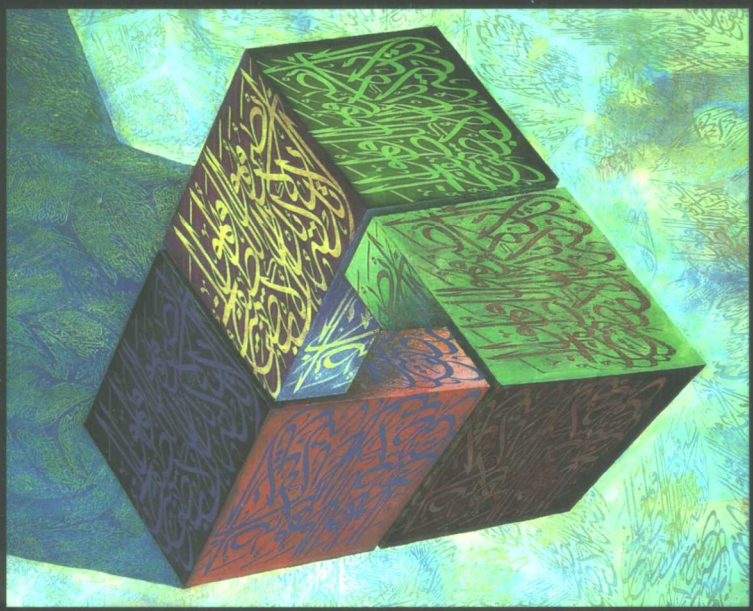
TRANSLATION THEORIES EXPLAINED

Translation and Language

Linguistic Theories Explained



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Foreword

This book is about the love-hate relationship between linguistics and translation theory. Many linguists have no interest in translation theory, and some translation theorists are increasingly declaring that linguistics has nothing to offer their discipline. The author of this book does not entirely share this sceptical attitude towards linguistics; he does not see linguistics as the grand liberator or the great oppressor of translation studies; he believes rather that there are many things in translation which can only be described and explained by linguistics. Further, a translator who lacks at least a basic knowledge of linguistics is somebody who is working with an incomplete toolkit.

Since what might be called the 'heroic age' of linguistically-oriented translation studies extended from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, it is only right that these classic texts receive their due attention in these pages. However, in spite of the scepticism alluded to above, there is continued and even renewed interest in linguistic approaches to translation studies. We shall thus also look at these more recent developments, especially in the later chapters.

In relation to some of these developments, the author may seem to take a sceptical attitude. But that should be taken not as hostility so much as an indication that these approaches have not yet made their point convincingly, and that more research needs to be done.

Indeed, a phrase encountered frequently and with variations in these later chapters is: 'little is known about this as yet'. There are many areas of translation studies where much more linguistic research is needed. There has been a tendency for translation theorists to make a proposal and then pass on, leaving the ground largely unbroken. Other researchers have to get out their spades and start digging. One hope, therefore, is that this book will point the way to such areas.

In an introductory book of this length it is not possible to cover all aspects of the relationship between linguistics and translation theory. I have nevertheless tried to cover in reasonable detail those areas which have been central to the subject and give at least a mention to others, which the reader can follow up through the bibliography.

All translations of quotations are my own.

Contents

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1. Introduction

A troubled relationship

Modern linguistics began in the early twentieth century with the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He focused on the notion of language as a system at a given moment in time (a synchronic approach) at a highly abstract level that uncovered powerful principles about the way in which language in general is structured. The structuralist model he produced was to prove immensely influential when, much later, it was taken up by anthropologists, literary critics and philosophers as the one model that would apparently explain what we had always wanted to know about life, the universe and everything.

Since linguistics is the study of language and has produced such powerful and productive theories about how language works, and since translation is a language activity, it would seem only common sense to think that the first had something to say about the second. Indeed in 1965 the British scholar John Catford opened his book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* with the words: "Clearly, then, any theory of translation must draw upon a theory of language – a general linguistic theory". In exactly the same year, however, the famous American theoretical linguist Noam Chomsky was rather more sceptical about the implications of his own theory for translation, saying that his theory "does not, for example, imply that there must be some reasonable procedure for translating between languages" (1965:30). Although no expert in translation, Chomsky nonetheless divined that there was something about the activity that put it beyond reason. Perhaps he had read what the academic Ivor Richards (1953:250) said about translation: "We have here indeed what may very probably be the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos".

This uncertain relationship between linguistics and translation theory continued to be reflected in the literature. Eight years after Catford's and Chomsky's pronouncements, the German theorist Jörn Albrecht (1973:1) expressed regret and astonishment that linguists had not studied translation; yet the Soviet linguist Aleksandr Shveitser, writing in the same year (although quoted here from the later German translation), made the opposite claim: many linguists had long since decided translation could indeed be an object of linguistic study (1987:13). He rejected the idea that linguistics can explain only the lowest levels of translation activity, saying this was based on too narrow a view of linguistics. He did, however, refer briefly to the furore caused by the first major attempt by a Russian scholar to produce a

linguistic description of translation (Fedorov 1953), which provoked lively polemic and liberal accusations of 'deviation' (see Cary 1957:187).

The intervening years have not resolved the tension. Almost thirty years after the Catford-Chomsky declarations, the English academic Roger Bell (1989:xv) claimed that translation theorists and linguists were still going their own separate ways. The French scholar Maurice Pergnier has pointed out that even though linguistics has developed in ways that make it much more relevant to the concerns of translation, there are still those who would like to liberate translation completely from its sway (1993:9). Indeed, his compatriot Marianne Lederer is just one among many who dismisses linguistics from translation studies: "I hope in this way to bring out the reasons why translation must be dealt with on a level other than the linguistic" (1994:87).

Such a position is provocatively extreme. Linguistics quite clearly does have something to offer the study of translation, and in these pages we shall be exploring what that is. At the same time, however, we shall be pointing out the limitations of the discipline, especially if people want to see translation as an *entirely* linguistic activity or want to use linguistics as a recipe giving ready-made solutions to specific translation problems rather than as a resource for extrapolating general problem-solving techniques from specific concrete problems.

The relationship of linguistics to translation can be twofold: one can apply the findings of linguistics to the practice of translation, and one can have a *linguistic* theory of translation, as opposed, say, to a literary, economic or psychological theory of translation.

In the first approach, a subdivision of linguistics such as sociolinguistics might have something to say about the way in which language varies in relation to social status, age, gender and so on. It will enable us to recognize these variations and describe them. And when we have to deal with sociolinguistic variation in a text to be translated, linguistics can provide one input in deciding how to cope with the situation.

In the second approach, rather than applying linguistic theory to elements within the text to be translated, one can apply it to the entire concept of translation itself. Thus the theory of dynamic equivalence put forward by the American scholar Eugene Nida, which we consider below, can actually be seen as nothing less than a sociolinguistics of translation, describing the way translators can adapt texts to the needs of a different audience in the same way we all adjust our language to suit the people we are talking to.

Both of these approaches are found in writings on linguistics and translation, and we shall try to signal them as we go along. For the remainder of this chapter we shall follow the first approach, giving an overview of the

basic concepts and main divisions in structural linguistics to see how important they are in translation, then coming back to them in greater detail in later chapters.

Langue/parole

Saussure made it possible to see language as a set of structured systems rather than a ragbag of bits and pieces. Some parts of language, such as grammar, have always been thought of as systems, of course. But the structuralist linguistics that emerged from Saussure's work attempted to uncover the systematic and structured nature of other parts of language: the sound system (phonetics and phonemics), the grammar system (syntax, which is word order, and morphology, which is word shape) and the meaning system (semantics).

For linguistics to make progress in describing these systems, Saussure thought it necessary to distinguish between what he called 'langue' and 'parole' (the terms are often used in their French form in other languages, because, ironically, it can be difficult to find translation equivalents). This is the difference between the abstract language system (langue or 'a language'), which Saussure saw as the object of linguistics, and actual uses of language (parole or 'speaking'), which were thought to be too variable for systematic, 'scientific' study because the factors involved were too numerous and too random.

An example might illustrate this: After a certain amount of alcoholic intake you might say *I've got a shore head* when you mean *sore head*. Now, although linguistics can describe the difference between *s* and *sh* in phonemic theory, in this particular case the difference has no *linguistic* meaning; it is a matter of parole; it is a one-off event that has no function in the language system. By contrast, the difference between *sore* and *shore* in the non-alcoholic *I got a bit sore sitting on the shore* does have a function in the language system: the sound opposition in this case serves to mark out a change in meaning, and it does so on a systematic basis (single/shingle, sin/shin etc.) These differences are a matter of langue.

This distinction between langue and parole, and the insistence that linguistics should study only langue, led to tremendous progress in the discipline. Yet the early linguistic approaches to translation that tried to follow the same line led to considerable dissatisfaction. To many translators and translation theorists the findings seemed sterile, leaving out many things of interest to translation. The German scholar Dieter Stein (1980), for example, went so far as to declare that the linguistics of langue had little or nothing to offer translation studies (which is to forget that language

structure can be a serious problem in translation).

The langue-oriented approach can certainly produce useful comparative descriptions of language systems, and, as the Canadian translation theorist Jean Delisle says, such things must be a part of every translator's knowledge (1988:78). I can scarcely envisage being a translator if I don't have that basic command of my languages. But these things by no means exhaust the problems of translation. They belong to what the German theorist Werner Koller (1979:185) calls 'foreign language competence', knowledge that is basic to, but not the whole of, 'translator competence', because simply knowing two languages is not all that is needed to be a translator, as these pages will make abundantly clear.

Stein advocated what he called the 'Sit/Text' approach, which involved data of a textual and situational nature. This would require a linguistics of parole rather than of langue and would allow us to account for such things as the drunkard's *shore head*, which is vital for translation. The French theorist Jean-René Ladmiral also claimed that "translation is a communication operation guaranteeing identity of parole through differences of langues" (1979:223), while Albrecht reminded us that "what is being translated are not 'codes' or languages but 'messages' or texts" (1973:26), in other words parole not langue. For Koller (1979:183), translation theory is "a science of *parole*".

The problem was that parole-oriented linguistics was scarcely developed. There was thus a fear that abandoning the langue-oriented approach would mean giving up any attempt to turn translation theory into a scientific theory that would rescue it from the earlier dilettante approaches. Even though the linguistics of parole is now better developed, it makes use of what the Croatian scholar Vladimir Ivir (1996:153) calls 'ad hoc categories' that do not have "theoretical coherence and scientific rigour" because they are "not amenable to ... theoretical treatment". The irony is that by the 1990s the whole idea of a scientific approach to translation had come under fire anyway.

The view that translation must be studied as parole (a communicative event) rather than langue (an abstract system) is now widely accepted, to the extent that an author like Pergnier (1993:223) can refer to it as a 'fact', and an important fact, since, as he says, it is because translation is a fact of parole that there is no such thing as the one 'right' translation of a message.

The langue/parole distinction is a very high-level distinction, concerning as it does the entire language. Saussure's other major distinction concerned one of the lowest levels of language, but was, if anything, even more revolutionary in its consequences.

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Signifier/signified

If language is a structure, it must have component parts. The most important of these is the sign, a technical concept intended to get away from the notion of 'word', which is notoriously difficult to define. The sign itself is a structure that has two parts: the signifier and the signified, both of which are mental states. The signifier is a mental image of the physical sound that you make when you say, for example, *cat* or *koshka* (or *mimi* if you speak Tahitian), while the signified is a mental concept or representation of physical cats in the real world.

One of Saussure's key claims is that the link between the signifier and the signified is not given by some Supreme Being or by Nature, as many nonlinguists believe, but by society. The relation between the two is an arbitrary social construct. A tubular object consisting of meat and other ingredients wrapped in a casing is assigned the signifier *sausage* in English and *Wurst* in German. Neither of these is more 'right' than the other. There is nothing magic in the object itself that makes *sausage* a 'better' word than *Wurst*. It might seem that way, especially to people who speak only one language, but in reality the link is purely arbitrary and no particular language has the 'right way' of saying things.

Perhaps one of the easiest ways to understand this is to consider the phenomenon of political correctness. In a short space of time the supporters of this ideology managed to create a whole new set of words to talk about things for which they previously used the same words as everybody else. They then tried, with varying success, to make their new words the social norm. Altering an entire vocabulary in this way can only be possible because of the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified link.

Paradoxically, the same PC phenomenon demonstrates the deep-rooted belief among many people that there *is* a special link between signifier and signified. The attempt by some feminists to write the word *man* out of existence, even as a component of words where it has no connection with 'male adult' (so that *emancipate* becomes *ewomancipate*), suggests a very strong belief in word magic, in the power of the signifier to shape the way we think about the signified. There is a joke about two farmers watching pigs wallowing in the mud. After a time one says to the other, 'No wonder they be called pigs'. This view is put with admirable succinctness by the comic novelist Terry Pratchett (1989:132): "All things are defined by names. Change the name, and you change the thing".

This kind of belief is not entirely irrational. If the signifier-signified link is arbitrary, then translation would be very simple: you would identify the signified, strip away the source-language signifier, and replace it with

the target-language signifier. According to this primitive theory of translation we would read the sign *sausage*, identify the language-independent signified denoted by the signifier, find its German signifier, and make a simple substitution: *sausage* would become *Wurst*. Translation would be a job for computers (a vast topic in itself which would be too technical for the present book to cover).

However, things are not that simple. Signs do not just signify (point to things in the real world). They also have value derived from language-internal structuring which is not the same from one language to the next. The words *cat* and *koshka* don't have the same range of meanings, so their value is different. English has two words *wood* and *forest* for the one Russian word *lies*, so again the values are different.

But words also carry a superstructure that is often referred to by the term 'connotation'. We think of some words as 'good' (*grandmother, baby, chocolate*) and other words as 'bad' (*spider, snot, slug*). But these connotational meanings are highly variable even within a language (some people don't like babies, others may have a fondness for spiders, while grandma may be the proverbial 'grandmother from hell') and they are often different between cultures. French people sitting down to eat remain calm in front of a plate of snails. Many English people would react differently, and so for them the menu may offer *escargots*, promising the exotic not the slimy. Connotation has proved difficult for linguistics to formalize, but we shall look at one useful attempt below.

Paradigmatic and syntagmatic: word sets and collocations

In addition to having its own internal structure, the sign can be structured in two other ways. Signs can be joined up in a string, and they can be grouped in a bundle. This is often called the 'chain and choice' model, and we shall see examples of how a translation problem that cannot be solved at one point in the chain may be solved by an appropriate choice at some other point. In the first case (making the chain) we produce word sequences: in the restaurant we can string words together to say 'I'd like sausage and chips, please'. The order in which we put the words is not normally random. It is governed by 'syntax', the rules of our language which tell us what kind of word can come in what place in a sentence. In another language we might have to say 'Like chipsausage would'. This is syntagmatic structure. Traditional linguistics handled syntax as a set of slots along the surface of the page or in the stream of spoken language; it tried to identify the function of each slot and what could go in it. Chomsky's revolution was to go below the surface and ask how the string was generated and from what.

In the second case (making the choice), we can pick words out of a 'bag' in place of other words. We could replace *sausage* in the above sentence by any number of words, such as *egg*, *pie* or *steak*. This is paradigmatic structure. But again the structure is not random. As we shall see below, words tend to group together to form semantic fields. Most people would associate *knives* with *forks* rather than with *cats and dogs* or any other non-cutlery items.

These groups may seem naturally ordered according to what is out there in the real world. But very often they, like the sign, are socially determined. Sticking with our food example, we find that the society we live in quite arbitrarily restricts what we are allowed to eat and in what combinations. *Tripe and chips* is not a combination found on English menus. Nor is *boiled potato and roast dog* or *broccoli and sautéd maggot*, although dogs and maggots are staple diet in other cultures, and this may pose problems for the translator. If we are translating a text in which the words *fish and chips* are chained together not to designate a particular combination of foods that somebody just happens to be eating but to convey the sociolinguistic connotation of 'typical national cheap meal', we may have to consider the possibility of some kind of cultural adaptation in our translation. This takes us outside linguistics, to a point where we can use linguistic concepts to describe the phenomena we find in language but where the guidelines on how to handle those phenomena in translation must come from some other discipline.

As the example of tripe and chips shows, the paradigmatic (picking items out of our lexical bag) and the syntagmatic (stringing them together in a line) come together in the concept of 'collocation', a technical term for what some people call a 'set phrase'. Except in special circumstances, such as poetry or madness, we can't take any old thing out of our language bag and stick it next to any other old thing. We are subjected to what are called 'selection restrictions'. These may be quite rigid (we say *bats in the belfry* not *bats in the steeple* to say that somebody is mad) or they may be quite loose: a British prime minister caused surprise with the phrase *two bananas short of a picnic* to mean the same thing, and although most English people say *egg and chips*, the heroine in the film *Shirley Valentine* called them *chips and egg*.

Some collocations are quite arbitrary. What possible link can there be between rain, cats, and dogs? And yet the English say *It's raining cats and dogs*. Others can be clearly motivated. The equivalent French expression *Il pleut comme vache qui pisse* ('It's raining like a cow urinating') is quite graphic. Good translation is often a case of either knowing or serendipitously hitting on the appropriate collocation (which

will not always be in the dictionary).

Even people translating into their own language can get the collocation wrong, as happened with the student translator who produced the sentence *lost in a sea of explanations*, which is actually a mixing of two separate collocations (drowning in a sea / lost in a fog). Yet it should be said that collocations are not necessarily always right or wrong, but often simply more or less acceptable. You might get some idea of degrees of acceptability of collocation by asking yourself whether one can say *the cow strolled over to the fence*.

Because collocations are judged on a sliding scale of acceptability rather than just as right or wrong, not all speakers of a language agree on what is or is not a collocation. The Canadian theorists Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet (1958:89) give the translation pair *Échappe à l'analyse / baffles analysis*, which baffles quite a number of English people because they do not accept that *baffles analysis* is an English expression (maybe they've only ever heard 'defies analysis'). The fact that the dictionary definition of 'baffle' does not preclude it from collocating with 'analysis' does not, of course, mean that the collocation exists.

As Hans Hönig and Paul Kussmaul say (1984:98), diverging from the accepted collocations of the target language is not necessarily a bad thing to do, since there may be a good reason for it (poetry, for example). Yet where no good reason exists, such divergence thwarts reader expectation and causes a momentary disruption in text processing, producing what Ladmiral (1979:221) calls a braking effect on the ocular sweep of reading, an effect that will not have existed in the original. Note, though, that proponents of 'foreignizing translations', a concept we shall come back to, are entirely in favour of this braking process.

These concepts (sign, paradigm, collocation, etc.), together with others of a more traditional nature that we shall look at below, produced the structural linguistics which allowed a rigorous analysis of word and sentence structure.

Indeed, the chain-and-choice model was tremendously successful when applied to other areas of human experience that suddenly became readable as a form of language: selecting items from a semantic field (such as clothes) and chaining them together in socially constrained sequences that were really quite arbitrary (fashion). Such social construction is also found in two other branches of linguistics that are closer to a linguistics of parole than of langue, although they can still be analyzed in terms of the Saussurean concepts of signifier/signified and paradigm/syntagm. We shall introduce them briefly here, leaving greater detail to later chapters.

Sociolinguistics and pragmatics

The reference above to 'tripe and chips' can serve as a pointer to these other areas of linguistics. If I order 'tripe and chips' in a restaurant, the other customers may react in two ways: either I will be considered irredeemably vulgar, or I will cause a stir, or even both.

In the first case, I will have categorized myself as coming from a certain social class (there is little demand for tripe among the English middle classes) and possibly also as coming from a certain part of England (London or the North, perhaps), which may also be confirmed by my accent. This is the stuff of sociolinguistics, the study of language in relation to such things as age, class, regional origin and status. This is at the edge of linguistics because it shades over from language use into real-world knowledge and experience. Am I classified as lower class because of the words *tripe and chips* or because of the objects? The distinction is not always easy to make, and the Egyptian-born theorist Mona Baker (1992:183) goes so far as to say that it is "not particularly helpful" in the case of translation to try to distinguish the linguistic from the extralinguistic. However, since we must be careful not to overrate the role of linguistics in translation, we must try to make that distinction where possible.

If my demanding tripe and chips had been deliberately intended to create a stir, then we would be in another area of linguistics that goes under the name of pragmatics. This is defined as what it is we actually do with language, the things we accomplish by speaking and writing.

If, for example, I wish to show respect for somebody I am writing to, the way I accomplish that aim differs according to the language I use, and it would be absurd, except for specific purposes, to translate such formulae literally. Likewise, if I were translating a novel that contained the phrase *Can you lend me 100 yen*, I would not make a precise calculation from the current exchange rate. I would instead provide what has been called a set-to-set translation (Malone 1988:102), because what matters is not the precise sum but the act of asking for financial assistance.

By contrast, if I were translating an engineering document describing machine-tool parts and made the foolhardy decision to convert the measurements from metric to imperial, then it would become necessary to use a calculator because these figures are being put to a different use. (I have called this decision 'foolhardy' because one translator *did* make the conversion with catastrophic results: the manufactured parts were the wrong length by a margin that was minute but sufficient to render them useless. One thing linguistics will not tell translators is to make sure they have a good insurance policy to cover them against that kind of mistake.)

Before we move on to these wider areas of linguistics we need to come back to the concept of the sign, both as a structure within itself and as a structure with other units; we need to analyze its importance to translation.

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