Eugene A. Nida

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND TRANSLATING

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Preface

This book on *Language, Culture, and Translating* has its origin in a series of lectures on translating given at the Shanghai International Studies University in the spring of 1989 and later that same year at the Maurice Thorez Institute of Languages and Translating in Moscow. The approach is essentially practical, although the principal theories of translating are discussed in Chapter 10.

This book has four main emphases: (1) the need to understand thoroughly the source text, (2) the close relation between language and culture, (3) the necessity to focus attention on style and discourse, and (4) the relevance of insights coming from several different disciplines.

Since a majority of failures in translating seemingly result from an inadequate understanding of the text in the source language, three chapters are given to a description of the crucial semantic and formal features of lexemes (words and idioms), syntax, and discourse. Unfortunately, many translators have only very hazy ideas about how languages are structured and how to explore the meanings of words and combinations of words.

The role of language within a culture and the influence of the culture on the meanings of words and idioms are so pervasive that scarcely any text can be adequately understood without careful consideration of its cultural background. Even though only one chapter is given to the specific subject of Language and Cul-

ture, there are constant references in other chapters to the relevance of culture both in understanding the source text and in representing the meaning in a target language-culture.

The significance of style and discourse and their role in associative (or connotative) meaning is a major concern of this book. Certain mistakes in terminology or grammar can be forgiven, but a failure to reflect the spirit and dynamic of a source document is a "mortal sin".

Many people assume that the only prerequisites for translating are a bilingual dictionary, an exhaustive encyclopedia, and an ability to speak and write two languages. But ability to translate also depends on a number of very important insights which come directly or indirectly from several different disciplines, e. g. cultural anthropology, linguistics, psychology, communication theory, and literary analysis. It is the interdisciplinary approach to interlingual communication which contributes the major new insights for effective translating and interpreting.

In the preparation of this volume I have been greatly helped by the criticism and insights of my colleague Johannes P. Louw, and I am especially indebted to my editorial associate Karen Munson for her advice on how to make this volume more meaningful and useful.

Eugene A. Nida
New York, 1991

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Chapter 1

Paradoxes of Translating

Translating is a complex and fascinating task. In fact, I. A. Richards (1953) has claimed that it is probably the most complex type of event in the history of the cosmos. And yet, translating is so natural and easy that children seem to have no difficulty in interpreting for their immigrant parents. These children normally do very well until they have gone to school and have learned about nouns, verbs, and adverbs. Then they often seem tongue-tied because they try to match the words and grammar rather than the content.

Because of experience in learning a foreign language in school, most persons assume that literalness in translating means faithfulness to the text, even though close, literal renderings are often seriously misleading. In English, for example, the repetition of a word usually implies emphasis, but not in Bahasa Indonesia, where repetition only signals plurality. In the Quechua dialect of Bolivia the suffix *-runa* marks the preceding noun as plural, but in conversation Quechua speakers use the suffix only at the beginning of a section and do not constantly repeat it, as is the case with the plural suffix in Spanish. Accordingly, a literal translation which represents every plural *-s* in Spanish by the Quechua suffix *-runa* is regarded by Quechua speakers as being not only strange but even an insult to the intelligence of hearers.

Because of the many discrepancies between meanings and structures of different languages, some persons have insisted that translating is impossible, and yet more and more translating is done and done well. Those who insist that translating is impossible are usually concerned with some of the more marginal features of figurative language and complex poetic structures. The use of figurative language is universal, but the precise figures of speech in one language rarely match those in another.

It is true that in some languages one cannot say "My God," because native speakers insist that no one can "possess" God, but a person can speak about "the God I worship" or "the God to whom I belong." Translating is simply doing the impossible well, regardless of the objections of such famous authors as Goethe, Schleiermacher, and Ortega y Gasset, who insisted that translating is impossible and yet did not hesitate to have their own writings translated (Güttinger 1963).

Another paradox of translating is reflected in the contention that translating is valid but paraphrase is wrong. In fact, all translating involves differing degrees of paraphrase, since there is no way in which one can successfully translate word for word and structure for structure. In Spanish *me fui* is literally 'I went myself,' in which *me* is a so-called reflexive pronoun, but this Spanish phrase can often be best translated into English as 'I left right away' or 'I got away quickly.' In English, as well as in most other European languages, one speaks of the 'heart' as being the center of emotions, but in many languages in West Africa a person 'loves with the liver' and in some of the indigenous languages of Central America people talk about 'loving with the stomach.' Since languages do not differ essentially in what they

can say, but in how they say it, paraphrase is inevitable. What is important is the semantic legitimacy of the paraphrase.

A further paradox occurs in the widespread view that a translator should first produce a more or less literal rendering of the source text and then proceed to improve it stylistically. Style, however, is not the frosting on the cake, but an integral part of the process of interlingual communication. It must be built into the text right from the beginning. It is usually better to aim first at a stylistically satisfactory rendering of the source text and then review it carefully to "tighten it up" by analyzing and testing the correspondences. A few errors in the correspondences of lexical meaning are much more excusable than missing the spirit and aesthetic character of the source text.

Since translating is a skill which generally requires considerable practice, most people assume that it can be taught, and to an extent this is true. But it is also true that really exceptional translators are born, not made. Potential translators must have a high level of aptitude for the creative use of language, or they are not likely to be outstanding in their profession. Perhaps the greatest benefit from instruction in translating is to become aware of one's own limitations, something which a translator of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* into Chinese should have learned. Then he would not have translated English *mule-skinner* into a Chinese phrase meaning 'a person who skins the hide off of mules.'

For many people the need for human translators seems paradoxical in this age of computers. Since modern computers can be loaded with dictionaries and grammars, why not let computers do the work? Computers can perform certain very simple

interlingual tasks, providing there is sufficient pre-editing and post-editing. But neither advertising brochures nor lyric poetry can ever be reduced to the kind of logic required for computer programs. Computer printouts of translations can often be understood, if the persons involved already know what the text is supposed to say. But the results of machine translating are usually in an unnatural form of language and sometimes just plain weird. Furthermore, real improvements will not come from merely doctoring the program or adding rules. The human brain is not only digital and analogic, but it also has a built-in system of values which gives it a componentially incalculable advantage over machines. Human translators will always be necessary for any text which is stylistically appealing and semantically complex —which includes most of what is worth communicating in another language.

The most difficult texts to translate are not, however, highly literary productions, but rather those texts which say nothing, the type of language often used by politicians and delegates to international forums. In fact, a group of professional translators at the United Nations headquarters in New York City have insisted that the most difficult text to translate is one in which the speaker or writer has attempted to say nothing. The next most difficult type of text is one filled with irony or sarcasm, since in a written text the paralinguistic clues to the meaning are usually much more difficult to detect than when someone is speaking. And perhaps the third most difficult type of text is a book or article on translating in which the illustrative examples rarely match. In fact, a book on translating almost always requires extensive adaptation.

One of the most surprising paradoxes of translating is that there is never a completely perfect or timeless translation. Both language and culture are always in the process of change. Furthermore, language is an open system with overlapping meanings and fuzzy boundaries—the bane of logicians but the delight of poets. The indeterminacy of language is part of the price that must be paid for creativity and for the new insights which come through symbolic reinterpretation of human experience.

Some people imagine that the greatest problem in translating is to find the right words and constructions in the receptor or target language. On the contrary, the most difficult task for the translator is to understand thoroughly the designative and associative meanings of the text to be translated. This involves not only knowing the meanings of the words and the syntactic relations, but also being sensitive to all the nuances of the stylistic devices. As one struggling translator summed up his problems, "If I really understood what the text means, I could easily translate it."

Perhaps the least understood paradox of translating is the general assumption that a person who knows two languages well can be a good translator or interpreter. In the first place, knowing two languages is not enough. It is also essential to be acquainted with the respective cultures—one of the important reasons for the title of this book *Language, Culture, and Translating*. Persons may be able to speak two languages perfectly but not have the capacity to write well, which means they can never become skilled translators. Moreover, merely speaking two languages in a competent manner does not mean that persons can become first-rate interpreters, whether in consecutive or simultaneous circum-

stances. In addition to knowing a language, an interpreter must have a quick mind to organize and formulate a response. The test for potential interpreters at the Maurice Thorez Institute in Moscow involves an assigned topic, one minute to prepare a short speech on the topic, more and one minute to speak.

The least understood paradox of language is the parallax of language, that is, the fact that language not only represents reality but also distorts it. For example, people use the terms *sunset* and *sunrise* when they know full well that the sun does not actually set or rise, but that it is the world which is rotating. Similarly, people call certain large-eared seals *sea lions*, although they are in no sense lions. Even when a word is wrongly understood, many persons tend to give it credence. For example, people still cite the adage *The exception proves the rule* as a means of justifying exceptions, when *proves* should be understood only in the sense of 'testing.'

Some people think of a language as being a picture or map of reality, and they seldom take the time to realize that pictures and maps inevitably involve selectivity and distortion. Both pictures and maps suffer from parallax, but people generally get used to such skewing of reality and even have special devices for calculating the errors in maps and photographs of the earth's surface. Unfortunately, they often do not recognize the parallax in language, and they accept verbal formulations as being absolute truths. They talk about the *Holy Roman Empire*, when in reality it was not holy or Roman or an empire. More recently there was the *German Democratic Republic*, which from the viewpoint of democracies in the West was neither democratic nor a republic in the generally accepted meanings of these terms. Some people no

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longer speak about agreements being *broken*; they simply use the word *inoperative*. And armies are no longer supposed to *retreat*; they just *regroup*. Similarly, stock markets no longer *fall*; they merely *consolidate*.

The paradoxes of translating are basically the paradoxes of language and of culture. Accordingly this volume is organized in such a way as to explain first a number of the important features of language (Chapters 2—6) and then of culture in its relation to language, i.e. translating seen from the perspective of sociolinguistics (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 is concerned with the issues of functional equivalence, and Chapter 9 deals with translation procedures. Chapter 10 discusses various theories of translation and their relation to adequacy in interlingual communication.

This book is not a text on how to transform active sentences into passive ones, how to foreground or background a phrase, or how to mark irony in written conversation, since there are plenty of handbooks which treat such matters. This volume aims at a broader understanding of the problems of interlingual communication as highlighted by the structures of language and of society. Accordingly, the principal emphases of this treatment of translating are functional equivalence between languages, the indeterminacy of language as a parallax of reality, and translating as a communication event rather than as a system for matching the features of source and target languages. As a way of dealing meaningfully with these issues, much is said about discourse features, including rhetoric and style, and the functioning of language as a type of game involving constant negotiating to arrive at understanding within and between languages. In game theory as applied to verbal communication there are only partial winners and never a perfect game.

Chapter 2

The Functions and Theories of Language

In order to have a more satisfactory understanding of what is involved in interlingual communication, it is essential to view first the major functions and theories about language. By considering many of the diverse functions of language it is possible to understand better the amazing complexity of verbal communication, and a brief look at the more important major theories about language can provide a much more satisfactory means of understanding how people communicate.

The functions of language are of two basic types: psychological and sociological. The psychological functions may be described as the means by which people negotiate with reality, and the sociological functions can be said to be those ways by which people negotiate with other persons. The psychological functions may be regarded as essentially internal or subjective, and the sociological functions as external and interpersonal.

The Psychological Functions of Language

The primary psychological functions of language are naming, stating, modeling of reality, expression, and cognition. The psychological necessity to give names to experience is so obvious that people sometimes fail to realize its significance until

they have read the stirring story of Helen Keller and the powerful insights gained by her discovery of a symbol for water. The eagerness with which most small children grasp for new words also highlights the importance of having symbols for identifying and controlling things. Finding just the right word to symbolize some object or event in a person's experience seems to give some control over such things and happenings.

But naming is not enough. People want to say something about the objects and events they name. And so they produce subject–predicate or topic–comment statements, e.g. *John ran off* and *John, I don't like him*. They also want to be able to link together strings of such statements, since single propositions are entirely too restricted to satisfy certain psychological needs.

People, however, need something more profound from language than the ability to string sentences together or to name phenomena. In one way or another they instinctively feel that words should provide a system for viewing the world. If they can call *Lassie* a *dog* and if all *dogs* can be called *canines* and if all *canines* can be called *animals*, then there must be a way in which verbal symbols somehow reflect reality, although imperfectly. When they also learn that the word *cat* may represent not only a pet house cat, but can be used in talking about *lions*, *tigers*, and *leopards*, they discover that a word may indeed have more than one function in the hierarchy of names, that is, it may have more than one meaning. Such sets of words are never a perfect reflection of reality, but only one way in which people have conceptualized experience. It is only "their reality."

Another area in which language tends to model reality is in the four major semantic classes of lexemes (words and idioms),

namely, (1) entities, e.g. *boy, horse, tree, house, sun, hill*, (2) activities, e.g. *come, walk, die, talk, rule, hit*, (3) characteristics, primarily qualities and quantities, e.g. *good, fast, brilliant, awkward, quickly*, and (4) relations, e.g. *in, through, behind, during, when, because, although*. Entities relate to activities in a number of ways: as agents, e.g. *John worked hard*, as experiencers, e.g. *John died*, as instruments, e.g. *a stone broke the window*, as location, e.g. *went home*, and as benefactees, e.g. *Mary was given a car*. Activities may be qualified or quantified by characteristics, e.g. *ran fast, worked a lot*, and *slept more*. Similarly, entities may be qualified or quantified, e.g. *fine person, large hill*, and *many birds*. Although many relations are not marked by words, but by order, e.g. *John hit Bill*, some relations are marked by words, e.g. space (*water in the tank*), time (*read while listening to music*), coordination (*oranges and apples*), subordination (*come if you can*), and linkage (*John was very foolish. Furthermore, he was completely irresponsible*).

Another psychological function of language is expression. This may occur in several different forms and is not designed to influence other persons. Rather, its purpose is to give vent to a person's own feelings. Such expressions may be simply cases of emotive response to some event, e.g. *ouch, damn it, hurrah*, and *oh boy*, or it may be a matter of playing with words, something which small children often love to do and something which adults do more often than they will usually admit.

Expressive language may, however, be a matter of aesthetic endeavor in arranging words to display balance, proportion, and symmetry. Words may also be manipulated so as to create or reflect a particular psychological atmosphere, e.g. serious or play-

ful, clear or mysterious, and imperative or suggestive. Aesthetic expression may also involve rhythm, whether phonological or semantic. Certain of these aesthetic aspects of expressive language may also be exploited in the sociological functions of language, since they may be important for increasing the impact or appeal of a discourse. But the expressive use of language fulfills a much more basic psychological function.

Probably the most important psychological function of language is cognition, the use of language to think. This does not mean that all cognition is verbal. One may think in terms of graphic relations or in terms of related series of events, but all complex or abstract thinking makes at least some use of language. The amount of time which the average person gives to the use of language in cognition (silently talking to oneself) occupies more time than any other activitiy except sleeping—and some people talk in their sleep. The manipulation of verbal symbols within the brain not only occupies more time, but in terms of ultimate goals and benefits it is probably the most important human activity.

The Sociological Functions of Language

The primary sociological functions of language, that is, those functions by which people relate to and influence one another, are of the following types: interpersonal, informative, imperative, performative, and emotive. The interpersonal function is listed first because of its strategic importance, despite the fact that it is often overlooked in discussions of the ways in which language is used by ordinary people in everyday circumstances.

The interpersonal function of language primarily involves the ways in which people negotiate and/or maintain social status, in other words, how they make use of language to help establish themselves in the social "pecking order" and how they maintain these relations with other persons. In most languages there are quite distinct levels or registers, including ritual, formal, informal, casual, and intimate speech. For example, at an elaborate banquet a butler might very well invite the guests to enter the dining room by saying, "The guests may now proceed to the banquet hall." In one's own home, however, a host is much more likely to say to distinguished guests, "May I suggest that we all find our places at the table." But at a gathering of close friends a person is likely to say, "Come! Let's eat!" and at a picnic a corresponding expression might be "Come and get it!" while to members of one's own family an expression such as "Soup's on!" might be used.

The use of these various levels or registers of language depends primarily upon the purposes of power and solidarity. People who wish to symbolize their power often talk down to others, and those who wish to increase their power often try to imitate the speech of those in power. To gain greater solidarity with other people, a speaker or writer usually attempts to use precisely the same level that the audience uses and appreciates. This means that people become classified linguistically as members of an "in-group" or of an "out-group." In-groups, whether professional or social, often develop their own jargons and distinctive slang, and such social dialects may become so distinctive that one needs to speak of diglossia, two different forms of the same language, as in the case of Black English and Standard American English.

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