

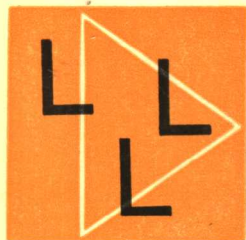
J. C. CATFORD

LANGUAGE  
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LANGUAGE  
LEARNING

# A Linguistic Theory of Translation

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# A Linguistic Theory of Translation

*An Essay in Applied Linguistics*

J. C. CATFORD

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## Preface

TRANSLATION is an activity of enormous importance in the modern world and it is a subject of interest not only to linguists, professional and amateur translators and language-teachers, but also to electronic engineers and mathematicians. Books and articles on translation have been written by specialists in all these fields. Writers on the subject have approached it from different points of view—regarding translation as a literary art, or as a problem in computer-programming, discussing the problem of ‘faithfulness’ of rendering, of whether words or ‘ideas’ are to be translated, or of the routines to be set up, say, for stem and affix recognition in machine translation.

The present volume is not primarily concerned with any of these special problems, but rather with the analysis of what translation *is*. It proposes general categories to which we can assign our observations of particular instances of translation, and it shows how these categories relate to one another. In short, it sets up, though somewhat tentatively and incompletely, a theory of translation which may be drawn upon in any discussion of particular translation-problems.

Since translation has to do with language, the analysis and description of translation-processes must make considerable use of categories set up for the description of languages. It must, in other words, draw upon a theory of language—a general linguistic theory.

This book is based on lectures given in the School of Applied Linguistics at Edinburgh University. It was thus originally intended for an audience of students already fairly well-informed about general linguistics. To make it more acceptable to the general reader, an opening chapter has been added which discusses briefly the nature of language and the categories of general linguistics as well as giving an outline of the analysis and description of English which underlies the discussion of a number of examples. Parts of the book are somewhat technical. This is

## PREFACE

inevitable in a book on a specialized topic, but it should not dismay the general reader since the main arguments demand little or no previous knowledge of linguistic science and the first chapter may be used for reference when required.

Language-teachers, in particular, may find the book of interest. The extent to which translation can be used in language-teaching is an issue of great concern to teachers, and it is one which cannot be fruitfully discussed without the support of some theory about what translation is, about the nature of translation equivalence, the difference between translation equivalence and formal correspondence, the levels of language at which translations may be performed and so on. The chief defect of the now almost universally condemned 'Grammar-Translation Method' was that it used bad grammar and bad translation—translation is not a dangerous technique in itself provided its nature is understood, and its use is carefully controlled: and translation is in itself a valuable skill to be imparted to students.

A number of students and colleagues contributed useful suggestions when the essay was first circulated in duplicated draft form, to all of whom I am grateful. In particular, however, I should like to thank Dr M. A. K. Halliday, with whom I discussed many parts of the work while it was in preparation, and Miss Leila Dixon, who carried out the difficult task of typing the manuscript in several stages.

J. C. Catford

Edinburgh, 1964

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## General Linguistic Theory

1.0 Translation is an operation performed on languages: a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another. Clearly, then, any theory of translation must draw upon a theory of language—a general linguistic theory.

General Linguistics is, primarily, a theory about how languages work. It provides categories, drawn from generalizations based on observation of languages and language-events. These categories can, in turn, be used in the description of any particular language. The general linguistic theory made use of in this book is essentially that developed at the University of Edinburgh, in particular by M. A. K. Halliday<sup>1</sup> and influenced to a large extent by the work of the late J. R. Firth. The present writer, however, takes full responsibility for the brief and, indeed, oversimplified sketch of linguistic theory given here, which differs from that of Halliday chiefly in its treatment of *levels* (1.2).

1.1 Our starting-point is a consideration of how language is related to the human social situations in which it operates. This leads on to classification of *levels* of language (or of linguistic analysis) and then to a discussion of the fundamental *categories* of linguistics which can be used in the description of at least the grammar and phonology of particular languages.

Language is a type of patterned human behaviour. It is a way, perhaps the most important way, in which human beings interact in social situations. Language-behaviour is externalized or manifested in some kind of bodily activity on the part of a *performer*, and presupposes the existence of at least one other human participant in the situation, an *addressee*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller account than it is possible to give here, the reader is referred to M. A. K. Halliday, 'Categories of the Theory of Grammar', *Word*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 1961, pp. 241–92; also to Halliday, M. A. K., McIntosh, A., and Strevens, P. D. 'The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching'. Longmans, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> *Performer* and *addressee* are 'participant rôles'. In the limiting case of a man talking to himself—i.e. interacting linguistically with himself—both rôles are

The specific type of behaviour in which language is manifested not only identifies the behaviour *as* language-behaviour but also defines the *medium* which the performer is using. The performer's activity most commonly takes the form of either vocal movements which generate sound-waves, or hand movements which leave a visible trace. The first type of activity is a manifestation of language in the *spoken* medium—the performer is a speaker, and his addressee(s) is/are a hearer or hearers. The second type is a manifestation of language in the *written* medium—the performer is a writer, and his addressee(s) is/are a reader or readers. In the next paragraph we shall, for simplicity, confine ourselves to language in its spoken manifestation.

Language, as we said above, is *patterned* behaviour. It is, indeed, the pattern which is the language. On any given occasion, the particular vocal movements and the resultant sound-waves can be described with a *delicacy*, or depth of detail, limited only by the delicacy of the apparatus used for observation and analysis. And the precise quality of these vocal movements and sound-waves will be found to differ on different occasions, even when the speaker is 'saying the same thing'. From the linguistic point of view, the important thing is that, on each occasion of 'saying the same thing' the vocal activities of the speaker conform to the same pattern.

The overt language-behaviour described above is causally related to various other features of the situation in which it occurs. There are specific objects, events, relations and so on, in the situation, which lead the performer to produce these particular vocal movements, and no others. The precise nature of the situational features which are relatable to the performer's linguistic behaviour will be found to differ on different occasions, even when he is 'saying the same thing'.

From the linguistic point of view, however, the important thing again is that, in each case, the situational features which lead to 'the same' utterance conform to the same general pattern.

Language then is an activity which may be said to impinge on the world at large at two ends. On the one hand, it is *manifested* filled simultaneously by the same biological individual: but this is of the most marginal relevance to linguistic theory (cf. 13.2).

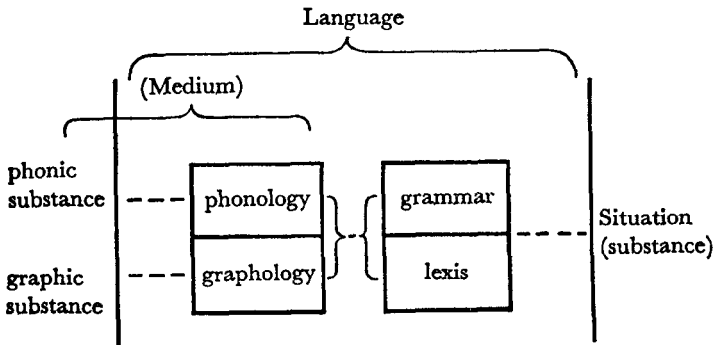


in specific kinds of overt behaviour (e.g. vocal movements): on the other hand, it is *related* to specific objects, events, etc. in the situation. Both of these—vocal movements, and actual events, etc.—are outside of language itself. They are extralinguistic events. They are the *phonic substance* in which vocal activity is manifested, and the *situation* (or *situation substance*) to which this activity is related. The language itself is, however, the organization or patterning which language-behaviour implicitly imposes on these two kinds of substance—language is *form*, not substance.

1.2 In order to account for language-events we make abstractions from these events: abstractions of various types, or at a series of *levels*.

1.21 We distinguish, first, the levels of *medium-substance* (*phonic* substance, for the spoken medium, and *graphic* substance for the written medium), and *situation* (or *situation-substance*), both of which are, in fact, extralinguistic. The internal levels of *language* are those of medium-form—*phonology* and *graphology*, arrived at by a process of abstraction from phonic and graphic substance, and the differently abstracted levels, which Halliday calls the 'formal levels'—*grammar* and *lexis*.<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between (the units of) grammar/lexis and situation (substance) is that of contextual meaning, or *context*.



<sup>3</sup> The term 'formal levels' for grammar and lexis has the inconvenience that it suggests that no relatively independent *form* can be stated for the phonological and graphological levels.

The relationship between (the units of) phonology and phonic substance has no generally recognized name, though 'phonetic meaning' might be suggested. The relationship between graphology and graphic substance might likewise be called 'graphetic meaning'. *Context* is the *interlevel* relating grammar/lexis and situation, indicated by the dashed line on the right of the above diagram.

1.22 The levels at which we make abstractions from language-events are thus the following:

1.221 *Grammatical/lexical form*

(i) *Grammar*: the level of linguistic form at which operate *closed systems*: the characteristics of a closed system being: (1) the number of terms is finite; (2) each term is exclusive of the others; (3) any change in the number of terms would change the 'values' (or 'formal meanings') of the other terms (e.g. systems of pronouns, of deictics, of number, of case, of tense . . . etc.).

(ii) *Lexis*: the level of linguistic form at which operate *open sets* (e.g. the open sets of items often occurring as examples or 'exponents' of nouns, verbs, etc.).

1.222 *Medium form*

(i) *Phonology*: the formal units into which phonic substance is organized, and which operate, usually in combination, as the exponents of grammatical/lexical forms.

(ii) *Graphology*: the formal units into which graphic substance is organized, and which operate, usually in combination, as the exponents of grammatical/lexical forms.

1.223 *Medium Substance*

(i) *Phonic substance*: actual vocal sounds—the substance in which phonology is manifested.

(ii) *Graphic substance*: actual visible marks—the substance in which graphology is manifested.

Both types of medium substance have a certain patterning or organization imposed upon them by medium-form.

1.224 *Situation* (or *situation substance*). All those features of situations, excluding medium substance, which are related or

relatable to language-behaviour. Situation substance has a certain organization imposed upon it by grammatical/lexical form.

1.23 In addition, we must consider the *interlevel* of *context* (or *contextual meaning*): the interlevel of statements about the distinctive features of situation-substance which are relatable to particular grammatical/lexical forms. As we have said above, there is another *interlevel*: the interlevel of statements about the distinctive features of medium substance which are relatable to medium forms.

It will be clear that *context* or *contextual meaning* is what is most usually understood by 'meaning': in our theory, this is only one part of *meaning*, which also includes *formal meaning* which is the way any item operates in the network of formal relations. Both types of meaning are discussed in Chapter 5.

1.3 The fundamental categories of linguistic theory—applicable at least to the levels of grammar, phonology and probably graphology—are *unit*, *structure*, *class* and *system*.

1.31 By a *unit* we mean a stretch of language activity which is the carrier of a pattern of a particular kind. In English phonology, for example, there is a unit, the *tone-group*, which is the carrier of recurrent meaningful patterns of pitch. The following are examples of English tone-groups (the pitch-pattern being roughly indicated by lines drawn over the texts).

Yes. Yesterday. John came yesterday.

The diagram shows three pitch patterns drawn over the text. 'Yes.' has a short line sloping downwards. 'Yesterday.' has a line sloping downwards then becoming horizontal. 'John came yesterday.' has a line sloping downwards then becoming horizontal.

The fact that each of these tone-groups is a carrier of a *meaningful* pattern is shown by the possibility of occurrence of units of a similar type which differ only in that the pitch-pattern which they carry is meaningfully different, thus:

Yes? Yesterday? John came yesterday?

The diagram shows three pitch patterns drawn over the text. 'Yes?' has a short line sloping upwards. 'Yesterday?' has a line sloping upwards then becoming horizontal. 'John came yesterday?' has a line sloping upwards then becoming horizontal.

In English grammar we have units such as *sentence*, *clause* and *group*: each of these is the carrier of a particular kind of meaning-

ful grammatical pattern. The following are examples of *sentences*, each carrying the same pattern of arrangement of clauses.

/// If you do that, // you will regret it. ///

/// When John arrived, // we had already started. ///

/// Having arrived too late, // we missed the start of the concert. ///

And these are examples of clauses, each carrying the same pattern of arrangement of groups:

// John / loves / Mary. //

// The young man / was writing / a letter. //

// All these people who were here last night / were / friends of mine. //

1.311 The units of grammar or of phonology operate in *hierarchies*—'larger' or more inclusive units being made up of 'smaller' or less inclusive units. They form a *scale* of units at different *ranks*. Thus, the sentences quoted above each consist of *two clauses*. The sentence is a unit of *higher rank* than the clause. And each clause consists of several *groups*—the clause being a unit of higher rank than the group.

1.32 The unit is the category set up to account for those stretches of language-activity which carry recurrent meaningful patterns. The patterns themselves still have to be accounted for—and these are what we call *structures*. A *structure* is an arrangement of *elements*. Thus, the elements of structure of the English unit 'clause' are P (predicator), S (subject), C (complement), A (adjunct).

The texts: /// John / loves / Mary. ///

/// The young man / was writing / a letter. ///

are two examples of English sentences, each of which consists of a single clause. Each clause has the *structure* SPC. The following clauses:

He / ran / quickly.

The young man / was writing / with a ball-point.

are examples of the structure SPA, and so on.

Among the units of English phonology we find the *syllable*: the elements of syllable structure are N (nucleus or vocalic element), K<sup>r</sup> (releasing (initial) consonantal element), K<sup>a</sup> (arresting con-

sonantal element),  $K^i$  ('interlude' or inter-nuclear consonantal element—occurring only between two Ns). Thus the syllables represented in orthography by *tea*, *car*, *now* exemplify the structure KN, those represented by *cat*, *stop*, *lumps*, etc. . . . KNK, and so on.

1.33 By a *class* we mean a grouping of members of a unit in terms of the way in which they operate in the structure of the unit next above in the rank scale. Structure, as we have said, is stated in terms of ordered arrangements (in which linear *sequence* often is, but need not always be, a characteristic) of elements: thus, in English, the elements of structure of the unit *clause* are S, P, C, A. The units which operate as exponents of these elements are themselves *groups*. Groups, then, may be classified in terms of the particular elements of clause structure which they expound. Thus we have, in English, the class of *Verbal Groups*, which operate at—or as exponents of—P in clause-structure; the class of *Nominal Groups* which operate as exponents of S or C in clause-structure, etc.

In English phonology, for instance, we have classes of the unit *phoneme*, defined in terms of their operation in the structure of the unit next above, the *syllable*. Thus the members of the unit 'phoneme', which operate as exponents of the element  $K^r$  (consonantal releasing element) in syllable structure constitute the class 'initial consonant' or  $C^i$ .

1.34 By a *system* we mean a finite set of alternants, among which a choice must be made. Very often, these alternants, the *terms* in a system, are the members of a class: thus the members of the class 'initial consonant' mentioned above constitute a *system* of phonemes *p b t d k g* . . . etc. which can alternate as exponents of that particular class.

An example of a system in grammar might be the *number-system* (Sing/Plur) (Sing/Dual/Plural), etc., of many languages. Where *number* is a system of the Nominal group (as in English) the terms in the system are themselves sub-groups or sub-classes of the *class*.

1.4 We have referred already to *rank* (in 1.311) and have used the terms *exponent* and *delicacy*. These three terms refer to three *scales* which are part of the general theory of language, and of language-description.

1.41 The *rank scale* is the scale on which units are arranged in a grammatical or phonological hierarchy. In English grammar we set up a hierarchy of 5 units—the largest, or ‘highest’, on the rank-scale is the *sentence*. The smallest, or ‘lowest’, on the rank scale is the *morpheme*. Between these, in ‘descending’ order, are the *clause*, the *group* and the *word*. By placing these in this order on the scale of rank we mean that every sentence consists of one or more than one clause, every clause of one or more than one group, every group of one or more than one word, and every word of one or more than one morpheme.

Thus ‘Yes!’ is a sentence consisting of one clause, consisting of one group, consisting of one word, consisting of one morpheme. And ‘As soon as the boys had arrived, their mother gave them tea’ is a sentence consisting of two clauses. The first clause consists of three groups, the second of four groups. In the first clause the group *as soon as* consists of three words, the groups *the boys* and *had arrived* of two words each. In the second clause, the first group *their mother* consists of two words, the remaining three groups of one word each . . . and so on.

1.411 The normal relation between units in a grammatical hierarchy is that stated here: namely that a unit at any rank consists of one or more unit of the rank next below, or, conversely, that a unit at any rank *operates in the structure of the unit next above*.

We must, however, make allowance for the fact that in all languages we find ‘Chinese box’ arrangements of units, in which a unit may sometimes operate in the structure of a unit of the same or of lower rank. To deal with this, we make use of the concept of *rank-shift*.

Thus, in English, *clauses* normally operate as exponents of elements of *sentence-structure*. But we also find clauses operating within *groups*, i.e. as exponents of elements in the structure of a unit of the rank *below* the clause.

For example, in *Since we couldn’t meet earlier, we met after the concert* the clause *we met after the concert* is operating directly in the structure of the sentence, as exponent, in fact, of  $\alpha$  (a ‘free clause’) in a sentence of structure  $\beta\alpha$  (a ‘free clause’ preceded by a ‘bound clause’) (see 1.721 below). But in *The man we met after the concert is my brother* the clause *we met after the concert* is *rank-shifted*. It is not

operating directly in the structure of the sentence, but within a Nominal Group. It is, in fact, operating as exponent of Q (qualifier) in the structure of the nominal group *The man we met after the concert*. This nominal group, in turn, is exponent of S in the clause *The man we met after the concert* (S) | is (P) | my brother (C).

Similarly in *He met Susan at the party* the adverbial group *at the party* is operating directly in the structure of the clause—as exponent of A. But in *The girl at the party was Susan* the group *at the party* is rank-shifted. It is not operating directly in the clause, but within a Nominal Group, as exponent of Q.

The concept of *rank* (and rank scale) is an important one both in theoretical linguistics and in many applications of linguistics, including translation-theory.

1.42 The scale of *exponence* is a scale of 'exemplification' or of degrees of abstraction, running from 'highest degree of abstraction' to 'most specific and concrete exemplification'. Thus, in English phonology, we may say that the class C (consonant) represents the highest degree of abstraction at phoneme rank. In any given instance, say of an utterance of the word *tea*, we may say that the initial phoneme here is a (member of the class) C: its exponent in this case is the particular phoneme / t /, and this, in turn, has its ultimate exponent in a piece of actual phonic substance, represented in phonetic transcription by, say, [t<sup>h</sup>].

Exponence is related to rank in the sense that an element of structure of a unit at one rank is *expounded* by—or has as its exponent—a unit or units of the rank next below. But exponence is a separate scale, and at any one rank we may go off sideways, as it were, to a relatively concrete exemplification: thus we might call the sequence of particular grammatical and lexical items represented by 'A linguistic theory of translation' an *exponent* of the unit 'group'. In other words, we also use the term *exponent* in talking of the relationship between the abstract units and items of grammar and lexis and their realizations in medium form. Thus, in English, *I* is the graphological exponent of the grammatical item '1st person singular subject pronoun', *bank* is the graphological exponent of two different lexical items which we might label X (meaning 'money shop') and Y (meaning 'border of river . . . etc.') and so on.

1.43 The third scale mentioned here is that of *delicacy*: this is the scale of 'depth of detail'. At a *primary degree* of delicacy, we recognize, or set up, only the minimal number of units or classes, etc., which are forced upon us by the data. Thus, if we are going to attribute *any* structure at all to English *nominal groups* we must set up *three* elements: H (head), M (modifier) and Q (qualifier). Our *least delicate* description of English Ngp structure is thus (M . . . n) H (Q . . . n), which means that one element, H, is always present, and this may be preceded and/or followed by one or more element M or Q. Thus we should say, at a primary degree of delicacy, that the groups:

Old / men  
These three old / men

have the

structure, MH and MMMH. By taking a further step down the delicacy scale we recognize different classes of the element M — namely d (deictic), o (numerative), e (epithet), and we can say that *These three old / men* has the structure d o e H, in which d o e is a more delicate statement of structure than MMM. 1.5 *Lexis*. We stated in 1.221 that *lexis* is that part of language which is not describable in terms of closed systems. The distinction between grammar and lexis is not absolute, but rather in the nature of a *cline*, with very well marked poles, but some overlap in between.

In English, for instance, most exponents of the word-class *verb* are open-set lexical items: a few, such as *can*, *may* etc. are purely grammatical items: and a few others are either lexical or grammatical, e.g. BE which is a lexical item in 'He *is* a teacher' or 'He *has been* a teacher.' and a grammatical item in 'He *is* talking'.

1.51 The categories discussed in 1.2 are not applicable to lexis. We deal formally with lexis in terms of *collocation* and *lexical sets*. A collocation is the 'lexical company' that a particular lexical item keeps. Any particular lexical item tends to collocate most frequently with a range of other lexical items. We refer to the item under discussion as the *node* or *nodal item*, and the items with which it collocates as its *collocates*. Thus in English, if we take *sheep* and *mutton* as *nodes* we will find that each has a distinct range



of *collocates*: e.g. *sheep* collocates frequently with such lexical items as *field*, *flock*, *shear*, etc., *mutton* collocates with such lexical items as *roast*, *menu*, *fat* . . . etc. There are certainly overlaps in collocational range—thus we may have a (whole) *roast sheep* and we might have *fat sheep* as well as *mutton fat*, but on the whole they have different collocational ranges, and this establishes the fact that they belong to different lexical sets and are different lexical items.

A *lexical set* is a group of lexical items which have similar collocational ranges.

1.52 *Collocation* and *lexical set* are concepts which sometimes enable us to establish the existence of two distinct lexical items, even when both share exactly the same medium exponents. Thus in English we have a graphological form *bank*—but the fact that this enters into two distinct collocational ranges, and hence apparently belongs to two distinct lexical sets enables us to say that there are two distinct lexical items which happen to share the same medium exponents, graphological *bank*, phonological /bæŋk/.<sup>4</sup>

1.6 We mentioned in 1.0 that our approach to the *levels* of language and linguistic analysis was somewhat different from that of Halliday, and indicated in 1.21 that this difference lay in the fact that we set up a separate level of *medium form*. In other words, instead of regarding *phonology* (and likewise *graphology*) as an *interlevel* linking phonic (or graphic) substance directly with the 'formal levels' of grammar and lexis, we regard the *medium* as being to some extent autonomous and detachable from grammar and lexis. Since this view of medium as 'detachable' is important for our theory of translation, some justification and discussion of it must be given here.

1.61 Medium form is a part of a language. Every language has its characteristic *phonology* and many languages have a characteristic *graphology*. In the process of analysing and describing a language we set up, as phonological units, just those bundles of

<sup>4</sup> Following a widely accepted convention, phonological forms are normally cited within slant-lines. Occasional use is, however, made of single and double vertical lines, as in 1.61 below. These are used only when explicit reference is being made to the description of English Phonology given in 1.71.