PROPOSITIONS, THE PARADOX OF ANALYSIS, AND MILAN KUNDERA'S AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Abstract. *I draw attention to how the paradox of analysis arises from Milan Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. I present a literary solution to the paradox of analysis in light of the book, and also raise a question of whether sentences across languages are expressing the same proposition, owing to differences in informativeness.*
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1. Introduction

My English version of Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* has an author's note, which tells us:
The Book of Laughter and Forgetting was written in Czech between 1976 and 1978. Between 1985 and 1987, I revised the French translations of all my novels (and stories) so deeply and completely that I was able to include, in the subsequent new editions, a note affirming that the French versions of these works "are equal in authenticity to the Czech texts."
Is there anything of interest for philosophers of language here? There are things that interest me when you combine this information with material from reading on. My main aim below is to present an instance of a renowned paradox that arises from combining it with much later material.

2. A paradox and literary solution

Part five of Kundera's book is entitled "Litost" and contains a section with the question "What is Litost?" It opens like so:
Litost is an untranslatable Czech word. Its first syllable, which is long and stressed, sounds like the wail of an abandoned dog. As for the meaning of the word, I have looked in vain in other languages for an equivalent, though I find it difficult to imagine how anyone can understand the human soul without it. (1996: 166)
Kundera goes on to explain the meaning. As an English reader imagining a Czech version, there is a puzzle of how this section comes across in Czech. Is Kundera suddenly writing children's literature, explaining what a familiar word means? How could the section be informative for competent users of Czech? This is an instance of the paradox of analysis. An analysis of a term gives a definition; if an analysis is uninformative, then it lacks value; but if we know the meaning of the term already, how can an analysis be informative?
Kundera suggests a literary solution to this paradox. Prior to giving his definition, he gives some examples of litost, involving a student. Then he writes:
Initially this chapter was entitled "Who Is The Student?" But to deal with *litost* is to describe the student, who is *litost* incarnate. (1996: 168)
Here is a way of taking information from the Czech counterpart (or the Czech counterpart posited; I hope you can walk with me on this hypothetical ground): Kundera is conveying, "Czech readers, if you ever have to explain this term to others unacquainted with it, then use my character the student as an example. He provides the best examples for this purpose." That is the information they should take from the section. More generally, perhaps all analyses, even if they are written by people who already understand the term analysed and read by such people, have in mind a reader who does not and those who do already understand learn a way of explaining the term to such a reader. The ordering, the sentence style, the examples, etc: that is where the informativeness is for other readers. This is the literary solution to the paradox. But the main solution I am aware of is Balaguer and Horgan 2016. I have also presented a solution myself (Edward 2023).

3. Propositions

Imagine taking an English word, finding it untranslatable, and writing something like Kundera does. One opens with a sentence of the form "X is an untranslatable English word." For readers competent in English, the informativeness seems to all be in the claim of being untranslatable.
WIth my copy of Kundera, we have an English sentence, "Litost is an untranslatable Czech word." It expresses a proposition. And presumably a French sentence and a Czech sentence express the same proposition. But the informativeness of the Czech sentence to Czech readers is different. It is all in the claim of being untranslatable. I suppose someone might ask, "Is it the same proposition then?" I think it is.

References

1. Balaguer, M. and Horgan, T. 2016. A Solution to the Paradox of Analysis. *Analysis* 76: 3-7.
2. Edward, T.R. 2023. The conceptual map solution to the paradox of analysis. *IJRDO - Journal of Educational Research* 9 (4): 1.
3. Kundera, M. (translated from French by A. Asher) 1996. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.* London: Faber and Faber.