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CENTRAL ISSUES

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The first step towards an examination of the processes of translation must be to accept that although translation has a central core of linguistic activity, it belongs most properly to *semiotics*, the science that studies sign systems or structures, sign processes and sign functions (Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, London 1977). Beyond the notion stressed by the narrowly linguistic approach, that translation involves the transfer of ‘meaning’ contained in one set of language signs into another set of language signs through competent use of the dictionary and grammar, the process involves a whole set of extra-linguistic criteria also.

Edward Sapir claims that ‘language is a guide to social reality’ and that human beings are at the mercy of the language that has become the medium of expression for their society. Experience, he asserts, is largely determined by the language habits of the community, and each separate structure represents a separate reality:

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.¹

Sapir’s thesis, endorsed later by Benjamin Lee Whorf, is related to the more recent view advanced by the Soviet semiotician, Yuri Lotman, that language is a *modelling system*. Lotman describes literature and art in general as *secondary modelling systems*, as an

indication of the fact that they are derived from the primary modelling system of language, and declares as firmly as Sapir or Whorf that ‘No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language.’² Language, then, is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy. In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril.

TYPES OF TRANSLATION

In his article ‘On Linguistic Aspects of Translation’, Roman Jakobson distinguishes three types of translation:³

- (1) Intralingual translation, or *rewording* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language).
- (2) Interlingual translation or *translation proper* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language).
- (3) Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems).

Having established these three types, of which (2) *translation proper* describes the process of transfer from SL to TL, Jakobson goes on immediately to point to the central problem in all types: that while messages may serve as adequate interpretations of code units or messages, there is ordinarily no full equivalence through translation. Even apparent synonymy does not yield equivalence, and Jakobson shows how intralingual translation often has to resort to a combination of code units in order to fully interpret the meaning of a single unit. Hence a dictionary of so-called synonyms may give *perfect* as a synonym for *ideal* or *vehicle* as a synonym for *conveyance* but in neither case can there be said to be complete equivalence, since each unit contains within itself a set of non-transferable associations and connotations.

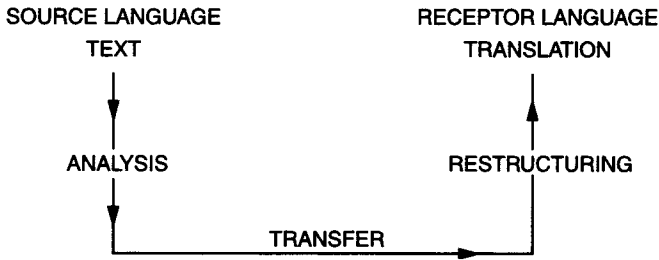
Because complete equivalence (in the sense of synonymy or sameness) cannot take place in any of his categories, Jakobson declares that all poetic art is therefore technically untranslatable:

Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition—from one poetic shape into another, or intralingual transposition—from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition—from one system of signs into another, e.g. from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting.

What Jakobson is saying here is taken up again by Georges Mounin, the French theorist, who perceives translation as a series of operations of which the starting point and the end product are *significations* and function within a given culture.⁴ So, for example, the English word *pastry*, if translated into Italian without regard for its signification, will not be able to perform its function of meaning within a sentence, even though there may be a dictionary ‘equivalent’; for *pasta* has a completely different associative field. In this case the translator has to resort to a combination of units in order to find an approximate equivalent. Jakobson gives the example of the Russian word *syr* (a food made of fermented pressed curds) which translates roughly into English as *cottage cheese*. In this case, Jakobson claims, the translation is only an adequate *interpretation* of an alien code unit and equivalence is impossible.

DECODING AND RECODING

The translator, therefore, operates criteria that transcend the purely linguistic, and a process of decoding and recoding takes place. Eugene Nida’s model of the translation process illustrates the stages involved:⁵



As examples of some of the complexities involved in the interlingual translation of what might seem to be uncontroversial items, consider the question of translating *yes* and *hello* into French, German and Italian. This task would seem, at first glance, to be straightforward, since all are Indo-European languages, closely related lexically and syntactically, and terms of greeting and assent are common to all three. For *yes* standard dictionaries give:

French: *oui, si*

German: *ja*

Italian: *si*

It is immediately obvious that the existence of two terms in French involves a usage that does not exist in the other languages. Further investigation shows that whilst *oui* is the generally used term, *si* is used specifically in cases of contradiction, contention and dissent. The English translator, therefore, must be mindful of this rule when translating the English word that remains the same in all contexts.

When the use of the affirmative in conversational speech is considered, another question arises. *Yes* cannot always be translated into the single words *oui, ja* or *si*, for French, German and Italian all frequently double or 'string' affirmatives in a way that is outside standard English procedures (e.g. *si, si, si; ja, ja*, etc). Hence the Italian or German translation of *yes* by a single word can, at times, appear excessively brusque, whilst the stringing together of affirmatives in English is so hyperbolic that it often creates a comic effect.

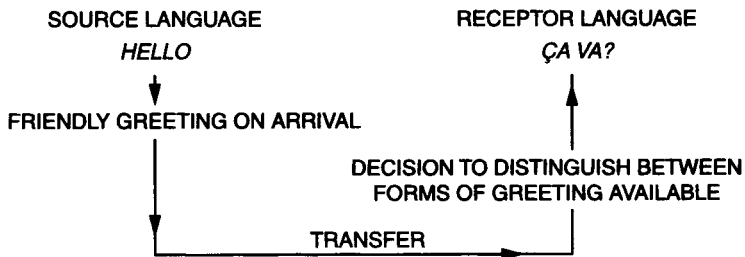
With the translation of the word *hello*, the standard English form of friendly greeting when meeting, the problems are multiplied. The dictionaries give:

French: *ça va?*; *hallo*

German: *wie geht's*; *hallo*

Italian: *olà*; *pronto*; *ciao*

Whilst English does not distinguish between the word used when greeting someone face to face and that used when answering the telephone, French, German and Italian all do make that distinction. The Italian *pronto* can only be used as a telephonic greeting, like the German *hallo*. Moreover, French and German use as forms of greeting brief rhetorical questions, whereas the same question in English *How are you?* or *How do you do?* is only used in more formal situations. The Italian *ciao*, by far the most common form of greeting in all sections of Italian society, is used equally on arrival and departure, being a word of greeting linked to a moment of contact between individuals either coming or going and not to the specific context of arrival or initial encounter. So, for example, the translator faced with the task of translating *hello* into French must first extract from the term a core of meaning and the stages of the process, following Nida's diagram, might look like this:



What has happened during the translation process is that the *notion of greeting* has been isolated and the word *hello* has been replaced by a phrase carrying the same notion. Jakobson would describe this as interlingual transposition, while Ludskanov would call it a *semiotic transformation*:

Semiotic transformations (Ts) are the replacements of the signs encoding a message by signs of another code, preserving (so far as possible in the face of entropy) invariant information with respect to a given system of reference.⁶

In the case of *yes* the invariant information is *affirmation*, whilst in the case of *hello* the invariant is the *notion of greeting*. But at the same time the translator has had to consider other criteria, e.g. the existence of the *oui/si* rule in French, the stylistic function of stringing affirmatives, the *social context of greeting*—whether telephonic or face to face, the class position and status of the speakers and the resultant *weight* of a colloquial greeting in different societies. All such factors are involved in the translation even of the most apparently straightforward word.

The question of semiotic transformation is further extended when considering the translation of a simple noun, such as the English *butter*. Following Saussure, the structural relationship between the signified (*signifié*) or concept of butter and the signifier (*signifiant*) or the sound-image made by the word *butter* constitutes the linguistic sign *butter*.⁷ And since language is perceived as a system of interdependent relations, it follows that *butter* operates within English as a noun in a particular structural relationship. But Saussure also distinguished between the syntagmatic (or horizontal) relations that a word has with the words that surround it in a sentence and the associative (or vertical) relations it has with the language structure as a whole. Moreover, within the secondary modelling system there is another type of associative relation and the translator, like the specialist in advertising techniques, must consider both the primary and secondary associative lines. For *butter* in British English carries with it a set of associations of whole-someness, purity and high status (in comparison to margarine, once perceived only as secondary butter though now marketed also as practical because it does not set hard under refrigeration).

When translating *butter* into Italian there is a straightforward word-for-word substitution: *butter*—*burro*. Both *butter* and *burro* describe the product made from milk and marketed as a creamy-coloured slab of edible grease for human consumption. And yet within

their separate cultural contexts *butter* and *burro* cannot be considered as signifying the same. In Italy, *burro*, normally light coloured and unsalted, is used primarily for cooking, and carries no associations of high status, whilst in Britain *butter*, most often bright yellow and salted, is used for spreading on bread and less frequently in cooking. Because of the high status of *butter*, the phrase *bread and butter* is the accepted usage even where the product used is actually margarine.⁸ So there is a distinction both between the objects signified by *butter* and *burro* and between the function and value of those objects in their cultural context. The problem of equivalence here involves the utilization and perception of the object in a given context. The *butter*—*burro* translation, whilst perfectly adequate on one level, also serves as a reminder of the validity of Sapir's statement that each language represents a separate reality.

The word *butter* describes a specifically identifiable product, but in the case of a word with a wider range of SL meanings the problems increase. Nida's diagrammatic sketch of the semantic structure of *spirit* (see p. 28) illustrates a more complex set of semantic relationships.⁹

Where there is such a rich set of semantic relationships as in this case, a word can be used in punning and word-play, a form of humour that operates by confusing or mixing the various meanings (e.g. the jokes about the drunken priest who has been communing too often with the 'holy spirit', etc.). The translator, then, must be concerned with the particular use of *spirit* in the sentence itself, in the sentence in its structural relation to other sentences, and in the overall textual and cultural contexts of the sentence. So, for example,

The spirit of the dead child rose from the grave

refers to 7 and not to any other of Nida's categories, whereas

The spirit of the house lived on

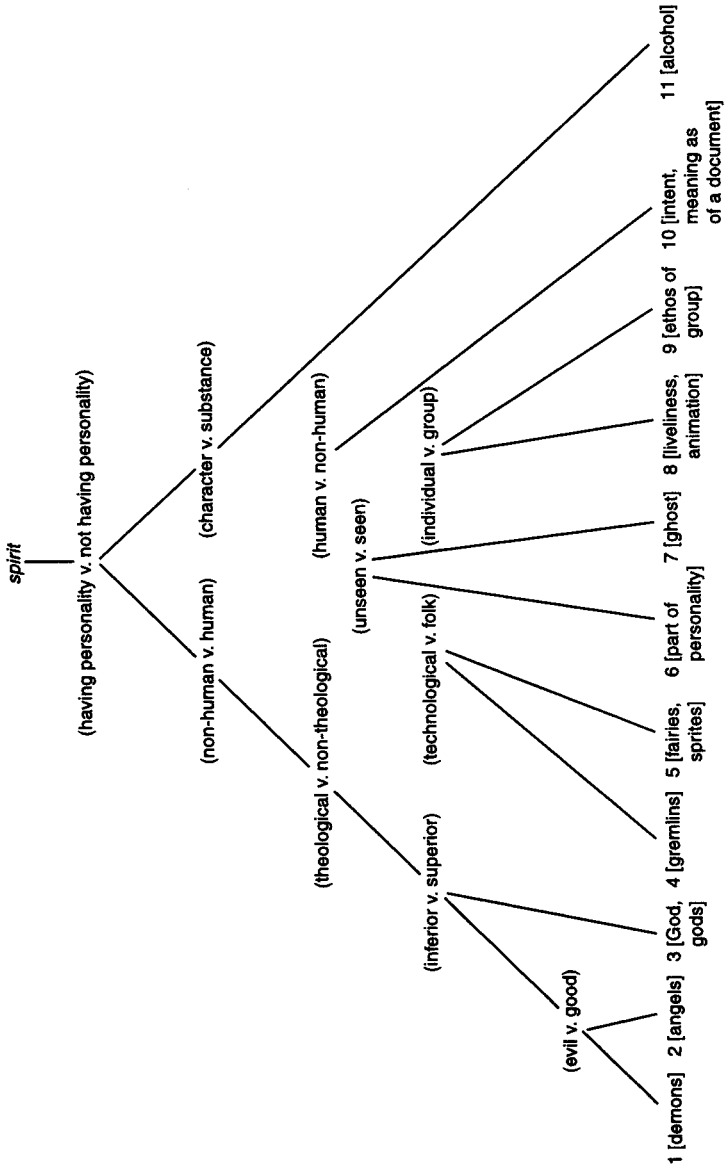
could refer to 5 or 7 or, used metaphorically, to 6 or 8 and the meaning can only be determined by the context.

Firth defines meaning as ‘a complex of relations of various kinds between the component terms of a context of situation’¹⁰ and cites the example of the English phrase *Say when*, where the words ‘mean’ what they ‘do’. In translating that phrase it is the function that will be taken up and not the words themselves, and the translation process involves a decision to replace and substitute the linguistic elements in the TL. And since the phrase is, as Firth points out, directly linked to English social behavioural patterns, the translator putting the phrase into French or German has to contend with the problem of the non-existence of a similar convention in either TL culture. Likewise, the English translator of the French *Bon appetit* has a similar problem, for again the utterance is situation-bound. As an example of the complexities involved here, let us take a hypothetical dramatic situation in which the phrase *Bon appetit* becomes especially significant:

A family group have been quarrelling bitterly, the unity of the family has collapsed, unforgivable things have been said. But the celebratory dinner to which they have all come is about to be served, and the family sit at the table in silence ready to eat. The plates are filled, everyone sits waiting, the father breaks the silence to wish them all ‘Bon appetit’ and the meal begins.

Whether the phrase is used mechanically, as part of the daily ritual, whether it is used ironically, sadly or even cruelly is not specified. On a stage, the actor and director would come to a decision about how to interpret the phrase based on their concept of characterization and of the overall meaning and structure of the play. The interpretation would be rendered through voice inflexion. But whatever the interpretation, the significance of the simple utterance cutting into a situation of great tension would remain.

The translator has to take the question of interpretation into account in addition to the problem of selecting a TL phrase which will have a roughly similar meaning. Exact translation is impossible: *Good appetite* in English used outside a structured sentence is meaningless. Nor is there any English phrase in general use that fulfils the same function as the French. There are, however, a series



of phrases that might be applicable in certain situations—the colloquial *Dig in* or *Tuck in*, the more formal *Do start*, or even the

ritualistically apologetic *I hope you like it*, or *I hope it's alright*. In determining what to use in English, the translator must:

- (1) Accept the untranslatability of the SL phrase in the TL on the linguistic level.
- (2) Accept the lack of a similar cultural convention in the TL.
- (3) Consider the range of TL phrases available, having regard to the presentation of class, status, age, sex of the speaker, his relationship to the listeners and the context of their meeting in the SL
- (4) Consider the significance of the phrase in its particular context—i.e. as a moment of high tension in the dramatic text.
- (5) Replace in the TL the invariant core of the SL phrase in its two referential systems (the particular system of the text and the system of culture out of which the text has sprung).

Levý, the great Czech translation scholar, insisted that any contracting or omitting of difficult expressions in translating was immoral. The translator, he believed, had the responsibility of finding a solution to the most daunting of problems, and he declared that the functional view must be adopted with regard not only to meaning but also to style and form. The wealth of studies on Bible translation and the documentation of the way in which individual translators of the Bible attempt to solve their problems through ingenious solutions is a particularly rich source of examples of semiotic transformation.

In translating *Bon appetit* in the scenario given above, the translator was able to extract a set of criteria from the text in order to determine what a suitable TL rendering might be, but clearly in a different context the TL phrase would alter. The emphasis always in translation is on the *reader* or listener, and the translator must tackle the SL text in such a way that the TL version will correspond to the SL version. The nature of that correspondence may vary considerably (see Section 3) but the principle remains constant. Hence Albrecht Neubert's view that Shakespeare's Sonnet 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' cannot be semantically translated into a language where summers are unpleasant is perfectly proper, just as the concept of God the Father cannot be translated into a

language where the deity is female. To attempt to impose the value system of the SL culture onto the TL culture is dangerous ground, and the translator should not be tempted by the school that pretends to determine the original *intentions* of an author on the basis of a self-contained text. The translator cannot *be* the author of the SL text, but as the author of the TL text has a clear moral responsibility to the TL readers.

PROBLEMS OF EQUIVALENCE

The translation of idioms takes us a stage further in considering the question of meaning and translation, for idioms, like puns, are culture bound. The Italian idiom *menare il can per l'aia* provides a good example of the kind of shift that takes place in the translation process.¹¹ Translated literally, the sentence

Giovanni sta menando il can per l'aia.

becomes

John is leading his dog around the threshing floor.

The image conjured up by this sentence is somewhat startling and, unless the context referred quite specifically to such a location, the sentence would seem obscure and virtually meaningless. The English idiom that most closely corresponds to the Italian is *to beat about the bush*, also obscure unless used idiomatically, and hence the sentence correctly translated becomes

John is beating about the bush.

Both English and Italian have corresponding idiomatic expressions that render the idea of prevarication, and so in the process of interlingual translation one idiom is substituted for another. That substitution is made not on the basis of the linguistic elements in the phrase, nor on the basis of a corresponding or similar image contained in the phrase, but on the function of the idiom. The SL phrase is replaced by a TL phrase that serves the same purpose in the

TL culture, and the process here involves the substitution of SL sign for TL sign. Dagut's remarks about the problems of translating metaphor are interesting when applied also to the problem of tackling idioms:

Since a metaphor in the SL is, by definition, a new piece of performance, a semantic novelty, it can clearly have no existing 'equivalence' in the TL: what is unique can have no counterpart. Here the translator's bilingual competence—'le sens', as Mallarmé put it 'de ce qui est dans la langue et de ce qui n'en est pas'—is of help to him only in the negative sense of telling him that any 'equivalence' in this case cannot be 'found' but will have to be 'created'. The crucial question that arises is thus whether a metaphor can, strictly speaking, be translated as such, or whether it can only be 'reproduced' in some way.¹²

But Dagut's distinction between 'translation' and 'reproduction', like Catford's distinction between 'literal' and 'free' translation¹³ does not take into account the view that sees translation as semiotic transformation. In his definition of translation equivalence, Popovič distinguishes four types:

- (1) *Linguistic equivalence*, where there is homogeneity on the linguistic level of both SL and TL texts, i.e. word for word translation.
- (2) *Paradigmatic equivalence*, where there is equivalence of 'the elements of a paradigmatic expressive axis', i.e. elements of grammar, which Popovič sees as being a higher category than lexical equivalence.
- (3) *Stylistic (translational) equivalence*, where there is 'functional equivalence of elements in both original and translation aiming at an expressive identity with an invariant of identical meaning'.
- (4) *Textual (syntagmatic) equivalence*, where there is equivalence of the syntagmatic structuring of a text, i.e. equivalence of form and shape.¹⁴

The case of the translation of the Italian idiom, therefore, involves the determining of stylistic equivalence which results in the substitution of the SL idiom by an idiom with an equivalent function in the TL.

Translation involves far more than replacement of lexical and grammatical items between languages and, as can be seen in the translation of idioms and metaphors, the process may involve discarding the basic linguistic elements of the SL text so as to achieve Popovič's goal of 'expressive identity' between the SL and TL texts. But once the translator moves away from close linguistic equivalence, the problems of determining the exact nature of the level of equivalence aimed for begin to emerge.

Albrecht Neubert, whose work on translation is unfortunately not available to English readers, distinguishes between the study of translation as a *process* and as a *product*. He states bluntly that: 'the "missing link" between both components of a complete theory of translations appears to be the theory of equivalence relations that can be conceived for both the dynamic and the static model.'¹⁵ The problem of equivalence, a much-used and abused term in Translation Studies, is of central importance, and although Neubert is right when he stresses the need for a theory of equivalence relations, Raymond van den Broeck is also right when he challenges the excessive use of the term in Translation Studies and claims that the precise definition of equivalence in mathematics is a serious obstacle to its use in translation theory.

Eugene Nida distinguishes two types of equivalence, *formal* and *dynamic*, where formal equivalence 'focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content. In such a translation one is concerned with such correspondences as poetry to poetry, sentence to sentence, and concept to concept.' Nida calls this type of translation a 'gloss translation', which aims to allow the reader to understand as much of the SL context as possible. *Dynamic equivalence* is based on the principle of *equivalent effect*, i.e. that the relationship between receiver and message should aim at being the same as that between the original receivers and the SL message. As an example of this type of equivalence, he quotes J.B. Phillips rendering of *Romans* 16:16, where the idea of 'greeting with a holy

kiss' is translated as 'give one another a hearty handshake all round'. With this example of what seems to be a piece of inadequate translation in poor taste, the weakness of Nida's loosely defined types can clearly be seen. The principle of *equivalent effect* which has enjoyed great popularity in certain cultures at certain times, involves us in areas of speculation and at times can lead to very dubious conclusions. So E.V.Rieu's deliberate decision to translate Homer into English prose because the significance of the epic form in Ancient Greece could be considered equivalent to the significance of prose in modern Europe, is a case of *dynamic equivalence* applied to the formal properties of a text which shows that Nida's categories can actually be in conflict with each other.

It is an established fact in Translation Studies that if a dozen translators tackle the same poem, they will produce a dozen different versions. And yet somewhere in those dozen versions there will be what Popovič calls the 'invariant core' of the original poem. This invariant core, he claims, is represented by stable, basic and constant semantic elements in the text, whose existence can be proved by experimental semantic condensation. Transformations, or variants, are those changes which do not modify the core of meaning but influence the expressive form. In short, the invariant can be defined as that which exists in common between all existing translations of a single work. So the invariant is part of a dynamic relationship and should not be confused with speculative arguments about the 'nature', the 'spirit' or 'soul' of the text; the 'indefinable quality' that translators are rarely supposed to be able to capture.

In trying to solve the problem of translation equivalence, Neubert postulates that from the point of view of a theory of texts, translation equivalence must be considered a *semiotic category*, comprising a *syntactic*, *semantic* and *pragmatic* component, following Peirce's categories.¹⁶ These components are arranged in a hierarchical relationship, where semantic equivalence takes priority over syntactic equivalence, and pragmatic equivalence conditions and modifies both the other elements. Equivalence overall results from the relation between signs themselves, the relationship between signs and what they stand for, and the relationship between signs, what they stand for and those who use them. So, for example, the

shock value of Italian or Spanish blasphemous expressions can only be rendered pragmatically in English by substituting expressions with sexual overtones to produce a comparable shock effect, e.g. *porca Madonna—fucking hell*.¹⁷ Similarly, the interaction between all three components determines the process of selection in the TL, as for example, in the case of letter-writing. The norms governing the writing of letters vary considerably from language to language and from period to period, even within Europe. Hence a woman writing to a friend in 1812 would no more have signed her letters *with love* or *in sisterhood* as a contemporary Englishwoman might, any more than an Italian would conclude letters without a series of formal greetings to the recipient of the letter and his relations. In both these cases, the letter-writing formulae and the obscenity, the translator decodes and attempts to encode pragmatically.

The question of defining equivalence is being pursued by two lines of development in Translation Studies. The first, rather predictably, lays an emphasis on the special problems of semantics and on the transfer of semantic content from SL to TL. With the second, which explores the question of equivalence of literary texts, the work of the Russian Formalists and the Prague Linguists, together with more recent developments in discourse analysis, have broadened the problem of equivalence in its application to the translation of such texts. James Holmes, for example, feels that the use of the term equivalence is 'perverse', since to ask for sameness is to ask too much, while Durišin argues that the translator of a literary text is not concerned with establishing equivalence of natural language but of artistic procedures. And those procedures cannot be considered in isolation, but must be located within the specific cultural—temporal context within which they are utilized.¹⁸

Let us take as an example, two advertisements in British Sunday newspaper colour supplements, one for Scotch whisky and one for Martini, where each product is being marketed to cater for a particular taste. The whisky market, older and more traditional than the Martini market, is catered to in advertising by an emphasis on the quality of the product, on the discerning taste of the buyer and on the social status the product will confer. Stress is also laid on the naturalness and high quality of the distilling process, on the purity of

Scottish water, and on the length of time the product has matured. The advertisement consists of a written text and a photograph of the product. Martini, on the other hand, is marketed to appeal to a different social group, one that has to be won over to the product which has appeared relatively recently. Accordingly, Martini is marketed for a younger outlook and lays less stress on the question of the quality of the product but much more on the fashionable status that it will confer. The photograph, accompanying the brief written text shows ‘beautiful people’ drinking Martini, members of the international jet set, who inhabit the fantasy world where everyone is supposedly rich and glamorous. These two types of advertisement have become so stereotyped in British culture that they are instantly recognizable and often parodied.

With the advertising of the same two products in an Italian weekly news magazine there is likewise a dual set of images—the one stressing purity, quality, social status; the other stressing glamour, excitement, trendy living and youth. But because Martini is long established and Scotch is a relatively new arrival on the mass market, the images presented with the products are exactly the reverse of the British ones. The same modes, but differently applied, are used in the advertising of these two products in two societies. The products may be the same in both societies, but they have different values. Hence Scotch in the British context may conceivably be defined as the equivalent of Martini in the Italian context, and vice versa, in so far as they are presented through advertising as serving equivalent social functions.

Mukařovský’s view that the literary text has both an autonomous and a communicative character has been taken up by Lotman, who argues that a text is *explicit* (it is expressed in definite signs), *limited* (it begins and ends at a given point), and it has *structure* as a result of internal organization. The signs of the text are in a relation of opposition to the signs and structures outside the text. A translator must therefore bear in mind both its autonomous and its communicative aspects and any theory of equivalence should take both elements into account.¹⁹

Equivalence in translation, then, should not be approached as a search for sameness, since sameness cannot even exist between two

TL versions of the same text, let alone between the SL and the TL version. Popović's four types offer a useful starting point and Neubert's three semiotic categories point the way towards an approach that perceives equivalence as a dialectic between the signs and the structures within and surrounding the SL and TL texts.

LOSS AND GAIN

Once the principle is accepted that sameness cannot exist between two languages, it becomes possible to approach the question of *loss and gain* in the translation process. It is again an indication of the low status of translation that so much time should have been spent on discussing what is lost in the transfer of a text from SL to TL whilst ignoring what can also be gained, for the translator can at times enrich or clarify the SL text as a direct result of the translation process. Moreover, what is often seen as 'lost' from the SL context may be replaced in the TL context, as in the case of Wyatt and Surrey's translations of Petrarch (see pp. 60–1; 105–10).

Eugene Nida is a rich source of information about the problems of loss in translation, in particular about the difficulties encountered by the translator when faced with terms or concepts in the SL that do not exist in the TL. He cites the case of Guaica, a language of southern Venezuela, where there is little trouble in finding satisfactory terms for the English *murder*, *stealing*, *lying*, etc., but where the terms for *good*, *bad*, *ugly* and *beautiful* cover a very different area of meaning. As an example, he points out that Guaica does not follow a dichotomous classification of *good* and *bad*, but a trichotomous one as follows:

- (1) *Good* includes desirable food, killing enemies, chewing dope in moderation, putting fire to one's wife to teach her to obey, and stealing from anyone not belonging to the same band.
- (2) *Bad* includes rotten fruit, any object with a blemish, murdering a person of the same band, stealing from a member of the extended family and lying to anyone.
- (3) *Violating taboo* includes incest, being too close to one's mother-in-law, a married woman's eating tapir before the birth of the first child, and a child's eating rodents.

Nor is it necessary to look so far beyond Europe for examples of this kind of differentiation. The large number of terms in Finnish for variations of snow, in Arabic for aspects of camel behaviour, in English for light and water, in French for types of bread, all present the translator with, on one level, an untranslatable problem. Bible translators have documented the additional difficulties involved in, for example, the concept of the Trinity or the social significance of the parables in certain cultures. In addition to the lexical problems, there are of course languages that do not have tense systems or concepts of time that in any way correspond to Indo-European systems. Whorf's comparison (which may not be reliable, but is cited here as a theoretical example) between a 'temporal language' (English) and a 'timeless language' (Hopi) serves to illustrate this aspect (see [Figure 1](#)).²⁰

UNTRANSLATABILITY

When such difficulties are encountered by the translator, the whole issue of the translatability of the text is raised. Catford distinguishes two types of *untranslatability*, which he terms *linguistic* and *cultural*. On the linguistic level, untranslatability occurs when there is no lexical or syntactical substitute in the TL for an SL item. So, for example, the German *Um wieviel Uhr darf man Sie morgen wecken?* or the Danish *Jeg fondt brevet* are linguistically untranslatable, because both sentences involve structures that do not exist in English. Yet both can be adequately translated into English once the rules of English structure are applied. A translator would unhesitatingly render the two sentences as *What time would you like to be woken tomorrow?* and *I found the letter*, restructuring the German word order and adjusting the position of the postpositive definite article in Danish to conform to English norms.

Catford's category of linguistic untranslatability, which is also proposed by Popovič, is straightforward, but his second category is more problematic. Linguistic untranslatability, he argues, is due to differences in the SL and the TL, whereas cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in the TL culture of a relevant situational feature for the SL text. He quotes the example of the different concepts of the term *bathroom* in an English, Finnish or Japanese















OBJECTIVE FIELD	SPEAKER (SENDER)	HEARER (RECEIVER)	HANDLING OF TOPIC. RUNNING OF THIRD PERSON
SITUATION 1a 			ENGLISH... 'HE IS RUNNING' HOPI..... 'WARI' (RUNNING. STATEMENT OF FACT)
SITUATION 1b OBJECTIVE FIELD BLANK DEVOID OF RUNNING			ENGLISH... 'HE RAN' HOPI..... 'WARI' (RUNNING. STATEMENT OF FACT)
SITUATION 2 			ENGLISH... 'HE IS RUNNING' HOPI..... 'WARI' (RUNNING. STATEMENT OF FACT)
SITUATION 3 OBJECTIVE FIELD BLANK			ENGLISH... 'HE RAN' HOPI..... 'ERA WARI' (RUNNING. STATEMENT OF FACT FROM MEMORY)
SITUATION 4 OBJECTIVE FIELD BLANK			ENGLISH... 'HE WILL RUN' HOPI..... 'WARIKNI' (RUNNING. STATEMENT OF EXPECTATION)
SITUATION 5 OBJECTIVE FIELD BLANK			ENGLISH... 'HE RUNS' (E.G. ON THE TRACK TEAM) HOPI..... 'WARIKNGWE' (RUNNING. STATEMENT OF LAW)

Figure 1 Whorf's comparison between temporal and timeless languages

context, where both the object and the use made of that object are not at all alike. But Catford also claims that more abstract lexical items such as the English term *home* or *democracy* cannot be described as untranslatable, and argues that the English phrases *I'm going home*, or *He's at home* can 'readily be provided with translation equivalents in most languages' whilst the term *democracy* is international.

Now on one level, Catford is right. The English phrases can be translated into most European languages and *democracy* is an internationally used term. But he fails to take into account two significant factors, and this seems to typify the problem of an overly narrow approach to the question of untranslatability. If *I'm going home* is translated as *Je vais chez moi*, the content meaning of the SL sentence (i.e. self-assertive statement of intention to proceed to place of residence and/or origin) is only loosely reproduced. And if, for example, the phrase is spoken by an American resident temporarily in London, it could either imply a return to the immediate 'home' or

a return across the Atlantic, depending on the context in which it is used, a distinction that would have to be spelled out in French. Moreover the English term *home*, like the French *foyer*, has a range of associative meanings that are not translated by the more restricted phrase *chez moi*. *Home*, therefore, would appear to present exactly the same range of problems as the Finnish or Japanese *bathroom*.

With the translation of *democracy*, further complexities arise. Catford feels that the term is largely present in the lexis of many languages and, although it may be relatable to different political situations, the context will guide the reader to select the appropriate situational features. The problem here is that the reader will have a concept of the term based on his or her own cultural context, and will apply that particularized view accordingly. Hence the difference between the adjective *democratic* as it appears in the following three phrases is fundamental to three totally different political concepts:

- the American Democratic Party
- the German Democratic Republic
- the democratic wing of the British Conservative Party.

So although the term is international, its usage in different contexts shows that there is no longer (if indeed there ever was) any common ground from which to select relevant situational features. If culture is perceived as dynamic, then the terminology of social structuring must be dynamic also. Lotman points out that the semiotic study of culture not only considers culture functioning as a system of signs, but emphasizes that 'the *very relation of culture to the sign and to signification* comprises one of its basic typological features.'²¹ Catford starts from different premises, and because he does not go far enough in considering the dynamic nature of language and culture, he invalidates his own category of *cultural untranslatability*. In so far as language is the primary modelling system within a culture, cultural untranslatability must be *de facto* implied in any process of translation.

Darbelnet and Vinay, in their useful book *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais* (A Comparative French—English Stylistics),²² have analysed in detail points of linguistic difference between the two languages, differences that constitute areas where

translation is impossible. But once again it is Popovič who has attempted to define untranslatability without making a separation between the linguistic and the cultural. Popovič also distinguishes two types. The first is defined as

A situation in which the linguistic elements of the original cannot be replaced adequately in structural, linear, functional or semantic terms in consequence of a lack of denotation or connotation.

The second type goes beyond the purely linguistic:

A situation where the relation of expressing the meaning, i.e. the relation between the creative subject and its linguistic expression in the original does not find an adequate linguistic expression in the translation.

The first type may be seen as parallel to Catford's category of linguistic untranslatability, while into this second type come phrases such as *Bon appetit* or the interesting series of everyday phrases in Danish for expressing thanks. Bredsdorf's Danish grammar for English readers gives elaborate details of the contextual use of such expressions. The explanation of the phrase *Tak for mad*, for example states that 'there is no English equivalent of this expression used to a host or hostess by the guests or members of the household after a meal.'

A slightly more difficult example is the case of the Italian *tamponamento* in the sentence *C'è stato un tamponamento*.

Since English and Italian are sufficiently close to follow a loosely approximate pattern of sentence organization with regard to component parts and word order, the sentence appears fully translatable. The conceptual level is also translatable: an event occurring in time past is being reported in time present. The difficulty concerns the translation of the Italian noun, which emerges in English as a noun phrase. The TL version, allowing for the variance in English and Italian syntax, is

There has been/there was a slight accident (involving a vehicle).

Because of the differences in tense-usage, the TL sentence may take one of two forms depending on the context of the sentence, and because of the length of the noun phrase, this can also be cut down, provided the nature of the accident can be determined outside the sentence by the receiver. But when the significance of *tomponamento* is considered vis-à-vis Italian society as a whole, the term cannot be fully understood without some knowledge of Italian driving habits, the frequency with which 'slight accidents' occur and the weighting and relevance of such incidents when they do occur. In short, *tomponamento* is a sign that has a culture-bound or context meaning, which cannot be translated even by an explanatory phrase. The relation between the creative subject and its linguistic expression cannot therefore be adequately replaced in the translation.

Popovič's second type, like Catford's secondary category, illustrates the difficulties of describing and defining the limits of translatability, but whilst Catford starts from within linguistics, Popovič starts from a position that involves a theory of literary communication. Boguslav Lawendowski, in an article in which he attempts to sum up the state of translation studies and semiotics, feels that Catford is 'divorced from reality',²³ while Georges Mounin feels that too much attention has been given to the problem of untranslatability at the expense of solving some of the actual problems that the translator has to deal with.

Mounin acknowledges the great benefits that advances in linguistics have brought to Translation Studies; the development of structural linguistics, the work of Saussure, of Hjelmslev, of the Moscow and Prague Linguistic Circles has been of great value, and the work of Chomsky and the transformational linguists has also had its impact, particularly with regard to the study of semantics. Mounin feels that it is thanks to developments in contemporary linguistics that we can (and must) accept that:

- (1) Personal experience in its uniqueness is untranslatable.
- (2) In theory the base units of any two languages (e.g. phonemes, monemes, etc.) are not always comparable.

- (3) Communication is possible when account is taken of the respective situations of speaker and hearer, or author and translator.

In other words, Mounin believes that linguistics demonstrates that translation is a dialectic process that can be accomplished with relative success:

Translation may always start with the clearest situations, the most concrete messages, the most elementary universals. But as it involves the consideration of a language in its entirety, together with its most subjective messages, through an examination of common situations and a multiplication of contacts that need clarifying, then there is no doubt that communication through translation can never be completely finished, which also demonstrates that it is never wholly impossible either.²⁴

As has already been suggested, it is clearly the task of the translator to find a solution to even the most daunting of problems. Such solutions may vary enormously; the translator's decision as to what constitutes invariant information with respect to a given system of reference is in itself a creative act. Levý stresses the intuitive element in translating:

As in all semiotic processes, translation has its *Pragmatic dimension* as well. Translation theory tends to be normative, to instruct translators on the OPTIMAL solution; actual translation work, however, is pragmatic; the translator resolves for that one of the possible solutions which promises a maximum of effect with a minimum of effort. That is to say, he intuitively resolves for the so-called MINIMAX STRATEGY.²⁵

SCIENCE OR 'SECONDARY ACTIVITY'?

The purpose of translation theory, then, is to reach an understanding of the processes undertaken in the act of translation and, not, as is so

commonly misunderstood, to provide a set of norms for effecting the perfect translation. In the same way, literary criticism does not seek to provide a set of instructions for producing the ultimate poem or novel, but rather to understand the internal and external structures operating within and around a work of art. The pragmatic dimension of translation cannot be categorized, any more than the ‘inspiration’ of a text can be defined and prescribed. Once this point is accepted, two issues that continue to bedevil Translation Studies can be satisfactorily resolved; the problem of whether there can be ‘a science of translation’ and whether translating is a ‘secondary activity’.

From the above discussion, it would seem quite clear that any debate about the existence of a science of translation is out of date: there already exists, with Translation Studies, a serious discipline investigating the process of translation, attempting to clarify the question of *equivalence* and to examine what constitutes *meaning* within that process. But nowhere is there a theory that pretends to be normative, and although Lefevere’s statement about the goal of the discipline (see p. 16) suggests that a comprehensive theory might also be used as a *guideline* for producing translations, this is a long way from suggesting that the purpose of translation theory is to be proscriptive.

The myth of translation as a secondary activity with all the associations of lower status implied in that assessment, can be dispelled once the extent of the pragmatic element of translation is accepted, and once the relationship between author/translator/reader is outlined. A diagram of the communicative relationship in the process of translation shows that the translator is both receiver and emitter, the end and the beginning of two separate but linked chains of communication:

Author—Text—Receiver=Translator—Text—Receiver

Translation Studies, then, has moved beyond the old distinctions that sought to devalue the study and practice of translation by the use of such terminological distinctions as ‘scientific v. creative’. Theory and practice are indissolubly linked, and are not in conflict. Understanding of the processes can only help in the production and,

since the product is the result of a complex system of decoding and encoding on the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic levels, it should not be evaluated according to an outdated hierarchical interpretation of what constitutes 'creativity'.

The case for Translation Studies and for translation itself is summed up by Octavio Paz in his short work on translation. All texts, he claims, being part of a literary system descended from and related to other systems, are 'translations of translation of translations':

Every text is unique and, at the same time, it is the translation of another text. No text is entirely original because language itself, in its essence, is already a translation: firstly, of the non-verbal world and secondly, since every sign and every phrase is the translation of another sign and another phrase. However, this argument can be turned around without losing any of its validity: all texts are original because every translation is distinctive. Every translation, up to a certain point, is an invention and as such it constitutes a unique text.²⁶