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Translation in groups.
The same language isn't always the same language.

"In learning to communicate
the group can compared
to a child learning to speak."
(Foulkes & Anthony, 1964)

I would like to reflect with you on different types of translations that we encounter in life and that determine our existence in all large and all small groups. On the one hand, I am talking about how different languages need good translations, always new ones, but also about how the process of translation is such an everyday act, even if we speak the same language - or at least believe we speak the same language.

1) Not translatable?

At the beginning, I would like to tell you about a memory I remembered the other day after I hadn't thought of it for many years.

For some time, the four- or five-year-old son of a friend divided his clothes according to criteria that we as adults could not recognize or understand. He called things "flish" or "not flish" and was completely sure of the name with this word invented by himself. He just took a look at a pair of trousers or a jacket and didn't want to put them on because they were "flish", shoes and hat could be "flish" or not, belts and stockings, all his clothes as well as the dolls and teddy bears got this characterization to the amazement of the adults with a word that didn't exist; it was obviously neither about the color, nor the material, not about qualities like scratchy, smooth, thin or thick. We tried again and again to solve the riddle, but the word "flish" could not be translated by us. At the same time, we were impressed by the self-evident and unexcited way in which the little one divided the objects of his world. Sometimes I even had the impression in some moments that he wondered why we couldn't see what seemed so obvious to him. Sometimes he responded with a shake of his head to our questions and happily informed us as an expert: "That's flish!

When we as group analysts talk to each other, a word like "flish" does not appear, but rather we speak in a vocabulary that we have developed theoretically and practically over many years. We use terms behind which whole concepts stand, basic assumptions about consciousness and unconscious expressions of life, about communication and its hurdles. This is what we need in our profession in order to be able to exchange ideas with each other and develop concepts further. Of course, we need conceptual limitations in order to be able to give the following generations a basic framework for what we are actually concerned with, for example why we attached such great importance to questions of belonging and psycho-

historical experiences, or why we give such special priority to scenic understanding.

And at the same time my experience with the little boy can also stand for something else that is no less important for us as group leaders and for adults in general. We can only see up to the tip of our opponent's nose and never rule out that the meaning that we ourselves give to something also applies to the other person or people with whom we speak. If the little boy had used an existing word, his family would probably not have noticed at the time that he was addressing a new issue of his own. If his concern to characterize his things according to his own measure had not met with tolerance and interest in the family, his individual point of view might have gone unnoticed and he might have been regarded as a child who doesn't like scratchy sweaters. Above all, however, the experience that something can be incomprehensible and at the same time valuable seems to me to be groundbreaking for a childhood as for a group.

If someone sits in our groups and his personal "flish" finds no room, it needs a "translation aid", less for the word itself than for the creative process on the one hand and the recognition of the counter-forces, which only want to accept the reasonable, on the other hand. The moment we promote a single flish in the group, we also reach unsaid and unspeakable flishs.

Foulkes considers any verbal or non-verbal expression of the group participants as a communicative communication which "tends to be partly a response to what has been said before and what is going on in the group as a whole. It partly has the value of an unconscious interpretation" (Foulkes 1974, p. 189). Inner-psychic processes of the individual are reflected in the whole group, as well as the group matrix of the current group shows itself reversed in the verbal and non-verbal messages of the individual. In the process of free-flowing group communication, the unconscious of the group is always recreated on the one hand and reinterpreted on the other; Foulkes calls this conscious and unconscious network of the group a dynamic matrix. "We arrive at the seemingly paradoxical result that, in the group, being connected on the unconscious level does not exclude individual differentiation and demarcation, but can precisely enable and promote it" (loc. cit., p. 4).

Our group-analytical ideas thus stand out clearly from the prevailing zeitgeist, groups are diametrically opposed to individuality, as if there were NEITHER individuality OR community. Also our common root and nearest neighbour, psychoanalysis, seems in many cases to associate the aspect of a real or supposed circumcision by groups, but hardly to consider the enormous possibilities that can be developed in groups and partly only there. Of course, the analysis of certain background processes and large group processes, which are also reflected in each small group, is not possible without a deeper understanding of pre-linguistic defense mechanisms, as conceived by Freud, Klein, Bion and Winnicott. The ethnologist and leader of

the large group, Gerhard Wilke, argues that "our understanding of the large group process includes findings from related sciences in theoretical and practical reflection. History, ethnology, art and literature and the relevant insights from medicine and natural science could be considered (Wilke, p. 72). All these sources can be useful to us in providing translations, whether in the form of linking thoughts between group members or interpreting remarks about processes throughout the group.

Links by the group leader refer on the one hand to the fate of a group member and at the same time to different group affiliations, in which a person was quasi placed without being aware of it. The development of a group affiliation never considered before can lead both to fright as well as to relief, in any case clarifies the connection into a hitherto unknown past. Translation and interpretation thus reflect a process of understanding that took place - at first only internally - in the group and in the person of the group leader (as a special part of the group).

Thus, surprising similarities and unexpected differences emerge time and again in the groups, as I would like to sketch with an experience that often takes place between East and West Germans - although they speak "one language". When an East German socialised woman tells us that she "was not allowed to become a designer", the group discussion turns to "typical" state paternalism in the GDR and ends up with Turkish men who allegedly "choose the men" for their daughters. It turned out that associations and distortions in the group had been promoted by socially influenced attributions, e.g.: "In the GDR everyone had to learn the profession that the state had chosen for them". The processing of the projective processes finally resulted in a more differentiated picture: the East German woman had been envied for her professional independence; she herself recognizes her painful fear of leaving her parents and had never applied in an artistic direction; a participant from Swabia confessed that he had "simply followed his parents" when choosing a partner; one participant now for the first time mentioned his ancestors who had fled Ukraine after the war for "opaque reasons". The group opens itself to personal experiences, after common social stereotypes have become questionable, and can find out from devaluing positions and supposed knowledge.

The potentials of speaking to each other and bringing each other into vibration in groups cannot be valued highly enough, not only with regard to a curative effect on the individual group participants, but also with regard to the repercussions on the social fields in which we all move. It is not a matter of translating individual words, but of getting to know the world of other people - and thereby ourselves.

The sociologist Hartmut Rosa looks at the world with us humans in it also from aspects of relationship and echo. In his texts he focuses on the fact that there is a genuinely human longing to have a tangible relationship with the world and to find recognizable resonance in it. Hartmut Rosa vividly

explains how the effort driven by fear of loss and a supposedly inexorable descent to do things, to get things done, to get them done, to create, to master, to solve, to graduate or to get them done prevents us from being able to entrust ourselves to the world: "He who does not feel himself cannot change the world, and he to whom the world has become dumb and deaf also loses his sense of self. (Rosa, p. 28)

"Modern man constantly tries to bring the world within reach: to make it economically available and technically controllable, scientifically recognizable and politically controllable and at the same time subjectively experienceable. But she threatens to become mute and alien to us: Vitality arises from the acceptance of the unavailable." (Rosa, p. 116)

An acknowledgement of fundamentally existing limitations, be it in oneself, be it in other people, institutions, organisations and society, is in contradiction with the independent desire of modern people to make the world available to them - and be it at least linguistically and with interpretive sovereignty over "the others".

2) Speaking in the Group

My concern is to be clearly recognizable to the group in one respect as a group leader: that I am interested in them; that I accept them as they come; and that I try to understand what they bring with them today (or have to carry around with them again and again).) I see the human need for belonging to a group as existential and see its downside, the fear of being sent away or even expelled from the group, as so crucial to contact and relationship that I become more visible in the uncertainty of whether someone is welcome than I am in any other question. The fear of some colleagues (working with a different concept of abstinence) that a broad welcome would hamper the treatment of rejection and expelling fears does not correspond to my experience. Appreciation, which can be experienced in real terms, is the most important prerequisite for being able to afford unpleasant utterances in the group and - reluctantly, but then nevertheless - turning to unpleasant moments of one's own inner self.

A group climate is to be exemplified and established which is neither characterized by particularly great reason, uniformity, rationality, effectiveness or other characteristics stemming from perfectionism, nor speaks the word to any arbitrariness, but is dedicated to a surprising addition of something.

Hartmut Rosa has found a touching picture that seems to resemble my idea of "something that comes as a surprise" when he writes: "Do you still remember the first snowfall in a late autumn or winter of your childhood? It was like the collapse of another reality. Something shy, rare, that comes to visit us, that descends and transforms the world around us, without our help, as an unexpected gift. Snowfall is the pure form of a manifestation of the unavailable: We cannot produce it, we cannot force it, we cannot even plan it

in advance, at least not over a longer period of time. And what's more, we can't get our hands on the snow..." (Rosa, p. 7)

The group participants in our continuing education or patient groups are encouraged to engage in an exchange process, to give individual ideas, feedback or ideas "in the middle", which were triggered by a narrative, a look or also by an incomprehensible group process. In the middle of the small group stands a table with me, on which something can be placed symbolically, but can also be taken symbolically. I look at the "centre" of the group using a piece of furniture and do a "translation" for some group members: the idea of actively placing or removing helps to regulate the distance, especially when dealing with aggressive content. For example, the communication of one's own anger can be greatly facilitated if it is given as one's own "in the middle" instead of attributing and combating the anger to the person who activated the affect.

An "empty chair" of a group member who is currently absent is also an interesting object of translation work, because mutually exclusive tendencies can be represented. Thus presence and absence can be symbolized at the same time, belonging and its subjectively experienced conditions can be thematized. When looking at the chair, feelings of abandonment and rejection as well as constancy or feared insignificance can be activated. The example impressively shows that we need the OWN images of the participants to understand what has been touched in a concrete moment.

It is impressive to see how a somewhat more experienced group is able to translate on its own, which leads individual group members to feel met, offended or set back, envious, angry or relieved on the occasion of a shared narrative. The ability of the participants to bring their individual images to light is crucial if we are not to unambiguate diversity and simplify conflict.

At the beginning, new group participants cannot quite believe that the focus of the group is not on supposed solutions or advice on manifest behavioural strategies, but rather on what we talk to each other like, what triggers one another, what makes speaking difficult or even completely prevents speaking. On the one hand this seems desirable, but on the other hand it also causes counter-movements - of course the pressure of the group is great and what "unexpectedly joins in" is by no means always of a friendly nature!

Overall, it is my urgent concern to promote feedback from the group participants, since the diversity of individual experiences, different points of contact and triggered fantasies give all participants a good chance of coming into direct contact with unconscious fields in the group. In this mutual cooperation, the group is encouraged to look at itself anew and to classify itself in a new way, without exposing itself to a scale of right and wrong.

As a group analyst I assume that the group members - i.e. all people who participate - are able to understand each other on many different levels and

thus to translate and interpret implicitly, even if this is not obvious or immediately comprehensible. If an individual narrative is created in the group, we can therefore also understand what happens in the group as an "understanding" or "interpreting" response to this narrative and its background, regardless of how it was assessed by the individual persons at the conscious level.

Such a diverse communicating group is not primarily dependent on consciousness-raising interventions by the group leaders, but can create a wholesome togetherness and in the course of time reach new perspectives. Group leadership is not primarily about finding unconscious connections, which might have to be "finally pronounced", but first and foremost about creating a special space in which speech and silence flow, so that touch can arise until "a surprising something comes along".

This approach is fundamental because it not only implies that the decisive potential is seen in ALL actors of the group association, but also that the speaking of the group members among each other is accorded an extremely high priority. Such an approval of an inherent act of translation is not to be taken for granted, even in view of the deficit of many people seeking help who look to themselves for help. But also against the background of our own professional socialisation as doctors, psychologists or psychotherapists, who need a sharpened view of needs, deficiencies and failures in order to grasp 'what the problem is', it is a real challenge to put aside the certainty of pathologically influenced descriptions and our own control needs.

Turning to the imagined interspace in groups as a place of change is not easy under everyday conditions, especially not with group participants who react to metaphorical images and other, at first incomprehensible utterances with pressure. My view of group work is, as perhaps becomes clear, shaped by a mixture of optimism and my experience of the limitations of what I can consciously do and what can move the group. That takes the pressure off. (Anyway, sometimes.)

If we now realize that speech acts of the group members are not only based on identification processes from the present, but are also fed by group affiliations of zthe past and even previous generations, it can be guessed that with this approach on the one hand fantasy is assumed, at the same time fantasy and creativity can just grow. Group analytical work is often characterised by humour, laughter and joy, as well as a certain pride in one's own development and that of the group community. Increasing freedom of movement, however, also entails imagination in an unpleasant sense. "For there are two mutually exclusive things: to sleep well and to remember well," the writer Christoph Hein notes in connection with the German inheritances of the last generations (Hein, p. 23).

3) Translating in TRIALOG

Another experience that I would like to share with you here is in the near past, at the TRIALOG conference, which took place two weeks ago for the third time near Berlin. The Berlin Institute for Group Analysis, under the direction of my colleague Stephan Alder (who also participates in our EGATIN meeting), organizes a four-day conference every two years at which mainly German, Russian and Ukrainian interested parties meet in order to meet in a group-analytical setting of small group, large group and social dreaming and an artistic contribution.

In the preparatory group the title of the event was created, which describes the concern of the meetings quite well: "Psychohistorical trialogue for Ukrainian-Russian-German understanding against the background of a common history". 40 to 60 people meet, mainly psychotherapists, some historians, journalists and other interested people, to exchange personal and family experiences and to see which of their own earlier experiences come to light and which common prehistory is still effective today. The groups are led in pairs with different "backgrounds" and usually come from different countries; an observer group, a group of interpreters and a supervisor accompany the whole process. In the small groups one interpreter works at a time, in the large groups and in Social Dreaming (as in the supervision sessions) all interpreters work at the same time.

In my opinion, the extraordinary thing about this conference is the fact that the process of translation is in the foreground and used methodically. If group members can express themselves in their own language, all those present can experience a resonance to the experienced sound and modulation of the voice, whether or not they are fluent in spoken language. This also applies to the respective speakers themselves, who are not absorbed by the effort of translation into a third language. Listening to the "original" message enables a kind of understanding and individual, inner translation process, which hardly seems possible in a foreign-language representation.

Following the "original" the translation of an interpreter can be heard, whose text now comes into connection with what I call the individual "inner translation". If it is a Ukrainian speaker, first a translation into German will be heard, then another interpreter will translate it into Russian. In addition, there are interesting effects when the experienced interpreters, who have accompanied all three conferences so far, exchange views - at our request coram publico - if "mistakes" or differences appear in the translation.

Among the misconceptions to which the organizers themselves were initially exposed was the idea that the Russian and Ukrainian languages were closely related and could always be understood and spoken by both language groups. This initially shortened the translation process until those who remained behind raised their voices in the large group and a clarifying process developed as to who had been understood by whom, had to

submit, or owed gratitude. This examination, as it crystallized, depicted historical social processes and attributions of the German-Russian-Ukrainian present.

Lastly, I would like to mention the slowness of the trialogical working process: there is an unusual amount of time for resonance and thus a holding atmosphere that creates a helpful counterforce to outraged contradiction, impulsive turning away and short-circuited solidarity.

4) Closing remarks

From my point of view, the main task in group-analytical work is to create a secure framework for joyful togetherness and a climate that can be reopened again and again, in which messages of experiences of exclusion and violence that have been inflicted or suffered are not hidden (which often happens because of fears of loss or for the sake of a good mood). Above all, the processes of division must be kept in mind and dealt with in order to make a radical distinction between victims on the one hand and perpetrators on the other, without taking into account development processes, overlaps, washes, reversals and aspects of refusal of empathy and revenge.

The openness of the participants always needs a patient hold. "Not only official historiography, but also autobiographical memory cannot be relied upon, for it rewrites the past in such a way that it fits the current state of the ego," writes my colleague Christoph Seidler (p. 87), stressing that "something as tender and fragile as human memory must be dealt with impartially, cautiously and patiently so that it can emerge reasonably close to reality.

I'd like to add: If we create space in and with our groups in which "flish" can be negotiated, people can discover of their own accord that they know more than they think possible and express more than they know - and that it is good when there are a few translators on board with whom it is sometimes more tedious, but without whom it does not get brighter.