

BEYOND THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF TRANSLATION

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Let me start with a pithy reflection by P. B. Shelley in *Defense of Poetry* (1821):

It were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet (p. 230).

Yet, the translation process is more often than not seen as violets cast into a crucible where the formal components are fully deconstructed like pieces of a mechanism. To this contributes the bi-planar view of language and structural meaning as composed of specifically fixed elements.

But I will put forward my starting hypothesis:

The arrogant pretension of translations to give an objective equivalent is beyond any limit of blind belief in the objectivist representation of reality by means of grammars and semantics of a language.

So, texts mean not because of their supposed «objective» structures but, as M. Foucault put it, because they are the result of «discursive formations» which are entrenched in the ideological system of a society.

The work of J. Trier has been influential in all structural linguistics with the notion of «semantic field» taken from the world of philosophy (Leibniz, Husserl & Cassirer recognized as his forerunners). His hypothesis can be summarized as follows: the lexis of a language is built up by hierarchical clusters of words (lexical fields); each cluster covers specific domains at the level of notions (conceptual fields); and each of these fields, lexical as well as conceptual, is formed out of juxtaposed units just as the irregular tiles in a mosaic. He argues (quoted by C. Germain)¹ that in the 13th c. the lexical items *Wisheit* (wisdom), *Kunst* (art) and *List* (craft) cover the domain of «knowledge», which, he decided, may be split into two great sectors: a material order and a spiritual order. For that he took into account the social strata of the contemporary society: in the material order courtly (whose manner of knowing is *Kunst*) on the one hand and no-courtly (whose manner of knowing is *List*) on the other. In the spiritual order both strata show the same manner of knowledge (*Wisheit*). He then goes on to argue that this relationship changes in the following century. Now, two things are interesting in Trier's proposal:

¹ C. Germain: *La Semántica Funcional*, Madrid, Gredos, 1981.

First, he imposed a systemic network which attempts to reflect coherently the two main social groups at play in that century. Secondly, this network is metastable, not fixed, and therefore suffers a transformation as society develops. Both assumptions, regrettably, are given short shrift, if they are not ignored, by today's semanticists when shaping out the semantic fields. Consequently, word use fails to reflect variability of users (leaving this peaceable task for more empirically minded sociolinguists) and, besides, there exists a tendency to explain meaning as a fixed code.

Trier's thought in 1934 was echoing the voice of Humboldt and other language philosophers who focused their interest in the vexing problem of thought and language relationship. In a quotation by Mounin² Trier says:

Cada lengua es un sistema que opera una selección a través y a expensas de la realidad objetiva. De hecho, cada lengua crea una imagen de la realidad completa, y que se basta a sí misma.

Such claims, which are usually imputed to Sapir and Whorf, more moderate in their views, by the way, than their detractors are willing to admit, could well be subscribed by those linguists involved with language variation who believe that translation is a cross-cultural social phenomenon that should be concerned with a wider range of facts that go well beyond the word to word formal correspondence.

Vinay and Darbelnet³ felt that most translators were bound to come to grips with their procedural activity by tackling some troublesome shifts of expression ranging from slight «omissions» and «additions» to the more divergent «transposition» and «modulation» to eventually radical «adaptation» and equivocal «equivalence». The cline is a good guide to the common ground *vis-à-vis* the contrasting language systems. Most importantly, they suggest that all translation is «approximate», that the conceptual message in any one language is hardly ever equivalent in another language. More recently J. P. Vinay⁴ gave two golden rules to translators:

- *prendre clairement conscience de l'existence des servitudes,*
- *s'habituer à les vaincre par la recherche obstinée d'équivalences dans la langue d'arrivée.*

Vinay claims further in the same paper that about 75% of the translated texts is the result of «servitudes» that leaves the translator with no choice. This may sound grim prospects, perhaps, but, in this connection, and perhaps not to be so pessimistic about the possibilities of translation, it might be worth bringing to mind the psycholinguist Ch. Osgood⁵ who remarked that the codes of the languages are «like icebergs where underneath the surface lies a potential of features common to all mankind and linked to our common biological and psychological roots». This point admitted, the

² G. Mounin: *Los problemas teóricos de la traducción*, Madrid, Gredos, 1971, 61.

³ J. P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet: *Stylistique comparée du Français et de l'Anglais*, Paris, Didier, 1958.

⁴ J. P. Vinay: «Statistiques de la servitude en matière de traduction», in *Meta*, XXV, 4, 1978, 447.

⁵ Ch. Osgood: «Language universals and psycholinguistics», in J. H. Greenberg (ed.): *Universals of Language* Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1963, 322.

problem still remains, however, of the identification of the codes connected with different social and cultural backgrounds. The linguists' admission that the boundaries inside the structured semantic fields are fuzzy and subject to change is tantamount as to allow in the unsteady relations between our cultural experience and the language code we are using. Could we otherwise explain the constant reshuffle of languages and its internal variety and modification of their structures (new words, borrowings, loans, etc.).

K. L. Pike⁶ put it, I believe, in accurate terms:

No pattern can occur in isolation, autonomous from a larger kind of context, or set of assumptions, and still be meaningful to human beings. Patterns require larger contexts, with relevance to more inclusive patterns, if they are themselves to be meaningful to us. The total autonomy of parts of knowledge does not exist.

When we translate we not only put into correlation two systems —almost always unequal— but we set into motion a whole contextual world, unjustly left behind or underrated with the technical jargon «polysystem»⁷ in the sense of that indetermined, untractable substance that are supposed to be of cultural semiotic nature and which a sound theory of language should reflect systematically rather than ignore it as irrelevant for the «linguistic meaning» or «form of the content». The social phenomena of the world, far from being a disorganized array of fixtures and events, are a meaningful configuration of cultural code of signs that are related to our language code. In an typical illustration of linguistic contrast J. C. Catford⁸ notes:

- English: yes/no.
- French: *oui/si/no*.

Here the two systems are put in parallel: it seems clear then that there are stretches of concepts that are highlighted by one language but not by the other. The examples are, in fact, endless, as anthropologists have shown. It is apparent that there are socio-cultural reasons for accounting for these distinctions, as Malinowsky had done when he attempted to translate Kiriwinan texts into English. A literal translation here would be meaningless to an Englishman without explicit reference to the «context of culture» (magical function) and the «context of situation» (pragmatic function). J. R. Firth⁹ has made it a central notion in his linguistic approach based on language use. As a semiotic category, the «context of situation» (central to socio-semiotic theories of language) has met both approval and criticism by linguists of various persuasions. Outstanding amongst its early critics was J. Lyons,¹⁰ based on more formal semantic approaches.

⁶ K. L. Pike: *Talk, Thought and Thing*, Dallas, S. Inst. Ling, 1992, 55.

⁷ G. Toury: *In Search of a Theory of Translation*, Tel Aviv, Porter Ins. for Poet. & Semiotics, 1980.

⁸ J. C. Catford: *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, Oxford, U. P., 1965, 40 ff.

⁹ J. R. Firth: *Papers in Linguistics: 1934-1951*, Oxford, U. P., 1957.

¹⁰ J. Lyons: «Firth's theory of meaning», in C. E. Bazell *et al.* (eds): *In Memory of J. R. Firth*. London, Longmans-Green, 1966.

It is difficult to overstate the role of «context of situation». A good example of the paramount importance of such concept is an early study of discourse by T. F. Mitchell entitled «The language of buying and selling in Cyrenaica: a situational statement».¹¹ As this linguist shows, in the discussion of interactional texts meanings are negotiated in the light of a culture-specific genre structure. The first textual category we must face when dealing with a text of whatever natural language is «genre», a varying conventional form of social communication. Genres are mostly transferable, but not without modifications in various ways. In each culture the speakers are aware of the variations allowed in a specific context as explicitated by the so called GSP (generic structure potential), which is a systemic network of possible options a speaker has. Now, it seems obvious that linguistic «equivalence is unlikely due to the fact that complete cultural semiotic «equivalence» is not bound to exist. This is a major snag for the translator which some theorists have, rather naively, wished to overcome by inventing the ungrounded *ad hoc* category of «transleme».¹² Now, as is well known, an inherent feature of natural languages is the mismatch between form and content. The ethnolinguist Dell Hymes¹³ suggests that the analysis of linguistic form and the social context goes well beyond a mere question of correlation. The users of a language can choose marked forms from the variables in a network of potential choices, for instance, in interactional relations: «deference», «politeness», «insult», «irony», «respectfulness», etc., but the question is, do such choices have an equivalent in another language?, or to put it another way, are there correlative social semantic variations? It would be an utter failure if we attempted to manipulate the data in linguistic terms in strict sense. According to Friedrich,¹⁴ there are ten features of use in the Russian second person pronouns, not just two as E. Haugen had suggested (authority-intimacy), which means that semantic features can be extended well beyond a *prima facie* analysis of general features leaving aside as pragmatic or connotative other essential ones.

Therefore, crucially for translators, we may ask: how can we establish equivalence between a SL and a TL? We have repeatedly heard the same message: «translation means the equivalence of meaning» and «meaning equals semantic content». Now, this begs the question: where do we establish the boundaries of semantics? Should it be only the so-called «representational content» or should it include the «interpersonal» one? R. Hasan¹⁵ has argued in favour of the latter proposal:

If it is granted that the boundary between the pre-existing objective phenomena and the subjective evaluative ones is fuzzy, then clearly their mutually exclusive assignment to either the semantic or the pragmatic type of meaning is open to question.

¹¹ *Hesperis*, 44, 31-71, 1957.

¹² J. C. Santoyo: «A propósito del término translema», en *Actas del I Congreso Nacional de Lingüística Aplicada*, Murcia, Univ. de Murcia, 1983.

¹³ D. Hymes: *On Communicative Competence*, Pennsylvania, Univ. Press, 1971.

¹⁴ P. Friedrich: «Structural implications of Russian. Pronominal use», in W. Bright (ed.): *Sociolinguistics*, The Hague, Mouton, 1966.

¹⁵ R. Hasan: «Semantic Variation and sociolinguistics», en *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 9, 1989, 240.

If, however, a situation is semiotically construed, then variation in representational meaning cannot be so restricted as it is made by structural lexicalists. E. A. Nida¹⁶ has explicitly pointed out:

the translator, however, is concerned with more than merely the string of sets of componential features in certain grammatical relations with one another. He must also have a great deal of additional information which is not contained explicitly in the immediate context. Ideally, he should have all the background knowledge which the original writer and his audience shared, since no document ever contains an exhaustive statement on any subject.

Nida is supposedly one of the few scholars who is well aware of what intercultural translation means, since he is directly concerned with the world-wide Bible translation. His insightful relativistic concept of «dynamic equivalence» and his taxonomy of «semantic domains» furnish the framework within which it can be roughly determined to what extent the semantic classes in ancient Greek are specifically related to social context. It indirectly reveals the unsatisfactory results derived from proposals which aim at dwelling on two well-structured lexico-grammatical systems. Nida's interest in «dynamic equivalent effect» («the closest natural equivalent to the source language-message») adds an obvious pragmatic dimension (reader's response) which aims at bridging the gulf between too far apart social meanings. This, however, is a slippery ground of relativity having potential for abuse and giving rise to polemic positions, something inherent to all translation practice.

That the «equivalent effect» is not easily achieved is something that speaks loud and clear about the un/bridgeable rift between languages and the pretended universals of the rationalist grammarians. Good examples abound that have attempted to put to test the categories B. L. Whorf had called cryptotypes or covert in the description of Hopi grammatical categories. J. R. Martin¹⁷ has convincingly demonstrated the cultural gulf that separates English and Tagalog through «grammatical conspiracies» in the expression of the semantic/pragmatic notions of «face», «fate» and «family». In a similar manner Malinowski¹⁸ had tackled the «garden site» in Kiriwivan. In dealing with the relations between the signs *bugayu*, *odila*, *yosewu*, *baleko*, *bagala*, etc., he argues that

the definition of the word consists partly in placing it within the cultural context partly in illustrating its usage in the context of opposites and of cognate expressions (p. 16).

He dismissed the idea that the Trobriand garden was a sort of botanical garden with tags tied to every bush, implement and activity.

Rather in the same line, Nida and Taber¹⁹ made use of the method developed by Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum to calibrate the actual meanings of translated words

¹⁶ E. A. Nida: «Semantic components in translation theory», in G. E. Perren and J. L. Trim (eds.): *Applications of Linguistics*, Cambridge, Univ. Press, 1970, 347.

¹⁷ J. R. Martin: «Grammatical conspiracies in Tagalog», in J. D. Benson, Cummings and Greaves (eds.): *Linguistics in a Systemic Perspective*, Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1988.

¹⁸ B. Malinowski: *Coral Gardens and their Magic*, Allen & Unw, 1935.

¹⁹ E. A. Nida and Ch. R. Taber: *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Leiden, Brill, 1969.

from the Bible. Thus *gynai* (literally «woman») is translated by *The New English Bible* by «mother», since a survey shows that this latter term is evaluated as more suitable, and *gynai* had more favourable connotations in Greek.

But if in ordinary speech we do not have to allow for many supplementary features inherent in word meanings, the translation of literary works are fraught with all kinds of difficulties. The reception of the literary meaning, even the one expressed in clear, ordinary wording can be a maze of connotative semiosis. Let us see just two verses from Shelley's *Adonais* (translation by V. Gaos):

Thy spirit's sister, the lorn nightingale
Mourns not her mate with such melodious pain;

*El viudo ruiseñor, de tu alma hermano,
no se lamenta con tan dulce acento por su
perdido amante,*

Now, some changes have taken place here, the most outstanding being the change of gender of both birds, the first due to attributed gender, the second to grammatical convention.

It is apparent then as various trends of discourse analysis have shown that a «contextual configuration is needed as a category that links cultural signs and linguistic realization of meanings. That necessarily implies a postulation of units for translation theory that go well beyond the piecemeal «nuts and bolts» of a mechanic process.