



THEORIES OF TRANSLATION

Eugene A. Nida



In developing a theory of translation there are so often a number of wrong concepts that constitute problems for the study of interlingual communication: first, the idea that translation is a science and second, the assumption that translating depends on a theory of language that includes all classes of texts, audiences, and circumstances of use. Translating is not a separate science, but it often does represent specialized skills and can also require aesthetic sensitivity. Skilled translators must have a special capacity for sensing the closest natural equivalent of a text, whether oral or written. But translating is essentially a skill and depends largely on a series of disciplines, for example, linguistics, cultural anthropology, philology, psychology, and theories of communication. In contrast with the various sciences, such as physics, chemistry, and biology, translation is an activity that all bilingual people can engage in without special studies of technical procedures. As efficient bilinguals they quickly sense the degrees of equivalence in comparable texts.

In the future we may be able to speak more scientifically about translating when we know more about the ways in which the brain manipulates information and transfers concepts from one language to another. Without such information about neural processes we cannot really understand what takes place in our brains. Some persons, however, seem to be unusually skilled in manipulating words, phrases, and clauses. In a technical sense a fully adequate theory of translation would consist of a group of general and coherent principles in matching the semantic contents of verbal utterances. The best translators do not spend years memorizing sets of related meanings, but they have incredibly alert sensitivity to the meanings of corresponding

expressions in two or more languages. On one occasion I asked the director of a famous school of translating in Europe to tell me how many really outstanding translators he had helped to train during the twenty-five years in which he had directed a school of translating, but he immediately replied that their famous school had not trained any highly creative translators. Such persons seem to be born with such skills of linguistic and behavioral equivalence.

The basic problem of formulating an adequate theory of translation is the fact that translation actually takes place in our brains, and we do not know precisely what actually happens. How is it that children of only five years of age can often interpret very effectively when scholars of fifty years often have great difficulties. In many cases people who have never studied the principles of translation turn out to be much more effective translators than those who may have studied translation in some school designed specifically for helping people recognize linguistic and cultural parallels and contrasts. In fact, our ignorance about linguistic and cultural equivalences or parallels is much greater than we like to admit. Unfortunately, most of the books about translating are written by persons whose range of experience is largely academic. Would we learn more about interlingual communication if we studied responses of children who apparently translate without thinking? Perhaps the following set of principles can help new translators know how they can best initiate themselves into the principles and procedures of translation.

1. A language is a series of verbal habits that represent aspects of a culture. No one speaker possesses a complete inventory of the signs and the structures of a living language, but the society of speakers collectively

possesses a language and can accordingly change the forms. But persons who wish to use the language of a different language community must learn how to use the words in a culturally acceptable manner.

Persons living separated from one another cannot preserve a language because languages are essentially interactive. For example, Negro slaves that fled from the Caribbean to the coast of Honduras had to learn the language of the Miskito Indians on the coast. But assimilation was so extensive that most of the local people along the coast of Honduras are now Miskitos in language, but Negroes in physical appearance.

2. The meaning of a verbal symbol is defined indirectly by all contrastive symbols. For example, the meaning of traffic symbols is defined by all the other symbols referring to the movement of vehicles on streets. Accordingly, it is not possible to have an absolute set of definitions. For example, in English the diverse uses of *whisper* can be analyzed syntagmatically in such expressions as *they whispered in class*, *a whisper campaign*, *a stage whisper*, *the breeze whispered through the trees*. In the first example there is every reason to assume that there was no voicing by the vocal chords, while in the following two expressions there would have generally been some voicing, and in the last example the voicing would not be the result of vocal chords vibrating.

3. Within any symbolic system the context normally contains more information than any focal term. This means that the different contexts are maximized and the functions of specific terms are minimized. The functions of the verbal contexts are evident in the various uses of the verb *run* in English, for example, *the man ran fast*, *the crab ran up the beach*, *the snake ran across the lawn*, *his heart is running*, *the bus runs between Madrid and Barcelona*, *the line ran off the page*, *the play ran for three weeks*, *he is running for mayor of town*, *his stocking is running*, *the well ran dry*.

The traditional manner of speaking about such differences in meaning is (1) to assign a series of meanings to a word such as *run* and then look to the contexts for the correct meaning in each instance or (2) to choose a basic typical meaning and to derive the extensions of meaning from each context.

But definitions of meaning are not easy to formulate, especially if one tries to combine a number of meanings into a single set of related usages. For example, one can define the prototypical meaning of *run* as rapid movement in space by means of feet that alternatively touch the supporting surface. But this does

not help to understand such expressions as *the well ran dry* or *he ran for mayor*. Much of the semantic role of language is arbitrary and highly specialized in objects, activities, states, and purposes.

The acceptance of this type of semantic analysis by means of contexts is confirmed in large measure by a number of dictionaries produced for the European Community, but the specific applicability to texts is not too encouraging. For example, in the Spanish dictionary entitled *El inglés jurídico* only an average of 12 out of 85 expressions are symbolized by a single term. Unfortunately, too high a proportion of verbal meanings have to be understood in terms of 5 to 9 words. This should not be surprising, since so many specific objects, activities and states require defining phrases consisting of series of words and not single terms.

4. There are no complete synonyms within a language or between different languages, but such a statement seems evidently incorrect because almost all dictionaries have extensive lists of synonyms, for example, sets such as *rich/wealthy* and *run/race*. But such sets of synonyms are normally limited to a restricted set of contexts. In English it is easy to speak of the same person as a *rich man* or a *wealthy man* but this measure of similarity in meaning does not extend to such phrases as *rich experience* and *wealthy experience*. Even the synonymous phrases *they raced around the track* and *they ran around the track* almost always suggest a distinction in competition.

Many persons insist that the Spanish phrase *cooperación económica* and the English phrase *economic cooperation* have exactly the same meaning, but in Latin America *cooperación económica* is generally understood as implying financial help, frequently with no suggestion of paying back the loan.

5. All languages and cultures are continually in the process of change, and such changes occur on all levels of structure. The English phrase *merry Mary married* previously had three distinctive front vowels in the first syllables of the three words, but the leveling of this distinctiveness in the western part of the United States and the spread of the loss of this distinctiveness in the Eastern part of the United States is further evidence of the linguistic strength of certain features of the phonological usage in American English dialects. But there are also a number of significant changes in grammatical usage. For example, as Charles Fries has pointed out, American English normally employed an expression such as *the boss told you and me to finish by noon*

but increasingly speakers of American English use *the boss told you and I to finish by noon*.

6. On all levels of American English, from sounds to discourse, important changes are occurring, but most speakers are largely unaware of what is happening. The standard orthography of English largely disguises these differences, as in *beat, bit, bait, bet, bat, bot* (a kind of fly), *bought, but, boat, put, boot*. The majority of these subtle differences are lost in rapid speech. Furthermore, failure to distinguish contrasts in the pronunciation of word final consonants is widespread, for example, in the series *cab/cap, kid/kit, pig/pick*.

In many instances the meaning of words does not depend on grammatical contexts but on the practical contexts of the communication. For example, the English word *stock* may refer to a number of distinct objects, for example, cattle, traded shares, supplies in a warehouse, and plants.

The meaning of such a word in a particular context may depend on a local usage, for example, *sack* or *poke* (a distinction made in the south part of the United States). Compare also *jacket* and *blazer*.

Differences in texts often suggest distinct social levels in the use of language, for example, *extermination, liquidation, ethnic cleansing*. Unfortunately some people assume that if the style of a text does not reach a relatively high level of vocabulary and grammar it cannot be scholarly or true. Such persons often insist on *Whom did you see?* rather than *Who did you see?* Or *Each student must turn in their term papers by Monday* in place of *Each student must turn in his or her term papers by Monday*.

It is not always easy to distinguish stylistic classes of texts, for example, poetic prose, free prose, conversation, interview, novels, and stories. But in some languages in the Orient professional writers think that they can come closer to a general audience by not adhering closely to a particular style of language.

7. One important aspect of languages and cultures is the fact that stylistic models have a very important role in communication, and proper adherence to such models is imperative, but highly creative writing is not always controlled by fixed rules. In fact, creative verbal communication needs elastic rules. Creative writers constantly violate rigid traditions in order to attract attention and to increase the impact of what they want to communicate.

In the United States people who work in drug stores are usually warned about promoting some

particular local doctor, but to new arrivals in a community they can explain that they are not permitted to promote the excellencies of particular doctors, but they can let people know the doctor to whom they normally go.

8. For translators and interpreters probably the most important part of their training is the thorough knowledge of different referential classes: entities (people, stars, mountains, rivers, plants), activities (think, speak, walk, swim, dance), states (dead, alive, tired, happy), processes (die, sicken, degenerate, improve), characteristics (large, small, attractive), and relationals (and, or, nevertheless, but),.... Some words, however, belong to more than one referential class. For example, in the phrase *a good dancer* the qualifier *good* refers to the capacity to dance well and not to any reference to cultural acceptability. Some words, however, function primarily to relate words to other words, for example, *and, but, nevertheless, if, although, in order to, so that*.

9. Some universal models of discourse are very important for translators and interpreters. The four most important classes of discourse are narration, description, argumentation, and conversation. Narration includes novels, stories, personal experiences, history, biography, while description describes the features of complex entities or events, and argumentation is primarily a collection of reasons for or against some development, while conversation is clearly the least regulated. Conversations by politicians can be exceptionally complex because no one knows the rules and each participant is usually seeking his or her personal advantage.

The purpose of a text may be described in terms of impact (relevance, novelty, and clarity), attraction (unity, totality, appropriateness, and circumstances of the communication), and esthetic factors (order, parallelism, figurative expression, rhythm, and balance). A number of people have attempted to define a theory of translation that would include all the differences of texts, diverse historical and cultural contexts, and distinct classes of receptors. But no description of the processes of translation has had the acceptance of the majority of translators.

One difficulty for the presentation of a theory of translation is the fact that all languages reflect the culture of which they form a part. Before establishing a general theory of translating, it will be necessary to have a generally acceptable theory of culture, and such is much more difficult than setting up a standard theory of language. Both culture and language are symbolic

systems, but whereas language consists only in verbal symbols, culture includes all kinds of beliefs and practices.

Nevertheless, it is important to mention the ways in which diverse authors have described the processes of translation as a way of helping translators do their work. But such helps represent a wide range of activity and quite different justifications for processes and principles of translation. These principles of communication include philology, linguistics, the theory of communication and sociolinguistics.

Since the time of Saint Jerome, who had to defend his Latin translation of the Bible, the principles of translation have focused primarily on literary texts, possibly because these appeared to be the only texts worthy of being translated. Luther also made an important contribution to the theory and practice of translation, but principally through his own translation of the Bible. Many other scholars have, however, written extensively about translating, for example, Alexander Frazer Tytler, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Ezra Pound, I. A. Richards, Brower, Quine, Andre Fodorov, G. Mounin (for this and additional authors, see the bibliography), Meschonnic, George Steiner, and G. Toury.

Walter Benjamin is often cited because of his insistence that formal equivalence is necessary, but his suggesting communication by means of meta-texts has not met with significant approval. Other important translators include Mary Snell Hornby, who urged that translating be considered an independent discipline, and Ernst-August Gutt has advocated relevance theory. Ladmiraal has focused on sociolinguistic factors, while Osgood has called attention to universal psycholinguistic factors. Osgood has contributed insights in the area of psycholinguistics, and Miguel Ángel Vega is the editor of classic texts on translating.

Catford writes about a functional orientation, and Malone has followed transformational linguistics, basically a form of sociolinguistics. At the same time Nida has employed comparative linguistics to gain insight concerning rare linguistic choices. See also Vinay and Darbelnay for their comparative studies of English and French.

The theory of communication has also introduced different perspectives and has emphasized such factors as means of communication, types of messages, receptors, noise, and circumstances of communication. But the principles of translation more widely employed focus on sociolinguistic factors presented by Maurice Pergnier, because we essentially exist in a multiple world of communication and we need theories that will make our world linguistically and culturally understandable.

BIBLIOGRAFÍA

- BENJAMIN, Walter. *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*. Introduction to his translation of Charles Baudelaire. Heidelberg, Tableaux, 1923.
- CATFORD, J. C. *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*. Oxford. OUP, 1965.
- GUTT, Ernst-August. *Translation and Relevance*. Oxford, Basel/Blackwell, 1991.
- LADMIRAL, J. R. *Traduire. Théorèmes pour la traduction*. Paris, Payot, 1979.
- MALONE. *The Science of Linguistics in the Art of Translation*. New York, Albany State University of New York, 1988.
- MOUNIN, G. *Los problemas teóricos de la traducción*. Madrid, Gredos, 1971
- NIDA, Eugene A. *Toward a Science of Translating*. Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1964.
- OSGOOD, C. «Language universals and psycholinguistics». En J. H. GREENBERG (ed.). *Universals of Language*. Cambridge, MIT, 1963.
- SNELL-HORNBY, Marym *Translation Studies, An Integrated Approach*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1988.
- TOURY, G. *In Search of a Theory of Translation*. Tel Aviv, Porter Institute of Poetics and Semantics, 1980.
- VEGA, Miguel Ángel (ed.). *Textos Clásicos de la Teoría de la traducción*. Madrid, Cátedra, 1994.
- VINAY, J. P. and DARBELNET, J. *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*. Paris, Didier, 1958.



RESUMEN

Teorías de la Traducción

Partiendo de una serie de errores que existen sobre la disciplina y teniendo en cuenta que la traducción consiste en un ejercicio que cualquier persona que conozca los idiomas puede llevar a cabo, el autor señala un conjunto de varios principios que pueden ayudar a los traductores en el desempeño de su trabajo. Ante la dificultad de establecer una única teoría general de la traducción, estos principios señalados dan forma a las diferentes teorías de la traducción existentes, y que nunca pueden distanciarse excesivamente de las propias culturas y sociedades en que se lleva a cabo la traducción.

En la versión electrónica de *Pliegos de Yuste* (<http://www.pliegosdeyuste.com>) se hallará la versión castellana de este artículo.