

Translating *Trieb* in the First Edition of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: Problems and Perspectives*

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Introduction

When discussing Strachey's translation of Freud (Freud, 1905/1953) the first problem that pops up is almost inevitably his translation of the German *Trieb* by "instinct." Instincts, as the standard objection goes, have a predetermined object that is given to them by nature to accomplish their biological function, whereas this wouldn't be the case with *Triebe* that don't have such a pre-given object. Since Freud fundamentally questions the idea of (human) sexuality as a biological function that aims at reproduction, Strachey should have translated *Trieb* in the contexts where it refers to sexuality, for example, as "drive" in order to clearly mark this difference. With regard to self-preservation, *Instinkt* would have been a possible translation. Indeed, there is or seems to be (things could indeed be much more complicated than we think) a much more intrinsic link between self-preservation and its object than between (human) sexuality and its object. Furthermore this would imply that *Trieb*/drive is typically human. Indeed, animal sexuality is in this line of thought quite often—rightly or wrongly—considered an exclusively reproductive function.

But are things really that simple? In the way I just formulated the problem, it has a very a "lacanian" sound: Lacan stresses over and over again the nonbiological character of the drive (*pulsion/dérive*) and of desire that, in humans, would be an effect of language. Lacan—as well as Laplanche—stress the passage in which Freud claims that the *Trieb* has no natural object (this passage is virtually the conclusion of Freud's analysis of homosexuality/inversion) and concludes from this that *Trieb* is not instinct (that does have a natural object) and hence should be translated differently: *pulsion/dérive* (Lacan, 1966, pp.851–854). All of this implies that the decision not to translate *Trieb* as instinct is made on the basis of a specific reading of Freud's text and, as I will argue, of a problematic privileging of specific passages.

To further discuss this question I will turn to the first edition of the *Three Essays*, and I will comment on some key decisions that Ulrike Kistner, Herman Westerink, and I made in discussing the first English translation of this text (Freud, 1905/2016). In doing so I will concentrate on a major distinction Freud makes in the *Three Essays* that passed unnoticed (or even rendered invisible) in most translations. I will argue, more concretely, that the 1905 edition of the *Three Essays* is not so much centered around the distinction between *Instinkt*

and *Trieb*, but rather around the distinction between *Geschlechtstrieb* and *Sexualtrieb*. This distinction is completely lost in the *Standard Edition* and in the older French translations.¹ Strachey translates them both as “sexual instinct.” This second distinction resembles the one between *Instinkt* and *Trieb*, but it is not identical to it. It should further be read in relation to the term *Geschlechtsleben* that is linked to it.

Geslechtstrieb vs. Sexualtrieb

Before debating this translation/interpretation, let me first make a quick remark on Freud’s use of the terms *Trieb* and *Instinkt* in the *Three Essays*. First of all, in Freud’s days the German *Trieb* wasn’t opposed to what we today call instinct. Freud uses *Trieb* for both human beings and animals and he doesn’t restrict it to sexuality. Quite the contrary, as early as the opening sentences of his text he speaks of a *Trieb nach Nahrungsaufnahme* and he further mentions the *Geschlechtstrieb* that humans and animals have in common. Furthermore, the word *Instinkt* doesn’t occur in the text, or rather it is only used once as an adjective (Freud, 1905, 23; 1905/1953, 164; 1905/2016, 25). Hence we can safely assume that the *Trieb/Instinkt* distinction as such was not really an issue that explicitly interested Freud very much, or that it had much weight in the articulation of his theory.

But let us now turn to the distinction between *Geschlechtstrieb* and *Sexualtrieb*. This distinction can best be explained by referring to the semantic contexts in which the terms involved are used. Indeed, Freud *tends* to systematically use *Geslechtstrieb* in semantic contexts in which he is talking about the “poetic fable” that claims sexuality is an instinct absent in childhood and that aims at reproduction (Freud, 1905, 2; 1905/1953, 136; 1905/2016, 2). Freud also uses the term more generally with regard to adult object-related and genitalized sexuality so that it also covers inversion or homosexuality. *Sexualtrieb*, on the contrary, is mainly used with regards to nonreproductive forms of sexuality in which the genital zone doesn’t play a leading role (in particular the perversions) or that are in principle autoerotic or *objektlos* (Freud, 1905, 72; 1905/1953, 233; 1905/2016, 82).² The latter

¹ The only translation I am aware of that takes the distinction we are discussing here into account is the new French edition that was realised under the direction of Jean Laplanche. *Geslechtstrieb* is translated as *pulsion sexuée*, and *sexualtrieb* as *pulsion sexuelle* (Freud, 1905/2006). Laplanche’s argumentation with regard to this distinction is in a certain way quite close to ours: *Geschlechtstrieb/pulsion sexuée* refers to adult sexuality and *sexualtrieb/pulsion sexuelle* refers to infantile sexuality (Laplanche, 2007, pp.7–25). However, Laplanche thematizes this distinction in a way that is that is fundamentally different from ours. Discussing this difference in detail would lead us too far astray.

² In the first pages of the original edition of the *Three Essays*, Freud consistently writes

characterizes infantile sexuality that for the same reason is non-phantasmatical and can be described in purely physiological terms: search for nonfunctional bodily pleasures. In this sense *Geschlechtstrieb* and *Sexualtrieb* refer to two clearly defined and opposing sexual regimes.

The opposition between these two regimes informs the structure of Freud's 1905 text. The exclusive emphasis on the passage on the variability of object of the drive that I mentioned in the introduction tends to obscure this opposition. Indeed, this passage is further linked to other passages that were added in 1915, after the publication of *Triebe und Triebschicksale* ("Instincts and their vicissitudes"), according to which the drive is directed from the outset to the object as such. As a result, the emphasis shifts from an opposition between a (non-objectal) *Sexualtrieb* and a (object-related) *Geslechtstrieb* as two different sexual regimes to a distinction between *Instinkt* (adequate object: animals) and drive (variable object: humans). These two distinctions are clearly linked, but they are not identical. Most importantly, the shift in emphasis that I just mentioned hides the philosophical problematic/potential of the distinction between *Sexualtrieb* and *Geslechtstrieb* once and for all from view.

Translating *Sexualtrieb* and *Geslechtstrieb*

So if it is crucial not to obscure the distinction between *Sexualtrieb* and *Geslechtstrieb* in the translation, how can we translate these terms? Since Freud never uses *Instinkt* in the *Three Essays* although it does (and did) exist in German, it is reasonable not to use "instinct" as a translation for *Trieb*. "Drive" seems to be the better option, also because it keeps the link with the body and bodily existence. As far as *Geschlecht* is concerned, it is worth noting as a kind of preliminary remark that the sex-gender distinction that we are so familiar with doesn't play a role in Freud's text. This distinction was only introduced in the 1950s and 60s. In the word *Geschlecht*, then, the sex-gender distinction doesn't play a role yet. Also there is no equivalent word for *Geschlecht* in English. In light of what I said earlier—*Geslechtstrieb* refers to object-centered genital sexuality—"genital drive" seems the better

Geslechtstrieb. In these pages Freud shows how homosexuality (inversion) undermines the "poetic fable" we already discussed. In the remaining part of the first chapter *Geslechtstrieb* is hardly used. Freud there discusses the sexual aberrations with regard to the aim of the (sexual) drive (perversions) in which the genital zone doesn't play a determining role. In the chapter on infantile, autoerotic (*objektlos*) sexuality, *Geslechtstrieb* is only mentioned four times, whereas *Sexualtrieb* is used ten times. These two words are used elsewhere in the text in the semantic contexts that I indicated.

option (rather than “coital drive,” even if that had also been an option in English, but it excludes inverts in the context of which Freud also speaks of *Geschlechtstrieb*). *Sexualtrieb*, then, can obviously be translated as “sexual drive.” We decided to translate *Geschlechtsleben* that also refers to human sexuality as such as “sex life” (“sex life” expresses quite well the generic meaning of *Geschlechtsleben*). We used “sex life” and not “sexual life” in these instances—although the latter would have been possible too—in order to safeguard the opposition between *Geschlechtstrieb* and *Sexualtrieb* that we consider fundamental to the understanding of the text.

“Genital drive” can appear questionable in places where Freud uses *Geschlechtstrieb*” as a *pars pro toto*. “Sex drive” would have been an option in these cases, but that would have required that we translate the same German word (*Geschlechtstrieb*) by two different English terms depending on the context. That is not impossible, but it wouldn’t have been very elegant from the perspective of the translation. Beyond that—and more importantly—we thought that changing the translation of *Geschlechtstrieb* depending on the context in which it occurs risked blurring the structural distinction between two regimes of sexuality—adult and infantile—that determines in many ways this first edition of the *Three Essays*. It is clear that the absence of a direct English equivalent for *Geschlecht* obliges us to look for a compromise. Since the context in most cases leaves no doubt of the generic use of *Geschlechtstrieb*—for instance, where Freud writes that the *sexualtrieb* is its first moment or phase—we think that it isn’t too problematic to consistently translate *Geschlechtstrieb* as “genital drive.”

Conclusion: Translating Freud, Interpreting Freud

A further reason why we decided to consistently translate *Geschlechtstrieb* with the same word is that we wanted to avoid the translation being too “interpretative.” One of the problems with Strachey’s translation is precisely that: it tends to introduce connotations that are not really in Freud—for instance, where he translates *psychisch* as “mental”—or by stressing through his translation one particular line of thought that even when it is present in Freud’s text, doesn’t have the exclusive character that it risks getting in translation. A good example of this problem is Strachey’s translation of *partialtrieb* as “component instinct.” I already discussed the translation of *Trieb* as “instinct.” The translation of “partial” as “component” stresses the idea of possible completeness, or of a possible integration: the component is an element of a larger whole—that is not so present in “partial.” It is true that the idea of a progressive integration of the different *partialtriebe* into one whole (or under the

dominance of the genital zone, and what does this mean then?) is present in Freud, and it is also true that he sometimes presents this idea as the ultimate goal of human development. But this is definitely not the only line of thought in Freud's text. Since we can easily translate *partial* as "partial," there is no reason to emphasize one particular concept—completeness—at the expense of other tendencies, and more particularly at the expense of the richness of Freud's text.

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