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Contexts in Translating

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Eugene A. Nida

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藏书章

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To my wife,
María Elena Fernández-Miranda,
my love and inspiration

Preface

For a number of years I have been increasingly interested in the role of contexts in understanding and translating texts, because failure to consider the contexts of a text is largely responsible for the most serious mistakes in comprehending and reproducing the meaning of a discourse. But contexts need to be understood as influencing all structural levels of a text: phonological, lexical, grammatical, and historical, including events leading up to the production of a text, the ways in which a text has been interpreted in the past, and the evident concerns of those requesting and paying for a translation.

In order to indicate precisely the implications of the roles of contexts, I have incorporated translations into English from French, Spanish, and German. And as a way of describing some of the more significant, but less known, treatments of translation, I have summarized several of these in Chapter 6 and have added Chapter 7 in order to present the three major types of theories of translation in terms of philological, sociolinguistic, and sociosemiotic principles.

I also wish to acknowledge the help that I have received from those who have reviewed certain portions of the text or who have provided help in recording questions and discussions about *Contexts in Translation* during a series of presentations of these concepts in ten universities in China during the Spring of 1999: Mona Baker, Gavin Drew, Jiang Li, Johannes P. Louw, Heping Shi, Huang Ren, Tan Zaixi, and Zhang Jing-hao.

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CHAPTER 1

What is translating?

Is translating simply the act of transferring the meaning of a text from one language into another or does it depend on some theory of similarities and contrasts between languages? In order to analyze and to direct such an activity, a number of specialists in translating have elaborated numerous theories: linguistic, sociolinguistic, communicative, free, literal, hermeneutic, semiotic, relevant, skopos, Marxist, transformational, and even gender--to mention only a few. But what seems even more strange is that for the most part the best professional translators and interpreters have little or no use for the various theories of translation. They regard them as largely a waste of time, especially since most professional translators regularly and consistently violate so many rules laid down by theorists.

One reason for rejecting certain theories of translation is the fact that they are often too heavy in technical terminology and too light on illustrative examples of what top-flight translators actually do. One of the most important journals focusing on the translating of literary texts does not accept articles on theories of translating, while for Chinese translators Yan Fu's triple principle of translation, namely, "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance," fails to say what is to be done when these three ideal principles are not equally applicable. But according to Zhang Jing-hao this triple principle of translation advocated by Yan Fu and by many other Chinese theorists was not meant to be a key to translation theory or to translation practice. The three principles of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance should be understood not as competitive but as additive factors: first, faithful equivalence in meaning, second, expressive clarity of form, and third, attractive elegance that makes a text a pleasure to read. But unfortunately too many Chinese translation theorists and practitioners have focused primarily on elegance and quite naturally they concentrated their efforts on literary texts. Much the same development took place in the West, because many people assumed that only literary texts deserved or needed to be translated. As a result, most present-day theories of translation still focus on stylistics rather than on content.

What is even more discouraging is the fact that most students in programs of translation find that courses on theories of translation are the least helpful, especially when they are heavily front-loaded in a curriculum by those who do not realize that the processes and procedures in translating and interpreting are basically skills, and not compilations of information in content courses, such as literature, history, and philosophy. But this does not mean that a detailed and comprehensive study of what translators and interpreters actually do is irrelevant. In fact, such scientific studies of the semantic and semiotic aspects of interlingual communication are extremely important, as is the study of any and all types of human behavior. But the results of such studies need to be presented in understandable language and carefully integrated into creative practice. A clear understanding of the nature of interlingual communication should become general knowledge because so much of how we think and respond to new developments in science and politics is influenced by what is happening in the process of translating and interpreting. This is especially important for the success of the European Union in which all translations into all the languages have theoretically the same legal standing.

Too often textbooks on translation employ technical vocabulary that most students cannot readily grasp, and the assigned passages for translating are usually so short that students do not have the required contexts with which to make intelligent decisions about correspondences in meaning. Frequently, however, courses in translation actually turn out to be courses in language learning since university programs in foreign languages concentrate much more on literature than on the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

In translation programs students learn a great deal about foreign languages, but they usually do not learn how to use such languages in communication. As a result they waste a good deal of time in courses that are poorly organized for both language learning and for translating. In fact, relatively few students entering programs in translating have the necessary language competence to begin translating. This is not the students' fault, but the fault of the educational system.

For professional translators what counts is the effective transfer of the meaning because that is precisely what clients want and need. Their concern is not the formal features but the content of the text. For example, in documents from Spanish-speaking Latin America coming to the European Union the customary phrase *cooperación económica* is not rendered by Commission translators as "economic cooperation" but as "help" or "assistance," because that is precisely what is involved. Nevertheless, people preparing texts for the European Union continue to use *cooperación económica*, because asking directly for economic help or support would imply that these countries are economically or politically inadequate, which of course they are, or they would not be asking for financial help.

Accuracy of content should not be judged primarily in terms of "being true" to the author, but in not causing misunderstanding of the message by those for whom the translation is intended. As Jumpelt used to say about his principle of translating for the aviation industry, "I want to make sure that no one will misunderstand my translation." What clients need and generally demand is first and foremost accuracy. If a translated text can also be easy to read, this is indeed a plus factor, and if it can be culturally appropriate, the translation is obviously a success.

If completely bilingual persons have a clear understanding of a text to be translated from a source to a receptor (or target) language, they do not need to instruct their brains about how to use a noun, verb, adjective, or participle to represent a particular concept or to place a qualifying clause at the beginning or the end of a sentence, all such decisions are largely automatic because our brains are excellently organized to carry out all such decisions in a largely unconscious manner. The process of going from conceptual clarity to a verbal text is almost automatic and should be regarded as essentially no different from writing in one's own mother tongue. Clarity in understanding the source text is the key to successful translating into a receptor language. Translators do not translate languages but texts.

When, however, a text written in one's own mother tongue must be translated into a foreign language, the focus of attention shifts radically. The translator of such a text should have no difficulty understanding the text, unless it is badly written, but almost inevitably the focus of attention shifts to the linguistic features of the translation, including the proper arrangement of words, sensitivity to the style, and the relevance of the translation for receptors.

Failure to understand clearly a source text often shows up in the puzzled attempts of readers to make sense of a translation, particularly if the content is related to some new technical discipline, for example, electronics and atomic power. A similar mastery of terminology is required for translating texts involving multinational contracts. Professional translators need not only an excellent general vocabulary but also a mastery of technical terminology in two or three expanding areas of international communication, for example, merchandising, computer technology, and environmental issues.

Some source-language texts inevitably leave their mark on a translation. This is particularly true of legal texts in which there is a tradition of including within a sentence far more than is done in ordinary speech so as to have all the conditioning factors concisely combined. This is also true of many religious texts in which the verbal utterances are often regarded as sacred and divinely inspired, and therefore they must be preserved as sentence units.

Brilliant translators are, however, often surprised by the highly creative solutions that seem to pop into their heads. Such creative translators are the best examples of the fact that interlingual communication is essentially a special skill that does not necessarily depend on long years of training, although it can often be greatly enriched by studying how other translators have solved typical problems. In many respects creative translating is like portrait painting and artistic musical performance.

On one occasion I was chatting with a man seated next to me on a flight up the Atlantic coast of the United States. He was rather embarrassed to admit that he was a portrait painter after having been a successful stock broker on Wall Street for a number of years. I immediately inquired as to where he had studied oil painting, and he admitted that he had never studied art. But when I further inquired about his background, he explained that during a period when his wife was dying of cancer, he had to be with her constantly. But he felt that he had to do something during those long tragic hours. And so he decided to buy some oil paints and paint his wife's picture.

After her death a friend was so impressed by the portrait that he asked to have his own wife's picture painted. And so began a new career in which my friend painted ten or a dozen portraits a year, but he said he was not interested in painting faces but in portraying people. Therefore he would spend a week or two living nearby and getting acquainted with the person to be painted. For his efforts he received some ten to fifteen thousand dollars for each portrait, but only if people were completely satisfied.

Some outstanding musicians know nothing about the science of harmonics, but they know how to play a piano with incredible skill, and new songs and sonatas seem to pour out of them, as though they had been stored for years in some deep recesses of the mind and were finally escaping.

Our ignorance of the ways in which our minds operate is impressive. Even in the simple activity of speaking we find it almost impossible to believe that a series of purely physical impulses, first, the air waves striking the ear drum, then, the oscillations of the tiny bones of the ear, the physical waves passing through the liquid of the ear and vibrating the cilia — all of which is purely physical — can become electro-chemical in the nerves leading ultimately to the conceptual area of the brain. How these electro-chemical physical features can be transformed into concepts — possibly by means of neural templates com-

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posed of complex patterns of synapses — is one of the two great mysteries of life — the other, being the rapidly expanding universe in which we live.

Perhaps even more mysterious is the way in which our concepts are ultimately dependent upon the clusters of sensory impressions or images of sight, taste, feeling, smell, and touch that come to us from outside of our bodies. These combine with certain internal feelings of physical well being and self awareness to make us what we are. Fortunately, we possess ways of symbolizing and understanding our experience by means of verbal sounds, and in this way we can try to make sense of our experiences. A word such as *love* may represent a number of images, and even clusters of images, suggesting such experiences as beautiful appearance, body fragrance, warmth, closeness, sexual attraction, and trust.

As Jakobson (1970, 1972) has pointed out, sociosemiotics, the science of signs in human society, tells us a great deal about the relation of signs to meaning. The iconic signs bear a formal resemblance between the verbal or visual symbol and the meaning, for example, the onomatopoeic words such as *bow-wow, cockadoodledoo, stutter* and such metaphorical expressions as *my father was a tower of strength* and *history is looking back in order to look ahead.* Imitative magic is also based on similarities, for example, making an image of a person that a voodoo priest wishes to destroy and then burning the image as curses are muttered.

On the other hand, deictic or indexical signs depend on some type of connection or association, for example, the distinction *here, there,* based on a spatial relation to some object. A metonym is often based on a part-whole relation, for example, *all hands on deck!*, a command for all sailors to be at their proper places. Associative magic also involves deictic relations, for example, the use of a lock of hair or even some uneaten food which can be used to cast a fatal spell on a hated victim. Most linguistic signs are, however, conventional, and they need to be if language is to be applicable to the endless sets of entities, activities, states, processes, characteristics, and relations existing in all the relevant aspects of human existence.

An increasing number of disciplines are also concerned with meaning, for example, communication theory, information theory, sociology, semiotics, psychology, philology, linguistics, sociolinguistics, hermeneutics, and aesthetics. Some literary critics, however, regard any published text as "public property" and no longer a part of a particular communication event. Therefore such texts are said to be open to almost any interpretation that any analyst wishes to attribute to it. But semioticians such as Jakobson, Eco, and Sebeok regard any text as a part of a communication process. And accordingly, all translating or interpreting must involve some relevant relation between the text in the source language and the text in the receptor language. At the same time, it should be clear that although this relation is never exact, there should be sufficient similarity that it can be described as having some significant measure of equivalence, described either as "the closest natural equivalent," or "as sufficiently similar that no reader of a translated text is likely to misunderstand the corresponding meaning of the source text."

1.1 A new focus on translation studies

In view of the unsatisfactory nature of many translation programs and the failure of many translation theories to provide the kind of help that professional translators can appreciate and that students can creatively employ, more and more persons concerned with translating and interpreting are turning to translation studies to form the empirical basis for a more creative approach to translating and interpreting.

A recent article in an Air France publication offered to travelers contains a fascinating interview in French with an English translation about Steven Spielberg, the famous motion-picture director. The French text uses the term *noirs* (literally, "blacks") to refer to the extras in the filming of Amistad, a film about slavery in America, but the translator wisely rendered this term as *African-Americans*, and in this way avoided a literal rendering with its negative overtones.

Similarly, the text speaks of Spielberg's astonishing success in one film after another as *Incontestablement, Spielberg a la baraka,* translated as "Spielberg is undeniably on a roll," which represents correctly the meaning of the Semitic expression *baraka* (literally, "blessed"). Furthermore, *on a roll* fits the motion-picture industry very effectively, since it is precisely the command that is often used to start the cameras functioning.

Although the French text has *La MGM, Paramount ou Warner existent depuis trois quarts de siècle,* the English translation has *MGM, Warner Bros. and Paramount have been churning out movies for more than three-quarters of a century.* In this interesting correction of the French text the translator shows clearly his greater knowledge of the American cinema industry and his close attention to detail. First, he introduces the correct designation of *Warner Bros*, and places it in the second position in line with the historical development of these producers. He also correctly renders the French *ou* as *and* (rather than *or*) and changes a generic *existent* to a critical judgment *have been churning out*, a judgment that is in line with other direct and indirect criticisms of the major producers.

The fact that not all language-cultures use similar terms for corresponding positions of responsibility creates special problems for translators. For example, the Spanish term *Presidente* refers to the president of the ruling party in Spain, whose powers are correspondingly much fewer than those of the President of the United States. Actually, the *Presidente de España* functions more as a prime minister, but this is not his title. Accordingly, translations from Spanish into English may need a footnote to explain a curious difference in the use of cognate terms.

Similarly, there were numerous misunderstandings about the role of Mao Tse-tung, who was always addressed simply as "Chairman Mao," but he had far more political and economic power than any other head of state.

1.2 Evaluation of potential translators

There is a tendency to accept academic training as a criterion of expertness in translating, since people think of translators as language professionals, and professionalism is usually judged in terms of years of study. For the translation of a technical volume from French into English about textual problems in the Hebrew Bible, the most promising translator appeared to be a complete French-English bilingual who was an editor of a journal dealing with similar subject matter. But the results were a $16,000 mistake because the translator, as well as a close colleague, simply did not understand the nature of translating. The translator matched the words but not the meaning.

On the other hand, one of the most creative translators I have ever known is Herman Aschmann, a person of limited academic training, but one who became entranced by the cultural content and literary potential of Totonaco, an Indian language of Mexico. Instead of submitting one possible rendering of a biblical expression, he usually had half a dozen different ways of representing the meaning of the Greek text. Not only did he produce an exceptional New Testament in Totonaco, but inspired local people to imitate his skill in discovering more and more meaningful ways of communicating a message into an entirely different language-culture.

Top-notch translators need to have a significant aptitude for interlingual communication, but they also need to be well grounded in the principles of transferring the meaning of a source text into a receptor language. This grounding can best be attained by experience in actual translating under the guidance of expert teachers who can present the principles of translation in terms of their own expert experience. Unfortunately, however, most institutes of translating cannot afford to pay what good translators can make in translating. And as a result, people with inferior training and experience end up teaching what they themselves have difficulty in doing.

If an agency that serves as a link between translators and clients wants to evaluate a translator's ability, it is wise to find out how three or more different translators would render a particular difficult text. Then the translated results should be judged by three or more professional translators. This may seem like an expensive procedure, but it is a far more successful assessment than accepting purely personal judgments that often fail to reveal the real underlying problems. For example, one reviewer working in a translation agency involved in evaluating translations into Chinese did not let his employer know that he was a speaker of Cantonese rather than Mandarin, and as a result his severe criticisms of translations by Mandarin speakers were seriously faulted. Similarly, an agency should not hire a Portuguese speaker to evaluate translations into Spanish, or even an American to evaluate a translation into British English.

I have lectured on theories of translation in dozens of schools and institutes, but frankly I have not been satisfied with the results, despite the numerous practical examples of interlingual equivalence. For one thing, most people have great difficulties in applying general principles to particular problems. As a result, I have found that so much more can be accomplished by sitting down with translators and helping them spot problems and test various solutions.

Many texts submitted for translation are extremely difficult to understand, although not necessarily as the result of technical terminology or figurative meanings. They are difficult to comprehend because they are so badly written. Frequently there are no indications as to the sequences of events or of ideas, and often there are predicate expressions without subjects. Such texts are many times the result of committee consultations with everyone wanting to insert some of their own ideas and with no one having the responsibility of putting a fragmented text into proper order. Learning to make sense out of nonsense is a huge and seemingly unending task for translators who must deal with the average political, financial, or technical document. And even when translators are able to telephone the writers of a text about problems of comprehension, the translators are often told that they do not need to understand the text; rather, they must simply translate it.

In fact, translators often need instruction and practice in rewriting bad texts into a more understandable form, a type of intralingual translating.

Instruction in translating between two forms or levels of the same language should be a regular part of a course in translating. For example, the following sentence occurs in a document on translation theory, "The intercultural relationship of translational issues are translated the way in which we view the translation process." Before trying to translate this English statement directly into another language, which still would not mean anything, it would be much better to translate it into intelligible English.

Such intralingual translating also has a supplementary advantage in learning how to edit a text so as to make the meaningful relations between words and phrases as clear as possible. But most textbooks on translating avoid most of these common translational problems by introducing only well written texts.

In Chinese many of the difficult poetic texts are being translated into a more modern form of language, even as Beowulf and the tales of Chaucer have been transformed into modern English.

1.3 Translating versus interpreting

Some problems arise because people think of translating and interpreting as being two entirely different kinds of operations, one written and the other spoken. But both are part of the same act of producing in a receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source text, whether spoken or written. The significant differences are the speed with which an interpreter must make decisions, the enormous tension to keep up with the rapid flow of spoken language, the background knowledge necessary for instant recall, and the willingness to produce something that may not be "perfect." In fact, no interpretation is ever perfect.

Interpreting can, however, be an important plus for a translator, because it immediately forces him or her to be up to date with respect to rapid developments within any discipline, and it highlights the fact that listening to one language and speaking in another is a largely automatic process, something that some translators have failed to recognize.

At the former Maurice Thorez Institute of foreign languages in Moscow, persons who had already demonstrated exceptional ability as translators could also be tested for their possible ability to act as professional interpreters. The test consisted of an assigned topic, one minute to prepare, and one minute to speak. The reason for this type of testing was the conviction that interpreting, whether consecutive or simultaneous, depended more on an ability to organize information than on determining meaning.

1.4 Translating and related studies

Many people assume that translating requires considerable training in linguistics. But this is not true. Some of the best translators have no training whatsoever in linguistics, although some introduction to linguistics can make translating a much more meaningful activity. The essential skill of translators is being able to understand correctly the meaning of a source text. Knowledge of linguistics is, of course, not a handicap, but a distinct asset in clearly distinguishing between the structures of a text and the understanding of a text. Linguists analyze texts, but translators must understand texts.

Translators need to know the meanings of words in particular texts, but not necessarily all the meanings that are listed in comprehensive dictionaries. Similarly, translators do not need to analyze all the layers of grammatical structures if they can comprehend accurately the ways in which they relate to one another. The comprehension of a text as a whole is much more important to a translator than outlining the structural levels, although in some cases identification of the literary structures can provide insight for the correct understanding of a text.

Serious attention may also be required for evaluating the capacity of students to use foreign languages, because most students entering programs of translation are usually not adequately prepared to translate, and as a result they often acquire habits that are not easy to break. The real issue is the best use of students' time and energy in learning a foreign language in the most efficient manner. Great advances have been made in the field of language learning, and programs in language learning should be designed to take advantage of such insights and methods.

At some point in all programs of language learning some experience in translating should be introduced, but not on the elementary level of simply trying to make sense, but at more advanced levels in which translating can test the adequacy of vocabulary for certain types of texts. The translation of various types of texts is particularly useful in highlighting the differences of style in different types of discourse.

Some programs in translation also try to provide students with extensive information about such supplementary fields as computational linguistics and artificial intelligence, but such information is only marginal to the practical concerns of most translators and interpreters. Far more important is the need to appreciate fully the importance of the intended audience. In fact, no translator should begin to work without first knowing who is the intended audience,

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