he dichotomy 'anxiety-anguish' has little clinical meaning in Anglo-Saxon psychiatry (the term *anguish*, in fact, never gained a place in medical terminology), it found a comfortable niche in France, Germany, and Spain where the terms *Angoisse*, *Angst*, and *Angustia* (respectively) carry distinct meaning, and refer to the paroxysmal and more severe aspects of the disorder [of anxiety].

If we hold this interesting bit of clinical/linguistic history alongside the fact that psychoanalysis entered the U.S. via psychiatry, we might begin to understand what *the problem of anxiety* is. The translation of *Angst* into *anxiety* is a sort of stripping or negating of certain aspects of Freud's understanding of *Angst*, thereby making the remainder, understood in all its psychiatric glory, into an isolable problem worthy of being excised or medicated. This psychiatric resonance of the term *anxiety* has permeated Anglo-American psychoanalysis, even in its post-psychiatric articulation.[5]

The long, deep and abiding association between psychiatry and psychoanalysis in the U.S. cannot be overstated. While I do not have the space in this chapter to detail this lengthy and sordid history, what I will note is that it differs significantly from the history of psychoanalysis in most countries of both Europe and Latin America. It is safe to say that in the U.S. psychoanalysis became "a technical medical specialty rather than an interdisciplinary body of knowledge and praxis" (McWilliams, 2004, p.7). As such, conventional psychiatric nosology had a great impact on Anglo-American psychoanalytic thought and practice. In fact, for the greater part of the 20th Century, it is difficult to distinguish between the two spheres.

An interesting and peculiar feature of this history is that because of this close proximity between the two fields, psychoanalysis ended up having an influence of its own on U.S. psychiatry. However, this influence was a measured and discreet one. Partly because of its construal as "a technical procedure comparable to surgery," Anglo-American psychoanalysis lived a very isolated existence, which "reduced opportunities for analysts to learn from intellectuals outside their field and for other intellectuals to learn from psychoanalysts" (McWilliams, 2004, p. 8). This isolation led to an orthodoxy in both theory and practice, wherein Freud's theoretical developments and ideas regarding treatment "were condensed into a set of 'rules' that supervisors handed down to trainees" (McWilliams, 2004, p. 10).

This Freudianist orthodoxy becomes especially evident when we consider the term *anxiety*. Not only does it bear the tell-tale marks of its psychiatric pedigree, it has a distinctly Freudian flavor, circa 1926. As Freud (1936b) notes in *The Problem of Anxiety*, he is abandoning his previous theory of “anxiety” as a transformation of inadequately discharged sexual libido, in favor of a formulation that views it as a reaction to a ‘traumatic situation’, a signal of possible future traumas or losses. We can say that Freud was quite successful in that this understanding of “anxiety” is pervasive in both contemporary Anglo-American psychiatry and psychoanalysis. When U.S. clinicians speak of anxiety, they generally understand the anxiety to be associated with an actual or anticipated *loss* or *separation* (i.e., the loss of the mother).

The Problem of Anxiety, as an *other* text, starts to make sense now. Coming out in the same year as Strachey’s English translation of *Hemmung, Symptom und Angst* (1936a), it underscores and signals an *inhibition* or inability of the English-language to hold the resonance that comes with the term *Angst*. Put another way, this bizarre alternative translation of Freud’s seminal 1926 work makes clear there is no place in Anglo-American psychoanalysis for what Freud was speaking about in the German. *Anguish* comes much closer to *Angst* than does *Anxiety*, but *Anguish* never found a place in Anglo-American psychiatric nosology, which means that there was no place for *Anguish* in Anglo-American psychoanalysis.

So what are we to make of Laubach’s *The Game with Minutes* (Laubach, 1956)? If the kind reader were to allow me a bit of speculative fun, I would say that the inclusion of Laubach’s text is, well, symptomatic. Laubach’s strategy, as outlined in his text, is an obsessive one *par excellence*. He exhorts us to *think* about God each minute we are awake! Funny then, that we should receive this command just prior to reading Freud’s text. By performing this elaborate ritual, will we, like the Rat Man, be able to ward off our own *Angst* whilst reading Freud? Indeed, if this is true, then there is much to fear in Freud’s work that it would generate this much defensive activity. It is almost as if translating *Angst* as *anxiety* was not enough. An additional bit of obsessional stratagem was needed to make this work palatable to Anglo-American sensibilities.

Which brings us to Lacan and the near universal rejection of his work by Anglo-American psychoanalysis. Interestingly, the “official” translation of *Seminar* as just recently published in English, under the title of “Anxiety” (Lacan, 2014). And here we have a repetition and a metonymy. *Angst=Anxiety=Angoisse*. For English-speaking ears, these are all the same. But this conflation or facile equation between terms that point to different things is a defensive move. There is much at stake in the signifiers *angustia*, *Angst* and *angoisse*. Something that Lacan brings forth in his own discourse, via *object a* and the *Real*, and the singularly important idea that *angoisse* is not due to an actual or anticipated loss or separation, *à la* Freud, but is the result of a lack of separation, or to put it more accurately, anxiety is the result of a lack of a lack.

This Lacanian notion finds almost no ground in the Anglo-American world. Because of the history of the U.S., the lack is almost always understood as threatening as opposed to generative. I have encountered this time and again in my work with analysands and patients. For Anglo-American psychoanalysis, the lack can only ever produce anxiety. It cannot be understood as the ground of desire. And this might go a long way to explaining why it is that Freud’s 1926 account of anxiety was so widely received in the U.S., especially in its ego-psychology version, whereas Lacan and his formulations have barely made a dent outside of Humanities departments.

Are my conclusions too far reaching? Perhaps, but as a practicing candidate psychoanalyst on the edge of the Western World, it seems all too obvious to me. Lacan’s take on *angoisse* provokes a real Freudian *angst* among Anglo-Americans; an apprehension and terror regarding an unknown danger that speaks an originary trauma that has been displaced into the future. An *angst* not easily dismissed and that is not in accord with the cultural and even geographical sensibilities of this place with a past masquerading as history. This is the kind of issue that must be dealt with if a Lacanian practice in English is to make any headway. It is not enough to translate Lacan into English. We must also make a cultural translation, and in doing so, address *the problem of anxiety* among Anglo-American psychoanalysts confronting the work of Lacan. Otherwise we truly will find ourselves in an episode of *Lost*; crash landing on an island where (mis)translations serve only to keep us befuddled.

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Notes:

[1] To my knowledge, previous editions of *The Problem of Anxiety* did not include Laubach's text, especially as the English publication of the former preceded the latter by 20 years.

[2] The voicemail I left was never returned, and they have no internet presence other than a webpage with their name, contact information and a handsome digital reproduction of Theodor Galle's *Impressio Librorum* : Plate 4 of the *Nova Reperta*, originally published in 1537–1612, Antwerp.

[3] *Anguish* has a long history in the English language (13th Century), and as we will see later, is generally understood to be a more intense version of *anxiety*. *Angst*, however, was a foreign word used in English and remained so until the 1940's when it became popularized, partly due to the importation of existentialist philosophy and Freud's work (Angst. (n.d.). Online Etymology Dictionary. Retrieved May 1, 2014, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Angst>)

[4] See Cassin et al, for examples of the lack of distinction between the two terms in both common-usage and in Freud's own work, particularly his writings in French.

[5] Prior to 1986, only psychiatrists were permitted to practice IPA-sponsored psychoanalysis in the U.S. This changed with the famous U.S. Supreme Court case *Welch v. The American Psychoanalytic Association*.

Bio:

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