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Points of Inquiry into Total Translation
A Review of J. C. Catford's *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*

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POINTS FOR INQUIRY INTO TOTAL TRANSLATION
A REVIEW OF J.C. CATFORD'S *A LINGUISTIC THEORY OF TRANSLATION**

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What benefits are we to derive from this "theory of translation which may be drawn upon in any discussion of particular translation problems" (p. vii) ? More specifically, how does this widely read and often quoted publication of fifteen years relate to student translators today ?

A thorough review of the work must address itself to either the linguistic theory expounded, or its relevance to the theory of translation, i.e., the reformulation of a message in an other language by a human being. In relation to the latter, it may be said that the difficulty with Professor Catford's handbook stems from his comparative approach to languages. Hence the preoccupation with "restricted translation", including phonological, graphological and grammatical translation as well as transliteration (Chapter 8-11, pp. 56-72). Not that these exercises cannot serve a purpose, but rather that they are best used as a "measure of typological difference between languages" (p. 33). In effect, too much of what is said deals with what translation is not. There is, however, no definitive theory of translation and a critical review of this manual allows one to raise several points for enquiry.

TRANSLATION/RESTRICTED TRANSLATION

The first point to be made is that, for the translator, the only type of translation that counts is ' total translation'. Word-for-word and literal translation, — duly recognized by Catford as cruder attempts such as those provided by early machines, — unfortunately amount to little more than replacements of a ' stretch of language' by another :

« SL text   It's raining cats and dogs.
   TL text 1. *Il est pleuvant chats et chiens.* (Word-for-word)
            2. *Il pleut des chats et des chiens.* (Literal)
            3. *Il pleut à verse.* (Free) » (pp. 24-25)

For analytical purposes exercises of this type can be useful but, to paraphrase the author, this is the realm of comparative linguistics.

Unfortunately, translation is still too often equated to comparative *a posteriori* study of idiomatic expressions. While such feed-back is useful in teaching, one may question its equation to translation theory. In Catford's terminology, it is the study of « rank-bound » attempts at translation (1 & 2 above) in comparison to total, unbounded ' free' translation.

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* CATFORD, J.C. (1965) : *A Linguistic Theory of Translation,* London, Oxford University Press, 103 p.

Catford's approach, however, does not allow him to divest himself of this preoccupation for grammar.

> It is clear that formal correspondence can be only approximate... Thus, if we find that two languages operate each with grammatical units at five ranks (...) we can reasonably say that there is formal correspondence between the two hierarchies of units... (p. 32)

It is this same logic, based, I suspect, on the premise that form equals substance, which leads him to conclude that transference of meaning from one language to another is untenable because "meaning is a property of language (...) A Russian text has a Russian meaning (...) and an equivalent English text has an English meaning..." (p. 35)

This concept appears rooted in the general linguistic theory subscribed to by Catford :

> Language is patterned behaviour. It is indeed the pattern which is the language. (...) in each case, the situational features which lead to ' the same' utterance conform to the same general pattern. (p. 2)

This is what renders his discussion of "Meaning and Total Translation" (ch. 5, pp. 35-42) so painful for the translator who has realized that language is the support both distinguishable and distinct from the message which is the object of the act of translation and which must be translated, "since all cognitive experience (...) is conveyable in any existing language" (Jakobson 1966 : 238).

If I may take the liberty to adapt the author's example to French, rather than Russian which I do not speak, we will consider one of his assertions more closely.

"I have arrived." — « Je suis arrivée. » (p. 37-ff.)

The problem as posed by Catford boils down to :

  a) Is "I" a woman ?
     but,
  b) The English does not specify the gender.

Or, more academically :

> ...only very few features of the situation are linguistically relevant ; that is to say, are built into the contextual meaning of the text and its parts. (p. 38)

Granted. But, even if the pattern is the language, is the language *per se* the message ? Does it not simply convey messages which are, first and foremost, speech acts, the very one Vinay and Darbelnet recognized as the objects of translation ago (Vinay 1958 : 30-31)[1] ?

LANGUAGE/SPEECH ACT

At all events, even if one assumed along with Catford that the sentence should be the proper rank (p. 49) at which to undertake a translation, I very much fear that the problem lies with the ' messages' he is examining : dessicated speech acts (if they ever at all existed as actual speech acts). Quoted out of context, his examples have no actuality and remain virtually inert. In other words, they are the potentially charged physical supports of potential messages, stretches of language. If ever it lived, that type of sen-

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1.   Although, regrettably, they did not pursue this vein, probably because they were responding to the pressing *language* problems of their students. Had they further pursued the Saussurian dichotomy, comparative stylistics would very likely have remained squarely in the realm of language, and translation would have been clearly identified with the speech act.)

tence *qua* message is dead, though if survives in language out of situation, as a shadow of itself. No amount of analysis is likely to permit reconstruction of the actual situational meaning of a sentence such as, "He ran quickly." Although it may serve to elucidate meaning as it relates to grammar.

Where meaning is concerned, Catford states : "We cannot say that English *yes* ' means the same' as (...) French *oui...*"

Apparently, that assumption would imply that,

> there is a one-to-one relationship between English and (French) (...) or that there is some pre-existent ' message' with an independent meaning of its own which can be expounded now in one ' code' (...) now in another... But this ignores the fact that each ' code' (i.e., each language) carries its own particular meaning... (p. 41)

The objection cannot be dismissed summarily. On the other hand, some people claim the opposite, for example, Seleskovitch (1976 : 64-65) goes so far as to state :

> *le sens est un vouloir dire extérieur à la langue (antérieur à l'expression chez le sujet parlant, postérieur à la réception du discours chez le sujet percevant) que l'émission de ce sens nécessite l'association d'une idée non verbale à l'indication sémiotique...*

A premise whereby concepts are granted life beyond words although "signs" are used to communicate them. As Jakobson (1966 : 238) noted, translators at least since Dionysius the Areopagite and Saint Constantine have "called for chief attention to the cognitive values and not the words themselves". Moreover, if each language had its own meaning, I would *mean* something other than "yes" when I say "*oui*". Insofar as one-to-one relationship between messages in different languages is concerned, I do not see why it just could not happen that a one-word speech act sentence (Yes.) could not cover the same ground as another (*Oui.*), if the utterance is a speech act, and if the participants in that conversation have applied the "bio-socio-physical" analyses comprehension of a message requires in a situation of language communication. Indeed, the same analysis applies to intranlingual communication : "yes = yes". Although the *oui* in my dictionary is virtually inert since it belongs to the language, not to a speech act.

KNOWING THE LANGUAGES

The next point I wish to raise is that of the useful "distinction between translation and transference" (p. 42). For the sole reason that in ' normal' ("total") translation there theoretically is "no carry-over into the TL of values set up by formal or contextual relations in the SL" (p. 43). There are no transferences ("when parts of the TL text do have values set up in the SL") (p. 43), because this is not translation, it is either an error in translation a calque, or it is borrowing, a not uncommon practice, even if the words and concepts said to be on loan from another language are never returned (Vinay 1958 : *calques, emprunts*). Therefore, the distinction between transference and translation is useful only in that it will help teacher and student to spot the mistakes and improve command of languages ; but this too is comparative after-the-fact stylistics ; useful to the extent that thou shalt not bastardize thine mother tongue ! Important too because it can help to separate language problems from translation problems.

That Chapter 7 ("Conditions of Translation Equivalence") should deal with equivalents where the "SL and TL items can rarely have « the same meaning »... (and) function in the same situation", *that* I find disturbing. Because "*oui*" can surely mean "yes". If the situation features warrant it. Which is not to say such is always the case, or that it is never the fact.

"Translation equivalence occurs when an SL and a TL text or item are relatable to (at least some of) the same features of substance" (p. 50). He may be close to asking what is the living, breathing, "bio-socio-physical" environment of the word ; close to the analysis of cognitive values. However, he remains mainly, and justifiably, preoccupied with grammar, that is to say with language rather than speech acts.

Chapter 13 ("Language Varieties in Translation") provides some of the most practical elements in the book, a neat, clear, simple classification : idiolects, dialects, registers, styles and modes. Pertinent and useful considerations on style, and on the relationship between form and substance, stemming from the recognized importance of a certain dimension of the situation. Indeed, there may even be, as he states, incompatibility between casual style and scientific or religious registers (p. 92). There are certainly academics, clerics and scientists to give that assertion credence, although the vernacular is now widely used for prayer and efforts are being made to substitute everyday English to legalese.

DIFFERENTIATING CONTEXT AND SITUATION

By far the most interesting chapter in this book is the last, which deals with "The Limits of Translatibility". The translator will surely relate to it, to a large extent.

> In total translation, translation equivalence depends on the interchangeability of the SL and TL text in the same situation — ultimately, that is, on relationship of SL and TL texts to (at least some of) the same relevant features of situation-substance. (p. 93)

The difficulty, as Catford notes, lies in defining what is relevant. If we recall the above-quoted example ("I have arrived." — "Je suis arrivée."), and if we consider the language, we can conclude as would Catford that the French performer "is obliged by a formal feature of her language to make incidental reference to her sex, even though that is not ‘ what he intend to say’" (p. 94).

Before agreeing, however, one must note the obvious : a) this refers to the written word only, and b) it could well be that she meant to specify her sex ; that she wrote what she intended. One will also note that Catford has introduced the possibility that intended meaning is not necessarily related to formal language features.

> Any speech-act takes place in a specific bio-socio-physical environment, at a specific time and place, between specific participants and so on. But the text which if (for the linguist) the central item in the speech act is, or may be, relatable not only to features of this *immediate* situation, but also to features at greater and greater distances (so to speak) reaching out, ultimately, into the total cultural background of the situation. (p. 52)

If we distinguish between speech-act and language, it is, quite clear that Catford, as linguist, is opting for a study of the language and not the speech-act ; for the support system, not the message. At least to the extent that he chooses to extract a stretch of language from its punctual "bio-socio-physical" environment, giving this new *message* a polyvalence related to the total cultural background, thereby rendering analysis an endless, hopeless task[2] .

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2. Bloomfield had raised the problem in *Language* (1923). C. Germain (1973) submits that the solution lies in differentiating context/situation, language/speech-act. The solution to this problem which Bloomfield has already perceived, lies in the more pragmatic approach suggested by C. Germain : differentiating between context and situation as between language and the speech-act.

COMMAND OF LANGUAGE AND ENCYCLOPEDIC KNOWLEDGE

Aproaching a text as a speech act in this manner, is precisely what the translator must do if he is to free himself from both literal translation and overly imaginative interpretation. The translator must not only disregard the mechanical annoyances of improper grammar in order to interpret a message which he "reformulates" in his target language, he must cut through the clutter of total cultural background in order to focus on the main issue. This is difficult, especially if the author, the intended audience and the topic of the written word are unknown to the translator ; when the specific bio-socio-physical environment of a speech event are barely discernable for lack of specific points of reference to encyclopedic knowledge. No mean problem but one peculiarly relevant to the written word, and text analysis.

What then are the limits of translatability ? They are cultural and linguistic. According to Catford, using a Finnish term such as "sauna", — or even a description of the sauna, — would result in "cultural shock" and "collocational shock" (p. 102) ! Disregarding the "imaginary translation" (p. 101) problems which arise from methodology reflecting the preoccupation for mechanical translation, and considering these "insurmountable" difficulties from the point of view of a contemporary Canadian, there is little, if anything, shocking in either the term or the fact of a sauna. Both have been naturalized and do not call for lengthy cultural or linguistic explanations. Indeed, this loan-word-loan-object points to the solution of the formal item-situation-knowledge limit to translatability identified by Catford. So does his other example : that the Japanese *yukata* is not presently part of Canadian (or Anglo-Western) civilization does not preclude the possibility that if may be someday, and does not mean that this "*hotel* bathrobe which, moreover, is worn in the street" is an oriental object-concept-word above, beyond or below intelligibility within an English-language speech-act whose situation would provide relevant information, although it may require either a loan in the form of a lexical item or a description. George Steiner's view of the Hermeneutic Motion, expounded at some length in *After Babel*, expresses much the same thought gleaned from this study of literature (pp. 296-413). Moreover, Georges Mounin, in his thesis on translation, long ago concluded that communication depended on the situation knowledge shared by author and translator (1963 : 222-223, 278). Although he may not yet have shared the conclusions later voiced by his student Claude Germain.

Insofar as linguistic untranslatability is concerned, Catford's basic points of contention centre on *shared exponence* and *polysemy* (p. 94 ff.).

One can readily agree that in the first instance,

> in most cases there is no ambiguity, since the co-text (as in *cats* and *eats*) indicates clearly which item is being expounded (i.e., nominal or verbal), and the translation equivalent is then not in doubt. But, cases of ambiguity can arise, an example if *Time flies*. If this piece of text occurred in a normal conversation there would be no translation problem... (pp. 94-95)

Hoc est problema. Since the message is a speech-act, spoken or written, and if one knows the English language, it is possible to interpret or explain in relation to the situation and the knowledge one has of it. The solution lies in an unraveling applicable to polysemy : in a normal person-to-person act of human language communication, at a specific time and place, the situation and the accumulated knowledge of the communicators allow them to resolve the ambiguities of language, a virtual support system, by breathing into it the life of speech-act meaning. Assuming the communicators are familiar with the language, intend what they say, say what they intend, and know the subject, it is possible to interpret clearly !

As to speech three principles hold : First there is the principle which, for lack of a better term, I will call the ' make-sense' principle. It says that the hearer always takes the view that what the speaker is saying to him somehow makes sense. (...)

A second principle (...) that the attention of the participants in the speech-event is largely directed and focused on the things spoken about and not on speech itself. (...)

In the third place all speech is used by human beings and is spatially and temporally determined (Uhlenbeck 1978 : 190-191).

The obvious difficulty in relating a written communication to this process is the distance in both time and space between the author and the reader, a factor which both must take into account.

CONCLUSION

A close reading of Professor Catford's book raises several theoretical points for interrogation even as it leads to some immediate conclusions. Primarily a reflection on language, as opposed to speech acts, and largely preoccupied with language patterns, it constitutes an interesting *theory of linguistic translation* whose main use may best be reserved to furthering language typonymy on a comparative basis. If that is the purpose to which one wishes to apply translation, then it may be useful as a textbook. If one wishes to broach stylistics on a comparative basis, then it may provide some orientation. Where teaching translation is concerned, however, its use is chiefly as a pedagogical *reductio ad absurdum* by means of "restricted translation", transliteration, graphology, etc. : exercises in code-switching not translation (Lederer 1973).

Of course, any substitution of a stretch of language for another, could be termed translation. It may also be argued that anything useful to the translator's objective should be used (Nida 1976 : 4-5). However, the chief use of phonological translation is the comparison of languages. Resorting to linguistic translation, therefore, can deviate from the translator's objective which, — I feel it is the consensus in Canadian Schools of Translation, — is highly pragmatic : getting the information across ; in effect, focusing on ideas, not on words. Since the translator's concern lies mainly with messages rather than with linguistic description, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* is, by and large, of historical academic interest.

This investigation has followed the author's exposition closely and the points of discussion have therefore been noted as they arise in the book. One can nevertheless posit an analytical order of procedure for examining the various components of a translation theory in contradistinction with the premises and theory tabled by Professor Catford.

POINTS FOR INQUIRY

These points, although they pose unresolved or debatable questions, may be retained among items for further critical discussion, or as areas of research on translation and language theory. Bearing in mind that written and spoken words are materially different objects (as translators and interpreters are quickest to indicate) and assuming that "total translation" is the translator's true object, they could be submitted in the following order :

a) Can there be meaning prior to or outside of language ?

b) What is the relationship between speech act and intended meaning ?

c) How does the speech act differ from the language to which it is related ?

d) What is the relationship between context (the language chain) and situation (the setting) ?

e) Is teaching a first language in comparison with a second language tantamount to teaching translation ?

f) How do formal linguistic features relate to meaning of a speech act if indeed all cognitive experience is conveyable in any existing language ?

g) (*In fine*) Is translation related essentially to the speech-act rather than to language ?

On this last point one would do well to read anew Maurice Pergnier's article in *Meta* (1981, vol. 26, n° 3). In it he quietly provides a judicious theoretical link between theories of translation and linguistics.

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