

THE STUDY OF ASIA – BETWEEN ANTIQUITY AND MODERNITY

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Coffee Break Project

SOME INTRODUCTORY WORDS

After months of discussions, organising efforts and sleepless nights, we proudly present the Third Edition of the Coffee Break Conference. For those of you who don't know yet who we are and why we are here, we will try to explain shortly why this project came to be. As to who we are, on our web site we describe us as "A group of young researchers who are variously linked to Asian texts, ideas, problems, languages, etc. but who have to do with methodologies elaborated in the Western world and who are mainly based in the West". The reasons why we gathered together for the third time are manifold, yet there is one which is the most important: to discuss about serious matters in a relaxed atmosphere, possibly while sipping a cup of good coffee. But what serious matters would we like to discuss about? As one can immediately notice from the conference program, the arguments and areas of research covered by the papers could hardly be more various and different, and range from translations techniques in antiquity to the recent trends in development studies. Although apparently unrelated, they share one very important common feature: all of them deal with Asian cultures—or if you prefer, with the Other. This fact has a first major consequence, namely the choice of the methodology and the attitude with which one should approach the study of different cultures—different in terms both of time and space.

Shortly, we hope that with our Coffee Breaks we managed to provide a friendly environment in which it should be possible to discuss ideas, even receiving harsh criticisms, but still without the feeling that these criticisms are bound to remain unheard.

We wish to express our gratitude to everyone who contributed to the organisation of this conference. Particularly, we are very grateful to the *Dipartimento di Filologia, Letteratura e Linguistica* (Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics) of the University of Cagliari (Sardinia, Italy). Not only they agreed to fund and host the CBC3, providing an excellent support in terms of hospitality and other practical questions, but they also gave us the opportunity to collaborate with the highly competent research personnel affiliated to the Department. We are particularly grateful to Dr. Tiziana Pontillo for her untiring help and her contribution to funding the conference with her personal research funds, as well as to the Department's director Prof. Ignazio (Efisio) Putzu for his invaluable help in the organisation of the conference. For the printing of the present booklet, our thanks go to the University of Cagliari Printing Service.

TRANSLATION TECHNIQUES IN THE ASIATIC CULTURES

Chair: Artemij Keidan

ABSTRACT OF THE PANEL

For millennia, the humankind has continuously faced the issue of translation, especially because the instances of multilingualism have always been far more widespread—both historically and geographically—than one could imagine (on this point see Weinreich 1953). Still, translation never ceased to be a difficult task for translators. The present panel is devoted to the study of the problem of translation in general and particularly that of translation in the cultures of Asia. Oriental cultures are, unfortunately, often disregarded when the translation studies come into account. However, they offer many extremely interesting cases in such respect, first of all because of the extreme diversity of the somehow “exotic” oriental languages, in comparison to the so-called “Standard Average European” (as defined in Haspelmath 2001). In fact, the more different are the source and the target languages, the more difficult is the translation process. Furthermore, the most influential translation theorists—from St. Jerome to Eugene Nida—come from the European cultural milieu, which makes it very interesting trying to apply their theories to some very different facts and situations.

In the present panel we base our approach on the semiotic theory of the natural language, as it has been shaped in the last century, especially by such authors as F. de Saussure, L. Hjelmslev and others. The semiotic approach to translation studies, even though not very popular nowadays, offers the possibility to describe all the translation issues, in whatever language, from a unified and very promising viewpoint (cf. Stecconi 2004, mostly concerned with Ch. Peirce’s semiotics). By accepting this approach, we will

be able to insert translation studies within a well-established and developed framework, which is that of the modern general linguistics, especially of the functionalist school, rooted in the ideas of de Saussure and aiming at the study of the linguistic diversity and the universal features of language.

TRANSLATION: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Many books have been published with this title, starting from the seminal work by Nida and Taber (1982). In our approach we prefer to put the practice first, and then to infer the theory: by “practice” we mean the eternal problem of the *difficulty* of the translation process; with “theory” we refer to the problem of *definition* of translation in general. Let us try, first of all, to understand the reasons why translation could be so difficult. We think that there are three such reasons.

Structural anisomorphism

First, languages are structurally different: they vary in unpredictable ways, due to the Saussurean *arbitrariness*. Particularly, the arbitrariness of the “meaning boundaries” is of great importance here: languages can have unpredictably different and mismatching lexical meanings, as well as incompatible grammatical values and categories. This means that not only do the words *sound* differently across languages (which is due to the Saussurean “meaning-to-signifier” arbitrariness), but also, more importantly, they are *anisomorphic* cross-linguistically. Lexical meanings are, so to say, *shaped* differently in different languages. A famous example of this is offered by L. Wittgenstein (1953). To a single German word *Spiel* correspond several different words in English, covering different subsets of the semantic area referred to by the German noun: *game* or *match* (e.g. in football) or *play* (e.g. in theatre) or even *gambling*. Obviously, each English word covers also some additional semantic areas that are not referred to by the German word. This means that the semantic boundaries of words’

meanings are shaped in an arbitrary way and are not easily comparable cross-linguistically.

The linguistic anisomorphism is attested also at higher levels than that of the words: not only do people use different words and grammatical constructions, but they also assume different, and often incompatible, linguistic “behaviours”. For example, the speakers of Japanese and Korean, in the everyday speech, use many complicated strategies—not only grammatical but also lexical and pragmatical ones—to express various degrees of honorifics while addressing other participants of the conversation. Obviously, this is not something *impossible* to express in an European language, but simply it is not *customary* for the Europeans to pay so much attention to this aspect of the reality: their linguistic habits are different.

Therefore, the whole process of linguistic communication is based on a set of arbitrary choices at every level of analysis. In most cases this makes the translation by a “parallel shift” quite impossible. Simply, speakers of different languages describe the real world in different, mutually incompatible ways.

Meta-semiotic diversity

A second problem for the translator is represented by what could be labelled as the “pervasive meaningfulness” (or “semioticity”) of the linguistic communication. The best account of this phenomenon is offered by the semiotic theories of L. Hjelmslev (see Hjelmslev 1953; see also Badir 2006). He developed the conception of *meta-semiotics*, i.e. a semiotic system that “speaks” about another semiotic system. From Hjelmslev’s point of view, in the footsteps of that of de Saussure, a semiotic system has a double-sided nature: it is constituted by a *plane of expression* and a *plane of content*. Now, the semiotic system as a whole can also become either the meaning or the expression of a meta-semiotic system. Let us exemplify this complicated theory with some concrete cases.

For a semiotic system to be the *expression* of a meta-semiotics means, simply, that the way we speak of something becomes mean-

ingful by itself. This is often called *connotation*. Thus, e.g. a slang sentence can mean the same thing (i.e. have the same *denotation*) of its standard English equivalent, but it will have a different connotation. In other words: the way it says what it says *means* something (for instance, a slang sentence might mean that the speaker comes from a lower social group). In order to find a translational equivalent for such a situation, the translator must re-create in the target text the same connotations of the source text, while maintaining its denotative meaning. This same kind of connotative meta-semiotics is to be observed in poetical or sacred texts: they have their proper denotative meaning, but also a connotative value (either aesthetic or sacred), deriving from a meta-semiotic interpretation of their own wording and sound. And all the poetry translators know how difficult could be the translation of a poem with the preservation of the original metrics, rhymes and strophes.

In the opposite case, a semiotics may become the *content* of a meta-semiotics. Generally, whatever “speaking about the speech” belongs to this kind of meta-semiotics that Hjelmslev termed *denotative meta-semiotics*. The most obvious instance of such phenomenon is represented by texts on grammar and linguistics. When we describe a language linguistically, we actually do a meta-semiotic operation, since the *content* of our discourse is, in itself, a semiotic system (i.e. a language).

Informational asymmetry

Another factor that makes texts difficult to translate depends on the intimate nature of the linguistic communication as a process. We must bear in mind that human communication is additive: in order to understand each other we have to share a *huge* amount of pre-existing information so that we could easily and successfully add *small* pieces of information upon it. Bare sentences in isolation could be, and often are, totally incomprehensible, although being perfectly grammatical, if we ignore the presupposed information. Each sentence develops some theme or topic that all the speakers belonging to the communicative situation are supposed to already know. Such knowledge may come from different

sources. First, some information comes from our physiology: we know some data by our nature, i.e. because of the inner structure of our body and mind. This information could be considered universally acquired by all the speakers, but different languages might lexicalise and/or grammaticalise it in different ways. Thus, the awareness of the body parts, the cardinal directions, the basic perceptual schemes belong to a common mental background shared by all the humans. According to the theorists of the cognitivist approach to linguistics, “human language and thought are structured by, and bound to, an embodied experience” (Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 233).

Moreover, most importantly, there is the culturally acquired information, from which most of the conversational implicatures theorised by Grice are determined. Language is (also) a behaviour, so that the speakers must know the rules of “how to behave” linguistically, and Gricean implicatures are such rules. More generally, the linguistic communication supposes that the addressee of the message (or text) is provided with the same bulk of culturally acquired information and knowledge background as the speaker.

Finally, a very important part of information comes from the situational context of the conversation (or narration). Speakers are able to capture some notions from the direct observation of the communicative circuit. Such notions could be either structural (e.g., participants of the discourse) or occasional (e.g., referred objects and their properties).

WHAT IS A TRANSLATION TECHNIQUE

The complete and perfect comprehension of a text implies the comprehension of all of the above-mentioned semiotic levels. The basic literal meaning of the words is only the tip of an iceberg: meta-semiotic connotations, presuppositions and implicatures are supposed to be correctly understandable by the community of speakers to which the text is addressed. The translation, therefore, could be defined as an “adaptation of the source text to a

different target community of speakers, conserving as far as possible the semiotic and informational complexity of the source text”. Note that according this definition also a commentary of an ancient text in a modern fashion becomes a translation. Thus, a modern commentator of Homer makes his poems understandable to a target of readers different from the audience to which Homeric poems were originally addressed.

A perfect translation is impossible, since the source text is always an extremely intricate conglomerate of linguistic and cultural structures, that usually cannot be conserved in their entirety in the target text. During the translation process, the translator faces three kinds of problems.

1. First, he has to resolve the structural incompatibilities between source and target languages (preserving as much as possible the original grammatical and lexical information).
2. Then comes the meta-semiotic analysis: all the meaningful semiotic levels of the source text must be identified; such levels have to be ordered hierarchically; the foremost level—i.e. the one that the author of the source text intended as primary—is to be individuated.
3. Finally, the cultural and informational background presupposed by the source text must be made available to the reader of the target text.

At the end the translator has to make some choices: he has to select the most prominent communicative content of the source text, and try to preserve it in the translation, while some other features of the original text are necessarily lost. It is important not to mistake the selection of such prominent levels. An example of an overestimation of a secondary level is the one offered by E. Ionesco's *La leçon*: “[...] pour le mot *Italie*, en français nous avons le mot *France* qui en est la traduction exacte”. The comic effect here is provided by the exaggeration of the presuppositional structure of the source text in spite of its literal meaning.

When it comes to decide which semiotic level to translate and which one to ignore, the decision might be “political”. Thus, the decision of Jerome to translate *sensum de sensu* ‘meaning by meaning’ instead of *verbum e verbo* ‘word by word’ was purely a political one: for some extra-linguistic reasons (see Marti 1974) he gave up re-creating the exact wording of the source text (the Bible), thus sacrificing its possible sacred connotations, in order to improve the translation of the denotative content, because preserving both of these features seemed impossible.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude we have to define the notion of the *translation technique*, which is the main concern of the present panel. A translation technique is, therefore, to be understood as a “procedure aiming at translating more than one semiotic level of the source text at once”. The more sophisticated is the technique, the less footnotes and translator’s comments are needed in the target text.

The papers of this panels are, then, devoted to the analysis of such techniques in the Asiatic cultures both of the past and also of the modern times. The translators who are under consideration here mostly belong to a pre-theoretical period, when nothing similar to the present approach to the theory of translation existed. But the solutions of the translation problem have been always quite similar, which is what we aim to demonstrate in our panel.

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