Text, Translation,
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3

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Contents

Towards a theory of good translation

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We all indulge in theorizing when we have to: we become medical advisers when someone we know is ill, and we are always ready with theories about translation, when faced with quaint or impenetrable instructions on some gadget imported from overseas. Among scholars in science and the humanities are many with a serious interest in the practice and theory of translation as it impinges on their own disciplines; writers and literary scholars have probably contributed the most to exploring the translation process and the relation between a translated text and its original. But there are two groups of professionals who theorize about translation in its entirety: the translators themselves, and the linguists. Both these groups are concerned with a general theory of translation; but they interpret this in rather different ways. For a linguist, translation theory is the study of how things are: what is the nature of the translation process and the relation between texts in translation. For a translator, translation theory is the study of how things ought to be: what constitutes good or effective translation and what can help to achieve a better or more effective product (cf. Bell 1991: ch.1).[1]

Of course, in putting it in these personalized terms I am consciously being schematic. Some translators are interested in the nature of their undertaking from the point of view of linguistic theory; and some linguists engage in improving the quality of translations and in training translators. It is entirely possible for the same person to adopt both these theoretical perspectives. Nevertheless they do raise different issues. To express it in grammatical terms: the linguist's theory of translation is a declarative theory (or better, indicative, since a theory of this kind is as much interrogative as declarative), whereas the translator's theory of translation is an imperative theory. Each is, obviously, an important and productive enterprise. What concerns me here is the relationship between the two.

Let me recall here something I have said at times with respect to text analysis. When we analyze a text linguistically, we usually have one of two possible goals. One is to explain why the text means what it does: why it is understood the way it is — by the analyst, or by anyone else. That is the lower of the two goals, the one that is easier to attain. The higher goal is to explain why the text is valued as it is — again, by anyone who may be evaluating it: this might be, in the case of a literary or religious text, by a general consensus within the culture. This second goal is more difficult to attain, if only because it includes the first one: to be able to explain why a text is more, or perhaps less, effective in its context one must first be able

to explain why it means what it is understood to mean. I am using "meaning" here in a broad, Firthian sense: a text has meaning at all linguistic strata, those of expression as well as those of content. The rhyme scheme of a poem is part of its phonological meaning.

How does this relate to the theory of translation? Let me approach this in two steps. First: suppose we are considering two texts, in different languages, the one said to be a translation of the other. The questions that arise are: is this text a translation of the other, or is it not? and if it is, is it a good translation? Of course, all such categories are fuzzy; but since they are all equally fuzzy, this does not affect the point. With the first question, we are considering what the text means; with the second, we are considering whether it is effective — and again, the second appears as the harder one to answer, since it is dependent on the first: we cannot judge whether a text is effective unless we know what it means.

With the second step, we ask two questions that are analogous to my questions regarding text analysis: why is this text a translation of the other? and why is it, or is it not, a good translation? In other words: how do we know? But in order to take this second step, we have to shift our stance. As long as we are asking only whether the two texts have these particular properties, we are simply observing instances: the two are being compared directly one with the other. Once we start asking why, our stance shifts and we are now observing systems: the systems of the two languages that lie behind the texts being compared. Just as the exercises in text analysis involve the theory of descriptive linguistics, so these exercises in translation analysis involve the theory of comparative descriptive linguistics (cf. Ellis 1966).

The problem of reconciling the two concepts of a theory of translation is that they make different assumptions about the stance of the observer. What I have called the linguist's perspective is systemic: it assumes that you can theorize the relationship of translation only by referring to language as system (or of course to other, non-linguistic features of the culture; but here also, to culture as system). The translator's perspective, on the other hand, is more likely to be instantial: it assumes that to theorize about how to improve a translation you have to engage with language as text. So, for example, in modeling functional variation in language the translator is more likely to think of "a register" as a text type, whereas the linguist will think of "a register" as a sub-system. The major difference between the indicative and the imperative perspectives seems to be that people tend to look at "translation" systemically, whereas they look at "good translation" instantially.

It is notoriously difficult to say why, or even whether, something is a good translation, since this must depend on a complex variety of different factors that are constantly shifting in their relationship one to another.

The central organizing concept is presumably that of "equivalence"; but equivalence with respect to what? It seems that one might need some kind of typology of equivalences, which could be assigned differential values according to the specific conditions attaching to a particular instance of translation. Is there such a typology ready to hand?

One likely source will be found in the parameters of language itself. If we construe these in terms of systemic functional theory there are three vectors which are probably the most relevant: stratification, metafunction and rank. Stratification is the organization of language in ordered strata: phonetic, phonological, lexicogrammatical and semantic — and one or more contextual strata outside of language proper. Metafunction is the organization of the content strata (lexicogrammar and semantics) in functional components: ideational, interpersonal and textual — roughly, the parts of the system that have to do with construing human experience, enacting social relationships, and creating discourse. Rank is the organization of the formal strata (phonology and lexicogrammar) in a compositional hierarchy: for example, in the grammar of English, clause complexes, clauses, phrases, groups, words and morphemes. All of these have been used in models of translation, and I will refer to each of them in turn.

In his book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (1965), Catford defined equivalence explicitly by reference to the different strata in language. The sense in which "translation equivalence" is most typically understood would be that of equivalence at the semantic stratum; but Catford recognizes equivalence at all the other strata, not only those of content but also those of expression (phonology and phonetics — and also, since he is taking account of the written medium, the analogous strata of "graphology" and "graphetics"). There could be purely graphic equivalence between symbols that resembled each other visually, even if they were functionally quite distinct. This kind of equivalence does not usually carry much value — though I used to play a game of multilingual Scrabble in which the roman letters also stood for their nearest graphic equivalents in Cyrillic: *w* for Russian *ш* and so on; and there are certainly contexts in which phonic equivalence may be valued rather highly. But the point I want to make here is the general one: that equivalence at different strata carries differential values; that in most cases the value that is placed on it goes up the higher the stratum — semantic equivalence is valued more highly than lexicogrammatical, and contextual equivalence perhaps most highly of all; but that these relative values can always be varied, and in any given instance of translation one can reassess them in the light of the task.

Catford's theory was entirely "indicative" in approach. In 1962 I wrote an article on translation in which (since it was offering a model for machine translation) I took a more "imperative" approach, adopting the notion that Ellis subsequently called "translation at ranks". This operated at

the stratum of lexicogrammar, and the idea was to list a set of equivalents at the lowest rank, that of the morpheme, ranged in order of probability; and then to modify the choice of equivalent in a stepwise move up the rank scale, each step locating the item in the context of the next higher unit — first the word, then the group an so on. So for example the Russian morpheme *общ* might have as its most likely equivalent the English *socio-;* but in the context of the word *общий* it becomes *general*; when this word, in turn, occurs in the group *общая длина (obščaja dlina)*, this gets translated as *the overall length* (not *the general length*), the criterion being 'if the noun functioning as Thing is a measure of quantity'. This has never been adopted as far as I know as a strategy for machine translation — but it defines translation equivalence with respect to rank. Here again we can observe that equivalence at different ranks carries differential values; and the that, again, the value tends to go up the higher the rank — clause complex (sentence) equivalence is valued more highly than clausal, clausal than phrasal and so on; but, again, there may always be particular circumstances in which equivalence at a lower rank acquires a relatively higher value.

The third vector in respect of which equivalence may be defined is that of metafunction. This is different from the other two discussed in that there is no ordering among the different metafunctions — no ordering, that is, in the system of language, although they are typically ordered in the value that is assigned to them in translation, with the ideational carrying by far the highest value overall. It is not hard to see the reason for this. As a general rule, "translation equivalence" is defined in ideational terms; if a text does not match its source text ideationally, it does not qualify as a translation, so the question whether it is a good translation does not arise. For precisely this reason, one of the commonest criticisms made of translated texts is that, while they are equivalent ideationally, they are not equivalent in respect of the other metafunctions — interpersonally, or textually, or both. To express this in analogous contextual terms, the field of discourse has been adequately construed in the target language but the tenor, or else the mode, has not. We cannot here assign a typical scale of values; but there can be considerable variation in the value that is accorded to equivalence in the non-ideational metafunctions. In some contexts, matching the relations of power and distance, and the patterns of evaluation and appraisal, set up in the original text may be very highly valued in the translation, to such an extent as even to override the demand for exact ideational equivalence.

This situation typically arises where the highest value, in stratal terms, is being placed on contextual equivalence, overriding the requirement for equivalence at the semantic stratum. In such cases what is being expected of the translator is a text which would have equivalent function to the original in the context of situation. This is analogous to what Hasan (1996: ch.5) describes as "semantic variation" between different coding orienta-

tions within one language (for example, where different mothers use different semantic strategies in giving reasons for regulating their child's behavior). And the analogy with the concept of variation provides another way of looking at the phenomenon of "equivalence value" that I have been discussing. If, for example, value is given to equivalence at some higher rank, the implication is that features at lower ranks are allowed to vary: provided the clauses are equivalent, the words and phrases need not be. The common motif, which permits us to look at translation as a kind of variation, is that of variation against some higher-level constant. This is a strategy that the translator has recourse to all the time.

To summarize the discussion of "equivalence value": in any particular instance of translation, value may be attached to equivalence at different ranks, different strata, different metafunctions. In rank, it is usually at the higher lexicogrammatical units that equivalence is most highly valued; lower units are then exempted (e.g. words can vary provided the clauses are kept constant). In strata, likewise, equivalence is typically most valued at the highest stratum within language itself, that of semantics (where again the lower strata may be allowed to vary); value may also attach explicitly to the level of context, especially when equivalence at lower strata is problematic. In metafunction, high value may be accorded to equivalence in the interpersonal or textual realms — but usually only when the ideational equivalence can be taken for granted (it is interesting to speculate on why this should be so).

If we now return to the two interpretations of "theory of translation" with which I started, these may seem a little less incommensurable. Let me express this as a characterization of the target language text (it could alternatively be expressed as a characteristic of the text pair). A "good" translation is a text which is a translation (i.e. is equivalent) in respect of those linguistic features which are most valued in the given translation context.

What this problematizes, of course, is the notion of value itself. I have been talking of the relative value that is accorded to translation equivalence at the various strata, ranks or metafunctions as outlined above. What I have left out of consideration is the value accorded to the (source language) text as a whole. Should a "great lyric poem" in the source language become a "great lyric poem" in the target? — in other words, what value is being assigned to the perceived quality of the original text? This is a question of the value that is being placed on value itself. And this constitutes one further variable for the translator, which we might need to add to the definition: ... and perhaps also in respect of the value which is assigned to the original (source language) text.

It also raises once more the second part of my analytic inquiry: why is the text evaluated as it is? If we can answer this, it may help us to decide,

when translating it, how much value to place on the factor of equivalence in value.

Notes

1. For a fuller exploration of "equivalence of contextual function", and related issues, see the chapters in the present volume by Erich Steiner and by Colin Yallop. Steiner draws on the notion of variation in explaining "identity" of texts in translation, and suggests that "For something to count as a translation, it need not have the same register features as its source text, but register features which function similarly to those of the original in their context of culture". Yallop defines equivalence as constructed out of "a rich diversity of similarities", and discusses the metaphors with which the concept of equivalence has been embellished. He stresses that there may in fact be no equivalence at the level of cultural context — a situation familiar to Bible translators, which Yallop illustrates by reference to the "translation" of *Alice in Wonderland* into Pitjantjatjara.

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What can linguistics learn from translation?

Michael Gregory

1. Prologue

I began the last, and only previous, piece I have written on translation, and that was nineteen years ago, with the disclaimer that I was not a translator, nor an expert on translation, but "a linguist, a philologist whose specialties are the description of present-day English, sociolinguistics and stylistics" (Gregory 1980: 45). That remains true today with the proviso that I have taught and written increasingly about linguistic theory since then. In that paper I was concerned with what help linguistics in the Firthian tradition might be in the practice and study of translation. So I started with some of Firth's own insights: that "the whole problem of translation is in the field of semantics" (Firth 1957: 32), and for Firth semantics was what linguistics was all about: "the disciplines and techniques of linguistics are directed to assist us in making statements of meaning" (Firth 1957: 191). He saw these statements as being dispersed throughout the different *modes* of description: the phonetic (including the phonoaesthetic), the phonological, the morphological, the syntactic, the collocational (or lexical) and the situational, and recognized that with some modes we might be facing meanings that are untranslatable (Firth 1957: 193). He also pointed out that it would pay to distinguish the kind of translation that is being called for, in his words "creative translations" (literary translations that aim to be works of art in the target language), "official" translation and machine translation; he saw a need for "the restriction of research in translation to the circumscribed fields of restricted languages" (Palmer ed. 1968: 91). Firth was at that time ahead of his time when, as regards machine translation his hunch was that the best progress would be made by the study of long units rather than the minimal segments favored by his transatlantic colleagues, and also by the examination of the mutual expectancy of words in cliches and high frequency collocations, particularly within restricted languages.

From Firth it was not too long a step to J. C. Catford's (1965) concise and lucid *A Linguistic Theory of Translation,* and his development of Firthian ideas on translation within the framework of scale and category linguistics and, very importantly, what is now called dialect and register (or diatype) theory, itself a sophistication and extension in many ways of Firth's concept of restricted language. So I spent much of the paper summarizing Catford's articulation of the concept of *translation equivalence*