SOCIOLINGUISTICS AS A CRUCIAL FACTOR IN TRANSLATING AND INTERPRETING

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In writing some years ago about translating as an «ethnolinguistic endeavor» I may have been one of the first to speak about the broad cultural factors of interlingual communication, but I failed at that time to realize the full implications of sociolinguistics as a crucial factor in all translating and interpreting. I also mistakenly described translating to the Linguistic Society of America as a «comparative linguistic undertaking», entirely too narrow a view. It is true that in all translating and interpreting the source and target languages must be implicitly or explicitly compared, but all such interlingual communication extends far beyond the mechanics of linguistic similarities and contrasts. In order to appreciate fully the role of sociolinguistics in translating and interpreting, it is essential to recognize two basic realities.

First, the meaning of verbal symbols on any and every level depends on the culture of the language community. Language is a part of culture, and in fact, it is the most complex set of habits that any culture exhibits. Language reflects the culture, provides access to the culture, and in many respects constitutes a model of the culture through its taxonomic hierarchies of words representing tokens and types on every level from viruses to galaxies.

And like culture, a language is also a nonlinear system: open-ended, essentially unpredictable, constantly changing, and with fuzzy boundaries of classes and constructions. Who would ever have thought a couple of decades ago that a happy little word like «gay» would be so radically altered in meaning, or that the generic Spanish verb *coger*, traditionally meaning «to take», would have to be deleted from a recent revision of the Spanish Bible because of its present association with sexual relations?

Second, translating and interpreting are communicative processes that produce a «text», whether on paper or in the air. As producers of a product, translating and interpreting constitute technologies, not sciences. They must, of course, employ insights from a number of scientific disciplines: psychology, cultural anthropology, linguistics, and communication theory, and as I. A. Richards has said, they probably constitute «the most complex event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos.»

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Internal communication involves a whole set of culturally significant components: source, message, media, target audience, setting, feedback, and noise (both physical and psychological), all of which need to be viewed from the perspective of their cultural roles. Perhaps the most relevant parallel can be found in architecture, which must also draw on a number of scientific disciplines, e.g. physics, chemistry, space engineering, systems analysis, etc., as well as reflect concern for the audience that will use the building and for an aesthetic component to make the building a source of visual and tactile pleasure.

Definitions of linguistics and sociolinguistics may be useful in understanding more precisely the distinctive roles of these two complementary ways of viewing language. Linguistics consists essentially in the investigation of the classes and structures of language and their interrelations on all levels from phonology to discourse. But sociolinguistics is concerned with the uses of language and the values associated with such uses. Therefore, sociolinguistics analyzes levels or registers of language (from highly ritual to decidedly intimate), competition between dialects and between languages, the growth and death of languages, the roles of jargons, slang, and verbal innovations, gender differences, and the abuse of language, especially by advertisers and politicians. At present, some of the most valuable insights about language are the result of research in the sociolinguistic aspects of verbal communication.

There are, however, two serious errors about language that significantly impede real progress in understanding the nature of translating and interpreting:

a) the naive idea that languages consist merely of words and grammar and

b) the distorted view that the primary, or even the only, role of language is to communicate information. These two misconceptions are serious roadblocks to grasping the true significance of what languages do and how they accomplish their functions.

Instead of a language being a single code consisting of words and grammar, it is actually a bundle of related codes. The verbal code never occurs in isolation, but is always associated with paralinguistic and extralinguistic codes, as well as with supplementary and competing codes, each with its own designative (or denotative) and associative (connotative) meanings.

The paralinguistic oral features of language consist of distinctive tone of voice, intonation, pitch, rapidity of utterance, and quality of enunciation. A growling tone of voice can change «I love you» into an expression of hate or contempt, while a slight shift in intonation can transform a straightforward statement into cynical irony. Excessive speed of utterance may signal nervousness or perhaps a cover-up, while high pitch often indicates aggression. And sloppy enunciation can convince listeners that the speaker couldn't care less about an audience's reactions.

Paralinguistic features also occur in written texts, e.g. orthographical correctness, the style of type, the system of writing, and format. Misspellings are a poor recommendation for a secretary seeking employment, and an article filled with bold-face type gives an impression that the writer is not content to argue his case but feels obliged to gesticulate graphically on every page. Some scholars insist that Greek and Hebrew words must always occur in their traditional letters and accents rather

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than be transliterated, but this can also reveal a kind of intellectual snobbery, especially when the forms of the letters are not germane to the discussion. The format can also convey a great deal of information. In fact, some people refuse to buy a Bible if it has a single rather than double column format, because, as they say, they don't want their Bible to look like any other book. The communicative importance of format can be easily confirmed by taking a prose text and dividing it up into poetic lines or by taking a poem and writing it out as prose. Almost inevitably the response of readers will be radically altered by the change in format.

Extralinguistic oral features constitute an amazing set of codes. The gestures of hand, face, mouth, and especially eye contact are not only distinctive of various languages but carry very important messages. So closely related are gestures to verbal language in Italy that it is not strange to see people in a phone booth holding the phone between the shoulder and the cheek in order to free the hands to gesticulate. Stance can also be part of the bundle of extralinguistic codes. Tense body stance can signal keen personal commitment to what is being said, while a lackadaisical attitude can greatly reduce an audience's appreciation for the verbal message. But perhaps the distance between conversationalists is one of the most wrongly perceived parts of the bundle of codes. In the Mediterranean countries and in Latin America most speakers stand about half an arm's length from one another, while in Northern Europe and North America most people stand about an arm's length apart. When a North American and a Latin American are conversing, the Latin American is likely to come closer, but the North American usually interprets this as aggression, and so he moves back. But to the Latin American this retreat is interpreted as being standoffish and lacking in a capacity for friendship.

There are even important extralinguistic features in written communications. Some years ago an enterprising representative of the Bible Societies made the grave mistake of binding in pigskin an Arabic translation of the New Testament, essentially an act of sacrilege. Even the color of binding communicates in many areas of the world. In the United States a book bound in yellow normally sells poorly, but one in gold is regarded as very attractive. In China, however, anything in yellow is much appreciated because this color is still associated with imperial grandeur. In the tropical parts of the world green is not very popular the people have too much green around them all the time, but in the desert areas of the world green is a favorite color, and books bound in green are regarded as particularly appropriate and acceptable.

Part of the meaning of any text depends greatly on the reputed source. To confirm this extralinguistic aspect, select a more or less neutral statement with political implications and give the same text to three different sets of students, but indicate to each group a different source, e.g. Thomas Jefferson, Karl Marx, and Adolph Hitler. It will soon be clear how much the presumed writer or speaker influences the understanding of the text. Even the setting of an utterance influences the meaning. For example, the words «damn» and «hell» have quite different meanings depending on whether they are uttered on the golf course or in a church.

Supplementary and competing codes often result in significant alterations in the form of the verbal code. For example, in songs the words may be arranged in an

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unnatural order so that word stresses will match the accented notes of the music. In drama the words must fit the action, and in dubbing the lip synchronization must closely parallel the mouth movements. In opera both music and acting are involved, and the required adjustments are so acute that most translators despair of ever being able to produce satisfactory translations. Multimedia productions also have the problems of coordinating background sound, visual images, and words, and as a result the content is too often sacrificed to the more spectacular visual images.

Bilingual and multilingual contexts are rich environments for competing codes. When a woman in southeastern Arizona explains to her neighbor about the noisy play of children as *los niños están monkeyando*, «the children are monkeying around», one can readily see the effects of multiple codes. In such circumstances, one language is likely to lose out to another, but in some cases there may be a rebirth of a long suppressed language, as in the case of Catalan. But rather than a conflict between languages on a wide front, the change may be only a subtle one. A century ago the prestige oral style in New York City was close to New England speech, but now in New York City the pronunciation of postvocalic *r* typical of the central part of the United States is winning out over the Bostonian centralized vowel.

Many people have assumed that bilingualism and multilingualism are a special feature of Europe, where more than fifty languages are employed in education and book production. But in Africa there is far more multilingualism. In fact, it is difficult to find people who speak only one language. Truck drivers can usually communicate in four or five languages, and most persons with a high-school education speak a local language, a trade language, and a school language, often a former colonial language.

The second major mistake made by most people is to assume that languages are used primarily to relay information. Although it is true that the informative function of language exists to some extent in all uses of language, it probably does not represent more than 20 percent of what takes place in verbal communication. The other sociological functions of language are in many respects far more crucial than the informative one. For example, the imperative function is designed to influence behavior, but not necessarily by the use of imperative forms of the verbs. An appropriate joke or a meaningful story may be far more effective for altering behavior. The performative function is especially relevant in changing the social status of people, for example, in sentencing criminals, in blessing and cursing, and in marriage ceremonies. The statement «I now pronounce you man and wife» may cost a bridegroom less than twenty dollars, but having the statement undone may cost him thousands. The emotive function is especially important for changing the emotional attitudes of people, something politicians and humorists are usually quite skilled at and for which they often receive high financial rewards. But probably the most important sociological function is interpersonal, because it has to do with establishing and maintaining interpersonal relations. Whether a person is addressed or spoken of as «the honorable George W. Waddington III», or «Judge Waddington», or «George», or «Waddie» (his wife's favorite name for him) depends largely on the setting and the social proximity of the persons in question. The interpersonal factors

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determine whether one uses the fixed formulas of ceremony or ritual, the formal language employed in speaking to people that one does not know, the informal language used by colleagues, the casual language of parties and picnics, or the intimate language of the family. Failure to respect these sociological functions of language can completely nullify even the most sensitive attention to the purely linguistic factors.

The psychological functions of language are often overlooked. The intellectual emancipation that comes with the discovery of names for objects and events is one of the great discoveries of childhood, and the capacity to combine topics and comments into meaningful utterances is a psychological triumph for both children and second-language learners. The modeling of a speaker's world by means of language does provide a sense of belonging. But the most commonly used psychological function of language is in thinking. Although some thinking may occur without the immediate use of language. all complex thinking does involve internal verbalization.

There is, however, a function of language that overlaps both psychological reactions and sociological interaction, namely, the expressive function. For example, a person may use words such as «ouch», «damn», «oh» without any intention to communicate anything to anyone, but an expressive urge may be an important factor in using language for aesthetic purposes. In fact, even in the aesthetic use of language there may be no intent to communicate to others, as in the case of Emily Dickinson, whose remarkable poems were published only after her death. But most persons who use language to express inner thoughts and drives do wish to share their insights and aesthetic concerns with others.

Having once overcome the mistake of thinking of language as merely words and grammar and after having recognized the wide range of functions that language performs, a translator or interpreter is in a much better position to understand how the sociolinguistic features become relevant for the entire range of communication: phonology, lexicon, syntax, and discourse.

Ideophones, the phonologically marginal combinations of oral sounds, e.g. «psst» (calling attention), «shsh» (asking people to quiet down), and «brrr» (to signal how cold it is), are essentially verbal gestures, but they may have very different meanings in different cultures. In Latin America «psst»is a perfectly proper way to get the attention of a waiter in a restaurant, but the same ideophone is certainly not acceptable in a restaurant in New York City unless a person wants to get into trouble.

Punning is also on the borderline between sounds and words, in which similarities in sound suggest alternative meanings. In some societies punning is a particularly common phenomenon that people cultivate and thoroughly enjoy. This is particularly true of the Kuna speakers living on the San Blas islands along the east coast of Panama. In Brazilian Portuguese there is a special type of punning that consists in combining the last syllable or so of one word with the first syllable of the following word to form still another word-often a word with a pejorative or vulgar meaning.

Not only do languages differ in the way in which they construct new words, e.g. compounding in German and Chinese in contrast with borrowing in English, but

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they all experience important changes in the meanings of standard terms. For example, the term «regularity» is so frequently mentioned in American radio and television advertising about food and pills to prevent constipation, that a speaker must usually avoid the word completely in order not to suggest unwanted nuances of meaning. And there are often very subtle semantic associations with words. A recent translation of the New Testament has been compelled to use such phrases as «to do miracles» or «to work miracles» rather than «to perform miracles» so as to avoid the impression of putting on a show, something typical of some television evangelists.

Because of the sociolinguistic aspects of lexicography, a new lexicon of the Greek New Testament vocabulary has been designed to reflect more accurately the cultural contexts of word usage. Instead of listing words in alphabetical order, the meanings are arranged in semantic domains. For example, all the words referring to body parts are in the same domain, all the meanings of words relating to thinking are together, and so on for commercial activities, emotions, ethical behavior, communication, etc. This has been done because the different meanings of a single word are generally farther apart in semantic space than the related meanings of different words. Furthermore, by arranging meanings in major and minor semantic domains, it is possible to highlight more readily and accurately the diversities of contexts in which the terms occur.

Recent research in neurophysiology has also indicated how the brain has certain special regions for meanings belonging to related semantic domains. A special number of *Scientific American* (September, 1992) on mind and brain reported on how the brain categorizes information so that related events and concepts can be reactivated together. Furthermore, there seem to be three separate but closely related parts of the brain concerned with language. one network encodes and decodes sounds, words, and grammar, while a second acts as a transfer mechanism, and a third is a conceptual area, in which concepts are not images, but traces of synaptic connections that can be readily reactivated. These neurological aspects of the brain provide a basis for Danica Seleskovitch's principle of «grasping the concepts and forgetting the words.» But there is much more to translating than this somewhat overly simplified formula.

The fact that we translate concepts instead of words was poignantly illustrated for me when checking a translation of the New Testament in the More language of West Africa. In the Gospel of Mark 1 .35 the Greek text speaks about Jesus getting up early before sunrise and going out alone to a desert place, but in the More text there were just two words: «Jesus» and an accompanying verb. Accordingly, I asked the translator, «Where is the rest of the sentence», but she replied, «That second word means to get up early in the morning and to go out to a desert place alone. It's all there in one word». If the concept is conveyed by a single word, there is no need to add words. Consider, for example, the remarkable combination of meaning in a single English word such as «heir», which can be defined as «a person who has or will receive something of value, presumably after the death of the person making the gift.»

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A sociolinguistic approach to lexicography also implies much greater attention to the role of contexts in determining meaning. Instead of speaking about thirteen different meanings of English «run», it seems much better to speak about the occurrence of «run» in thirteen different types of contexts. Furthermore, definitions need to be much more sensitive to marginal or peripheral meanings, which are not exceptions, but should be part of the definitions. For example, the most common meaning of «run» is usually given as «movement in space by use of the limbs such that at alternating instances no limb is in touch with the supporting surface». This is all right for bipeds and quadrupeds, but what about such expressions as «the spider ran across the table», «the crab ran up the beach», and «the snake ran across the lawn»? For spiders and crabs the statement about no limb touching the surface is simply wrong, and for a snake there are no limbs. Compare also two more sets of expressions: «the clock is running», «his heart is running», «the motor is running», and «the water is running», «the faucet is running», «his nose is running». In these three kinds of «running» we recognize the differences simply because of the words that accompany «run». The meaning we attribute to «run» is actually a composite or combined meaning of «run» and the context.

If we are to take seriously 1) the principle that the meaning of a word in any context is the minimal amount that the word contributes to the meaning of the whole and 2) the principle that any semantic system maximizes the context and minimizes the role of the individual items, our approach to meaning will be much more attuned to the cultural contexts in which words occur. Furthermore, in linguistics there is also a fundamental principle of «conditioned variation». That is to say, if alternative forms are completely conditioned by context, they are structurally irrelevant. It is for this reason that in English we do not write the phonetic differences between aspirated and nonaspirated voiceless stops in «pill»/«spill», «till»/«still», and «kill»/«skill» because these differences are conditioned by the absence or occurrence of the initials. The application of this principle to lexical semantics would certainly provide a more accurate and ultimately more intuitively satisfying approach to meaning.

Since syntax is so automatic, we should let our brains do a lot of the mental work for us by concentrating on a clear understanding of the concepts. As a result our translations and interpretations will usually be far more satisfactory. Geronimo Martin, a blind Navajo Indian, was justly famous as a remarkable interpreter, but he was hopelessly literal when he translated the Bible with his fingers following an English Braille text. In order for him to translate well, someone had to read the text to him. Then after he had accurately grasped the concepts, he could produce a remarkably idiomatic Navajo equivalent.

During a recent experience in translating and adapting some five hundred pages of Study Bible notes from Spanish into English, I found that if I paid too much attention to the words of the Spanish text, I almost inevitably used English words that represented a much higher academic level than the words of the English Bible for which I was preparing the notes. The reason for this is not difficult to understand, because Latin cognates in English are generally on a much higher register than

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they are in Spanish. Similarly, one of the principal reasons why machine translation has proven to be so inadequate is that the rules are tied too closely to words rather than to concepts.

Sociolinguistics is particularly important in matters of discourse structure. In the Western world a discourse of serious content normally begins with a statement of the major thesis or theme, and what follows is usually a series of reasons or data that substantiate the principal point of the discourse. In the Orient, however, speakers or writers often begin with a series of observations or experiences that are designed to lead listeners or readers to recognize the purpose or theme of the discourse. In other words, the big idea comes last, and in fact may not even be explicitly mentioned. For many people in the Western world, this way of organizing ideas seems like beating around the bush and avoiding the real issue, while many people in the Orient insist that their approach is much more polite and effective because it encourages an audience to recognize gradually the significance of what has been said and therefore to accept the conclusions more readily and gratefully.

The crucial problems of effective interlingual communication are not primarily linguistic, but sociolinguistic, because it is in the blend of language and culture, of words and concepts, and of semantics and pragmatics that the real significance of translation and interpretation can be best understood and the principles of sociolinguistics can be most usefully employed.

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