THE LINGUISTIC SIGN HELD HOSTAGE

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> Having once overcome the mistake of thinking of language as merely words and grammar... (E. A. Nida, 1995)

1. It has been an ages old stubborn topic to think of the translator as striving to steer a middle course between her two major hurdles: *literal* and *free* translation.

First we can imagine her making a big effort to keep the signals on a tight rein so as to preserve the meanings as clues to a faithful message.

Then, perhaps in the subsequent paragraph, she is at pains to shed the shackles of form, thereby permitting a freer interpretation of concepts to fit her TL, most often her own native, relevant idiom.

And we readers and observers of both versions are left to wonder, with an unhibited inquisitorial critical mind, about the laws and licences of the translator. Where should the boundary line be drawn which can tell us that a forbidden land has been trodden? To make further use of this spatial metaphor, we may argue that a translator would do well in crossing over the boundary walls of the SL linguistic enclosure. And yet we find Nida's assumption quoted above as somewhat perverse, no matter what followed it. The forthcoming pages have been prompted as a discussion of that assumption.

2. Surely Nida has meant with that statement something slightly different to what at first blush he seems to have actually said. That was made very clear by Newmark, who has alighted on that very point and quite forcefully too: «All the same, we do translate words, because there is nothing else to translate; there are only the words in the page; there is nothing else there».[1]

This is a call to stick to the meanings derived from the linguistic material there is on the page, which strikes one as a most sensible advice which should take into account all there is to the text, while disallowing erratic paths.[2] Having said that, one has the feeling that things could not be so simple as they sound, and that the whole issue is badly in need of further elaboration and clarification.

I will concentrate, to the modest extent that this brief paper allows, on two burning notions in translation studies, which are time and again major sources of confusion, namely first, what is the role played by the *linguistic sign* in the whole process of

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[1] P. Newmark: *A Textbook of Translation*, Prentice Hall, 1988, p. 73.

[2] Newmark makes that remark as a reaction against the radical psychologism of current approaches to translation/interpretation such as the one made by the Seleskovitch School, for whom language has but an ancillary role to play in the cognitive process.

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translation? and second, can it be disposed of, once we have entered the alleged cognitive region of meaning and the common ground of pragmatics for both languages?[3]

I hope I will not disappoint anybody if I anticipate the rider that no single cut and dried answer can be given to the above questions. Little wonder then that the students and analysts alike are at a loss when they desperately attempt to seek a single straight answer. So we will be dealing with some of the most outstanding assumptions and views in turn.

3. Most linguists would still maintain the Saussurian basic conception of language (qua *langue*) as an inventory of signs which are bearers of *values* or functional meanings. In a comparison of languages, as is the case with translation, nothing can be gained from a theory of meanings as abstract entities. Katz's basic assumption of it is: «sentence meaning is arrived at mechanically through the amalgamation of word meaning along with grammatical information».

A *sign-based* theory, on the contrary, already precludes the possibility of a trade-off with the modern modular account of language as a representational system, which insists on formal, at the expense of functional, explanation.[4] Meaning then, far from being compositional *sentence meaning*, associated with propositional truth value, is conceived of as the values *linguistic signs* (words and morphemes) display.

What is the contribution of *sign meaning* to communication? As W. Reid[5] suggests in his study of the «number» category in English, the reader has to make some sort of interpretive *bootstrapping* operation whereby she has to simultaneously solve for unknowns of two kinds, the *message* and its particular motivating *signals*, a relation that goes well beyond purely structural principles. In fact it is the signals that provide the necessary clues to reach a message. The cited *bootstrapping* operation should be then firmly based on the pragmatic searching for «contextual plausibility» which typically involve *inferential* work, as Sperber and Wilson (1986) have already demonstrated.

Let's look at some examples. Consider *La Regenta*'s first line and its English translation by Rutherford:

La heroica ciudad dormía la siesta
The city of heroes was having a nap

We may set a rule of equivalence that states that a premodifying epithet is equivalent in meaning to a determinative postmodifier, and the rule might work for a good number

[3]That this is a slippery ground, where a wide gamut of linguistic approaches strive as best they can to stand up, is recognised by the late D. Bolinger: *Pity the poor analyst, who has to do the best he can with meanings that are as elusive as a piece of wet soap in a bathtub*, 1975, p. 205.

[4]Relevant names are W. Diver («On Defining the Discipline», in *CUWPL*, 6, 1981, pp. 59-116), W. Reid and E. C.García amongst other representatives of the so called Columbia School. For them forms have meanings that are non arbitrary with respect to the message intended in communication. Thus, for instance, the «formal» oblique morphology of a language is explainable in terms of *focus* vs. *not focus* meaning, as García (1979) clearly demonstrate for Old English.

[5]W. Reid: *Verb and Noun Number in English*, Longman, 1991.

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of examples. But clearly, context independent semantic rules are riskful, and sensible translators are advised not put much trust in them.

In sharp contrast with the previous example, we meet the following translation of a similar construction in a poem from *Las Soledades* (1903) by A. Machado:

Y allá en el fondo sueñan	and there, in the depths, dream
los frutos de oro...	the golden fruits...

where the reader is unlikely to be puzzled by Machado's metaphor, and neither is by its non-metaphorical translation. Here both meanings are likely to be read as carrying analogous messages given the more than probable similarity of the respective contextual effects.

Of course, this rift between the *linguistic signals* of two languages has been a major source of concern among translation theorists. Coseriu,[6] for instance, distrusts the linguistic meanings of the signs (*significados*), obviously «cut up» (in a Whorfian sense)[7] differently in different languages, and puts his trust in the, for him, a catch-all immutable reference (*designación*);[8] but occasionally, according to this linguist, we come across words that have symbolic values, and then we may choose to translate the textual sense (*el sentido*) instead of the actual designation. To make matters worse, he has this to say with his typically structuralist cryptic jargon: *Y la traducción, como simple técnica lingüística, concierne sólo a los medios lingüísticos del hablar, y no también a los extralingüísticos* (1977:230). If I understand him correctly, he means that the words and only the words printed in the page are the subject of translation. If that is so, what about his all important referential designation? Moreover, what about *the context* for his also important concept of sense, supposedly located in the minds of the speakers? Is not linguistic communication an interaction between at least two minds, a cognitive operation of some kind, which involves much more than a fixed code of signals? Two points should be worth discussing in this connection:

First, *designation* is surely an important extra-linguistic factor that a translator must count on during the process of rendering the message of the SL into the TL. Thus, the *sobrecubierta* is referentially equivalent to the *dustjacket* of a book, in spite of so little signically common ground. K. Süss has made it quite clear when he commented on a German text translated into Spanish. The popular Nurenberg *Brunnen* may means *pozo, fuente* and *manantial* and other near synonyms, depending crucially on our knowledge of the referential context. If the translator is not well informed about such differences, there is no way of successfully putting her message across. The underdetermination of the meaning signal *Brunnen* in German may lead to ambiguity in the TL. This is a frequent, straightforward phenomenon. But translators are likely to come

[6] E. Coseriu: *La lengua y el hombre*, Madrid, Gredos, 1977.

[7] B. L. Whorf: *Language, Truth and Reality*, MIT, 1956.

[8] E. Coseriu's more than arguable definition of translation is *«designación idéntica por medio de significados en principio diferentes»* which implies that linguistic signs are but mere labels attached to the same universal reality. A truism typical of taxonomic structuralists.

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across the contrary phenomenon of over-use of a signal, as is the example of *bay* in English:

She sat at the window bay
Leave the car in the parking bay
We'll meet at the mixing bay
You must keep them at bay

In these examples bay is used as an extensive metaphor where only some of the basic meanings of *bay* as equivalent to *bahía* have left their clues as semantic traces to be relevantly decoded.

Second, and as Nida has suggested, there is more than merely *words* in a text. The verbal code is far from being fixed and bi-univocous which must reflect a once and for all reality, but is itself *shaper* of reality.[9] It is language users who are cognitively active in the creation of messages by means of words, which in turn are not just innocent labels attached to extralinguistic *things*, as formal semanticists obsessed with reference would have it. Rather, *words*, and by the same token *texts*, are loaded with thick layers of cultural information, which have often been dismissed by some linguists as matters of «connotation» or *emotive meaning* from Bloomfield to Lyons.[10]

4. The trouble is, in mainstream linguistics the received tradition has been prone to hold a reductionist view of meaning as *referential* meaning. As a purely linguistic phenomenon, this concept of meaning, of course, would not include any feelings, images or connotations which may be associated with particular expressions, nor is the semantic status of an expression evaluated in terms of what is plausible, usual or likely to happen «outside» language. Which, by the way, is a *contraditio in terminis*, since designation was an essential condition. The rest would be simply a matter of style, evocative context, socio-cultural context, connotative or expressive meaning, affective discourse and other such fuzzy secondary terms, as if we could afford getting rid of them in actual *communication*.

Little wonder that connotation has deserved the derogatory terms of *«un fourre tout»* by Todorov and *«un terme passe-partout»* by Mounin, as if it was a refuse in the garbage bin laid outside the neat and tidy semantic house.[11] Thus the objective meaning *«le vieux sens général du mot»* in a given set of similar signs: *nag, pony, stallion, steed, stud* all share the same generic denotative meaning (*horse*) as a concept in the users mind. The connotative meaning, however, is variable in all five signals. The opposition of the marked term is on style or register meaning age, sex, race etc.

As O. Paz aptly put it:

> *Cada texto es único y, simultáneamente, es la traducción de otro texto. Ningún texto es enteramente original porque el lenguaje mismo, en su esencia, es ya una traducción: primero,*

[9]M. A. K. Halliday: *Language as a social semiotic*, Arnold, 1978.

[10]J. Lyons: *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, Cambridge UP, 1970.

[11]As J. L. Ladmiral put it in *Traduire: théorème pour la traduction* (1979, p. 140): dans ce qu'elle peut avoir d'individuel, la connotation serait ainsi rejetée vers les ténèbres extérieures du non-linguistique, dans la fameuse «boîte noire» d'une psychologie plus ou moins mentaliste. But surely, connotation is not strictly synonymous to individual, and it can hardly be so.

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del mundo no-verbal y, después, porque cada signo y cada frase es la traducción de otro signo y de otra frase.[12]

Paradoxical or startling though the above reflection may sound, it reminds us that we inhabit a semiotic world where signals are anything but transparent surrogates of objective reality. In Derride an terms, the world is a weaving of linguistic traces and differences that cut out shapes in a *mass sensible*. The woven *tissue* textile or *text* that is the world utterly depends on the encoded linguistic signals, which have the task of *decouper* the brute reality . It is in that sense that Lacan claimed that «language involves the murder of the things», a signifying practice that situates us beyond the threshold of pure objective designation. As H. Putnam rightly put it: «But a sign that is actually employed in a particular way by a particular community of users can correspond to particular objects within the conceptual scheme of those users. *Objects* do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description».[13]

Yet this point should not, in any case, take us as far as to proclaim that we live in the most lonely and desolate desert of linguistic solipsim. Rather, as mutually knowledgeable members of the same culture we share a great many of the *mythologies* in practical everyday communication.

And this is crucial for translation, as O. Paz has argued above. It is in that sense that he quotes Wallace Stevens' shrewd verse:

.....the hard hidalgo
Lives in the mountainous character of his speech;
And in that mountainous mirror Spain acquires
The knowledge of Spain and the hidalgo's hat

The mythology of the *hidalgo* may be grasped when we translate it by the same word *hidalgo*, a unique bearer of a semiotic layer, a narrative discourse as implicit subtext.

As I mentioned elsewhere,[14] the seemingly unachievable, too highly utopic aim of Nida's «equivalent effect» sends us back to our own world weave of *social meanings* or mythologies. The «effects» triggered by signals are no other than the *cognitive assumptions* foreseen by pragmatics, as I argued above, as fundamental for building up strong hypotheses and implicatures to decode a relevant message. It is in that sense that I argue that in a translation *process* the linguistic signs of the SL are, as it were, held *hostage,* while the message is encoded in turn in the TL.

J. R. Martin's examples of Whorfian *covert* categories from Tagalog, which he calls grammatical conspiracies, provide clear evidence in this connection: «Tagalog predis-

[12]O. Paz: *El signo y el garabato*, Madrid, Anagrama, 1991, p. 66.

[13]H. Putnam: *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge UP, 1981, p. 52.

[14]V. López Folgado: «Beyond the nuts and bolts of translation», in *V Encuentros Complutenses en torno a la traducción*, Madrid, Complutennse, 1995, p. 139.

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poses its speakers to a social reality in which participation is a key element in a way English does not...»[15] To illustrate this:

ang kanilang suntukan: their fight with one another
nakipag bigayan: joined in mutual gift giving

Here the signal suffix -an means reciprocal action involving two or more actors. Other affixes include: joint action: *maki-*, commitative: *ka-*, closeness or fondness: *maka-*. As translators, we feel that the *clues* these signals provide for message encoding in a TL will inevitably lead to a sequestering of them from the scene.

5. The interaction of lexical signals helps create a message and it involves goal-directed pragmatic efficacy. In the process, a sequestering operation is carried out where the signals are left in suspension, their clear-cut edges becoming blurred, as we tread the uneven cognitive grounds of the interpretation of the message which the signals help create.

A recent case of a translation is worth mentioning in this connection. The once sacred immutable character of the Holy Scriptures has been altered of late to fit the modern social world, more sensitive now in matters of sex and race discrimination. Thus, we may purchase a «politically correct» Bible in U.S publish by Oxford U.P. where the negative nuances attached to female submission, slavery and skin colour are banned altogether.[16]

As a concluding remark, I would like to suggest three points:

First, that the emphasis in Translation Studies should not be put so much on the *description* of two linguistic systems of signals, but rather on both SL and TL *uses* of such signals in contextual texts, which by implication, means the pragmatic aspects of interpretation and production. It is in this respect that I have refereed to the linguistic sign as being held *hostage* during the process of translation.

Second, that translation considered as *process* already means the taking into consideration all the above mentioned semiotic i.e. culturally loaded, aspects of messages in actual communication.

Third, and as a consequence of the above two points, we should brush off from current work in Translation Studies all the unnecessary complex terminology which surely leads to many actual misunderstandings. I find a strange proliferation of concepts that are loosely or misapplied in this domain, many of which are equivalent by implication such as: language use, communication, cultural background, cognitive implications, pragmatics, text in context, polysystem, etc...and any such terms that are not mutually exclusive but are frequently treated as if they were so.

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[15]J. R. Martin: «Grammatical conspiracies in Tagalog», in J. D. Benson et al.: *Linguistics in a Systemic Perspective*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1988.

[16]As is well known, owing to the new impetus of today's Women Studies, numerous publications have appeared dealing with *sexism* in language, which demonstrates that both lexis and grammar resources heavily depend on our social ideologies. J. Poynton (*Making the Difference: the language of gender,* Deakin UP, 1985) quotes a number of lexical conspiracies in our culture to fit our sexist mentality.

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