THE LIMITS OF TRANSLATION: THE UNTRANSLATABLE

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When talking about translation, the first thing we should analyze is the relationship between language and thought. Firstly, we must assume that all human communication means translation, either inside or between languages.

George Steiner, in *After Babel*, gathers two opposed points of view that can be asserted when speaking about language. On the one hand there are those who think that the underlying structure of language is universal, common to all languages and to all men. The universalists think that translation is possible, precisely because differences among languages are superficial, and therefore, can be overcome. On the other hand, the contrary position (called monadist or relativist) rejects any possibility of translation. The monadists maintain that the only thing we do when translating is look for approximate analogies and equivalents. (Steiner 1977: 73-4).

In short, the possibility of carrying out the task of translation is questioned by Contemporary Linguistics. For a long time, it was thought that the structures of the Universe on the one hand, and the universal structures of the human mind, on the other, give birth to language structures. It was assumed that the human mind dissects its experience of the Universe according to universal logical and psychological categories. Therefore, communication among speakers of different languages is possible, precisely because all of them, and always, speak of the same Universe, of the same human experience, analized according to knowledge categories identical in all human beings.

This way of conceiving the relationship between our experience of the Universe and the different languages has undergone slow transformation, especially within the last hundred years. Nevertheless, throughout the history of language philosophy we may already find some forerunners of this thesis.

In 1697, Leibniz declared that "language is not the vehicle of thought but its determining medium". Leibniz suggested that "thought is language internalized,

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and we think and feel as our particular language impels and allow us to do". (Leibniz in Steiner 1977: 74)

Almost a century later, in 1760, Hamann stressed the existence of "creative, irrational, and manifold proceedings through which language -unique to the species but so varied among nations- shapes reality and is, in turn, acted upon by local human experience". (Hamann in Steiner 1977: 78)

Nevertheless, it was the philosophical thesis of language supported by Humboldt and his successors, the "neo-kantians" and "neo-humboldtians", which gave it a new impulse. According to them, all linguistic system encloses a particular analysis of the internal world, a different analysis from that of other languages or other stages of the same language.

Humboldt spoke of the language as a "third universe" midway between the phenomenal reality of the "empirical world" and the internalized structures of consciousness. (Humboldt in Steiner 1977: 81). Language structures experience and, at the same time, this structuring is subject to the continuous flux of the collective behaviour of the users. In this way, languages generate multiple social ways that, in their turn, consolidate those linguistic divisions.

In this century, Internal Linguistics has taken up the task of making us aware that every language dissects different aspects of the same reality; that it is our language which biases our view of the Universe; that we only perceive in this Universe what our language shows of it. This position is relevant to the questionability of translation as a satisfactory practice.

On the other hand, External Linguistics, which draws on auxiliary sciences like Sociology, underlines the questioning about the legitimacy of translation. It is not only that the same experience of the world is analyzed in a different way in different languages, but, as Ethnology and cultural Anthropology teach us, it is not always the same world that which is expressed by different linguistic structures. After Whorf' s hypothesis, we can now admit that there are deeply different cultures, cultures which do not represent so much a certain number of "visions of the world", but a certain number of different "real worlds".

Benjamin Lee Whorf, starting from the humboldtian presuppositions, tried to demonstrate, by means of the comparison between the Hopi and the English language, that it is the grammatical categories which give shape to thought. The "Whorfian hypothesis" was stated in the following terms:

"_the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the programme and guide for the individual' s mental activity_ Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and

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differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages_ The world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and adscribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way -an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language." (Whorf 1956: 209)

The principle of "linguistic relativity" stated by Whorf implies, that no man can describe nature with total impartiality, on the contrary he is subject to certain ways of interpretation. As far as the human conscience is concerned, there is no universal and objective physical reality. We perceive and describe nature according to the orientations imposed by our native language. In the same way as linguistic structures, visible in the syntax and lexical devices of a language, change greatly, the modes of perception and thinking, and the reactions of the human groups that have different linguistic systems will be very diverse. All of it generates images of the world which are absolutely divergent, and which Whorf terms "worlds of thought". That is to say, the same physical evidence does not lead all observers to the same image of the Universe, unless they have a similar linguistic background.

The name of Edward Sapir has been largely associated to his disciple Benjamin Whorf, especially in the so called "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis". However, both of them sustained different points of view about the relationship between language, thought and culture.

According to Edward Sapir there is no relationship of causality between language and culture, that is, between a selected inventory of experience (culture) and the particular manner in which the society expresses all experience (language). Culture and language are two non-comparable and unrelated processes unless it can be shown that culture has an innate form, a series of formal patterns quite appart from subject-matter that may serve as a term of comparison with language.

Nevertheless, the points of contact between Sapir' s and Whorf' s hypotheses are very important. Sapir stated:

"No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The world in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached". (Sapir in S. Bassnett-McGuire 1980: 12)

Psycholinguistics, Ethnosociology and Sociolinguistics are auxiliary sciences whose appraisals about the relationship between language and thought have been decisive when considering the problem of linguistic relativity. Neurologists agree on saying that the human being is limited by his neurological equipment to the perception of only one part of the Universe as stimulus. To this biological barrier we should add a series of cultural limitations; we focus our attention only on a

portion of the many stimuli we constantly receive. One of the basic problems in the study of language and culture is to know if our attention towards the world that surrounds us is biased by words and meanings already learned and incorporated.

The principle of "linguistic relativity", or what is the same, the idea that the structure of a language has an influence on the cognitive processes of the speaker of that language, has to be thoroughly analized. If we follow this path we could infer that the speakers of a language' s mental processes are not the same as the mental processes of the speakers of another language, and, therefore, a bilingual person, when using a language, thinks differently than when using another.

In any case, before assessing the validity of the "linguistic relativity" principle, we should first decide whether the languages differ as much in their meaning structures as it has been assumed. Research done so far has been carried out in a very limited corpus of languages. The differences quoted as irrefutable proofs of the diverse mental processes of speakers do not provide enough evidence. They only sketch some possibilities that have to be supported by appropriate investigation. The only thing we find is differences among languages with respect to those categories which require more attention on the part of the speakers.

John B. Carroll states in *Language and Thought* :

"There are more similarities than differences in the way language codes symbolize concepts because the concepts are the result of the transactions of human societies with a physical and social environment that has many uniformities over the world. Even if there are differences, the basic intelligence of man is usually sufficient to overcome them." (Carroll 1964: 109)

In contrast to those who defend linguistic relativism, the Generative and Transformational Linguistics supports the existence of a universal linguistic competence and of a grammatical program innate to the human mind. Chomsky says:

"As far as evidence tells it seems that grammar is universally subjected to powerful imperatives. The deep structures seem to be very similar from one language to the other, and the rules used to govern and interpret them belong to a very restricted class of possible formal operations." (Chomsky in Steiner 1975: 97)

In this generative-transformational formulation on the innateness of grammar, and in the controversy it arouses lies the weak point of contemporary Linguistics. Its detractors defend the idea that no two human beings share an identical associative context. Consequently the individual specificity appears in every linguistic form. Each one is part of an idiolect. These associative mechanisms have important consequences for the theory and practice of translation.

Some linguists think that no two speakers mean the same thing when using the same terms, and if they do, it is impossible to demonstrate it. For this reason there is no possibility of a verifiable and perfect communication. Any discourse is basically idiolect. Keeping on this path we can reach extreme positions of linguistic solipsism, as those of Blanchot, who asserts that "all direct communication through language is impossible" (Blanchot in Mounin 1963: 182).

The solipsists consider that the real difficulty of communication is the transmission of affective values, whereas in its practical and intelectual communicative function, language is just an instrument. On denying the possibility of translation they also deny the possibility of communication, as the language itself does not secure communication among human beings not even unilingual communication.

At least we have to admit that absolute sameness between two languages cannot exist.

Eugene Nida, in Language Structure and Translation , insists on the existence of three presuppositions which must underlie all semantic analysis:

1. No word (or semantic unit) ever has exactly the same meaning in two different utterances.

2. There are no complete synonyms within a language.

3. There are no exact correspondances between related words in different languages.

After these statement, Nida rejects any possibility of perfect communication and affirms that all communication is one of degree.

Nida indicates that the cultural fact symbolized by a word provides the denotative meaning, whereas the emotional response experienced by the speakers in the culture is the basis of the connotative meaning.

According to Mounin, these connotations, that is, the expression of the affective attitude of the speaker towards the meanings of a statement, are part of the language and, as such, have to be translated.

Lévy goes further and insists on the fact that "any contracting or omitting of difficult expressions in translating is immoral". He states that "the translator has the responsibility of finding a solution to the most daunting of problems" (Lévy in S. Bassnett-McGuire 1980: 23).

One of the points of conflict and interest of contemporary Linguistics is the search for language universals, that is, features that can be found in all languages and in all cultures expressed by those languages. As the Ethno-linguistic approach to syntactic universals, represented by Whorf and Sapir, has proved unsatisfactory

or merely descriptive, the Generative and Transformational Grammar tries to argue at deeper phenomenological levels. According to Chomsky, "any real progress in linguistics consists in the discovery that certain features of given languages can be reduced to universal properties of language, and explained in terms of these deepest aspects of linguistic form" (Chomsky in Steiner 1977: 100).

There have been extreme opinions, as Osgood' s, who affirms that eleven-twelfths of any language consist of universals, and only one-twelfth of specific and arbitrary conventions. The belief that all languages are cut to the same pattern is widespread. However it may be that too many linguists have assumed that the "deep structures" of all languages are identical because they have equated universal criteria of possibility with what could be in truth aspects only of the grammar of their own tongue or language group.

We may point out that Syntax has always found arguments against the possibility of translation; but the fact that we keep on translating shows, according to Mounin, that under the superficial differences in that syntax, there are syntactic universals.

As syntactic universals Eugene Nida speaks of four different groups (Nida in Mounin 1963: 211):

-Object-words (equivalent to an order of nouns)

-Event-words (equivalent to an order of verbs)

-Abstracts (equivalent to modifiers of the names of objects and events)

-"Relacionales" (equivalent to prepositions and conjonctions in Indoeuropean languages).

As Mounin implies, the one and only real objection to be made to Nida and his syntactic universals is the one made by Whorf, who shows that the same experience is literally seen in a different way by two different languages.

Eg.: J' ai mal à la tête

Mi duole il capo

That is, when transferring from one language into another, it is not only the notions that change, but also the election of the relationship to be expressed.

As far as semantic universals are concerned, at first sight easier to delimit, Peter Newmark states that the most available are those referring to ecological elements (the sun, the moon, the land, the sea), but the only semantic invariants seem to be the numbers, and a few terms from that semantic field (minutes, seconds, days of the week, months).

On the other hand, Bloomfield explains that the practical question of knowing which things can be said in different languages is normally mistaken by the problem of meaning of words and categories. A language will use a sentence where another

uses a word, and where the third one makes use of a compound. But as far as denotation is concerned, anything that can be said in a language, can no doubt be said in another.

Hjelmslev thinks that it is possible to point out to a series of linguistic universals, as it is the fact that language carries a substance by means of a form; the opposition and interdependence between signifier and signified, between expression and content, between system and text, between paradigmatic and syntagmatic, and the three main syntactic functions: parataxis, hipotaxis and cataxis.

Although the search for linguistic universals is still one of the main objectives of contemporary Linguistics, and, even though the general opinion is that inter-linguistic communication is possible, with a higher or lower degree of equivalence, due to the fact that we can keep on translating, the problem originated in the operation of translation are serious and sometimes without solution.

Eugene Nida, in *Language Structure and Translation* (1975: 27), classifies the problems of translation as:

1. loss of information
2. adding of information
3. skewing of information

J.C. Catford, in *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (1965: 93) states that "in total translation, translation equivalence depends on the interchangeability of the SL, and TL text in the same situation".

He distinguishes between two types of untranslatability: linguistic and cultural. Linguistic untranslatability occurs when the TL has no formally corresponding feature. This type of untranslatability happens typically in cases where an ambiguity peculiar to the SL text is a functionally relevant feature, for example in SL puns.

Cultural untranslatability, on the other hand, is not due to differences between two languages, but arises when a situational feature, functionally relevant for the SL text, is completely absent from the culture of the TL.

Catford admits that in many cases, what provokes untranslatability is the impossibility of finding an equivalent collocation in the TL. (Catford 1965: 93-103).

Peter Newmark in *Approaches to Translation* states that any operation of translation entails a loss of meaning that he classifies in four groups (Newmark 1981: 7-8):

1. If the text describes a situation which has elements peculiar to the natural environment, institution and culture of its language area, there is an inevitable loss of meaning, since the transference to or rather the substitution or replacement by the translator's language can only be approximate.

2.   Two languages, both in their basic character (langue) and their social varieties (parole) in context have different lexical, grammatical and sound systems, and segment many physical objects and all intellectual concepts differently.

3.   The individual uses of language of the text writer and the translator do not coincide. Everybody has lexical if not grammatical idiosyncrasies, and attaches "private" meanings to a few words.

4.   The translator and the text writer have different theories of meaning and different values. The translator may look for symbolism where realism was intended, for different emphasis.

If we agree that the translator's task is to produce as nearly as possible the same effect on his readers as was produced on the readers of the original, we will meet a whole range of instances where this effect cannot be achieved. This happens:

-due to the peculiarity of the language, to the existence of puns, etc.

-a non-literary text relating to an aspect of the culture familiar to the first reader but not to the target language reader is unlikely to produce equivalent effect.

-there is the artistic work with a strong local flavour which may also be rooted in a particular historical period. If the culture is as important as the message, the translator reproduces the form and content of the original as literally as possible, without regard for equivalent effect. (Newmark 1981)

Perhaps the most evident problems in translation are the handling of idioms, puns and metaphors. As S. Bassnett-McGuire points out, "idioms, like puns, are culture-bound. In the process of interlingual translation one idiom can be substituted for another. That substitution is made not on the basis of a corresponding or similar image contained in the phrase, but on the function of the idiom".

eg.: Menere il can per l' aia

To beat about the bush

(S. Bassnett-McGuire 1980: 23)

According to Newmark all these elements that imply ambiguity, polisemy and puns, are translated in a different way, depending on the type of text we face. If it is a literary text, these elements have to be reproduced as perfectly as it is possible, trying to keep the principle of equivalence. If is a non-literary text, they may be explained in the TL.

The translation of metaphor is one specific problem in the process of translation. Metaphor is defined by Terence Hawkes in The Critical Idiom : Metaphor as:

"a particular set of linguistic processes whereby aspects of one object are transferred to another object, so that the second object is spoken of as if it were the first."(Hawkes 1986: 1)

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The science of Anthropology has helped Linguistics to conceive the reality resulting from our experience of the world as the source of all metaphors. This idea would deny, in the first place, the universality of metaphor. Metaphor points out to a particular vision of the world, specific in each culture.

M.B. Dagut, who has most deeply studied this problem, defines three types of metaphor in his article "Can metaphor be translated"?, published in Babel (1976). He speaks of dead or fossilized metaphors, standard or stock and original or creative ones.

The easiest to translate is the dead metaphor as its figurative aspect is completely ignored in SL as well as in TL.

About creative metaphors he says that the more original and surprising it is, the easier it will be to translate, since in its essence it will be remote from common semantic as well as cultural associations.

However, it must be taken into account that, next to the cultural and universal element, original metaphors have an idiolect and personal element, an irrational element, in the realm of imagination, which needs a wider scope of structured images to be translated.

In short, Dagut stresses the uniqueness of metaphor and denies the possibility of finding an equivalent in TL:

"Since a metaphor in the SL is, by definition, a new piece of performance, a semantic novelty, it can clearly have no existing "equivalence" in the TL: what is unique can have no counterpart. Here the translator's bilingual competence is of help to him only in the negative sense of telling him that any equivalence in this cannot be "found" but will have to be created. The crucial question that arises is thus whether a metaphor can, strictly speaking, be translated as such, or whether it can only be "reproduced" in some way." (M.B. Dagut 1976: 21-3)

To conclude we could say that this statement by Dagut could be applied to the whole process of translation and give every translation the value of an original and unique text. Octavio Paz says:

"Cada texto es único y, simultáneamente, es la traducción de otro texto. Ningún texto es enteramente original porque el lenguaje mismo, en su esencia, es ya una traducción: primero, del mundo no-verbal y, después, porque cada signo y cada frase es la traducción de otro signo y de otra frase. Pero ese razonamiento puede invertirse sin perder validez: todos los textos son originales porque cada traducción es distinta. Cada traducción es, hasta cierto punto, una invención y así constituye un texto único." (Octavio Paz 1971: 9)

In any case, the controversy about the possibility or impossibility of translation goes on. We must admit with Mounin several facts as the untranslatability of human experience, personal and unique; or admit that Whorf is right when he asserts that

a language imposes the way of looking at the world. But we should not adopt extreme positions that could lead us to a form of linguistic solipsism which could make us deny all possibility of communication, and therefore, of translation. Translation is and will be possible provided we discard the utopia of a perfect work. Perfection does not exist in translation. In each work, translators will have to fix a degree of fidelity and tolerance. Equivalence, more or less approximate, and adequacy of the translated text to its original is the only thing we may hope for.

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