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Résumé de l'article

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# THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM: SLIPPAGE BETWEEN THE ORIGINAL AND THE TRANSLATION OF SEMANTIC TEXTS

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***Résumé***

*À l'aide de la traduction d'un article tiré du journal* Le Monde, *on étudie les différences de contenu sémantique au niveau du langage et de la culture (point de vue de l'auteur, inclusion et/ou exclusion d'éléments) afin de démontrer que, même en traduction pragmatique, il est impossible de produire une traduction fidèle à tous les niveaux.*

It has often been remarked that the *Doppelgänger*, that ubiquitous figure so prevalent in late nineteenth and early twentieth century prose, can be seen as an analogy for translation: the source text and the translation are parallel copies of one another, bearing the same features, but moving in different worlds. However, another aspect of the double, which is as apparent and as important as the similarity between the two, and which makes the analogy with translation even better, is the extent to which the protagonist and his double are different, and in many ways opposite. Thus, Mr. Hyde is Dr. Jekyll's evil half, Dorian Grey's portrait bears the traces of his evil over the years, and so on. If the source text and the translation are in many ways the same, the latter a faithful reflection of the former, they are also in many ways different — there is a gap, often a significant gap, between the former and the latter. It is the inevitable difference between source text and translation that I wish to discuss here.

It is generally accepted that there is considerable slippage between source text and translation in the case of literature. Some translators have made a virtue of necessity by accepting and welcoming this gap; a good example of this is Robert Lowell in his "imitations," in which he sought to write what were essentially new poems in English, while striving to retain what he called "the tone" from the original poem.[1] Another way in which the gap is recognized is in the fact that each generation has found it necessary to translate anew the great classical texts. That these translations differ so much from one another reminds us that all of them differ at least somewhat from the originals.

In the case of semantic translation, however, the gap is less obvious and less recognized: indeed, the ideal of semantic translation, unlike that of literary translation, is precisely that there should be no difference — that the translation should be a faithful rendering of the semantic content of the original in the target language. This position is perhaps best expressed by Jean Delisle: "*La traduction de textes pragmatiques est un art de réexpression fondé sur les techniques de rédaction*"[2]. I agree with this statement, but my point is that a composition in another language always differs somewhat in semantic content, because semantic content is itself subtly — or unsubtly — altered by being transposed to a foreign culture. Furthermore, the nature of language difference, even in the case of such similar languages as English and French, is such that linguistic parallel — parallel at the level of language — is also impossible in a pure sense. It is my claim,

then, that the ideal of semantic translation, admirable though it may be, is impossible to realize in practice.

In order to show how this is so, I shall briefly examine a fairly recent article from *Le Monde*. The article in question was entitled *"Des vagues sur le lac"*[3]: the subject was the relations of the United States with the various nations of the South Pacific.

There are two major ways in which a semantic translation of this article would inevitably differ from the original, and they follow the old distinction between meaning and significance. To take meaning first: the translation will differ from the original at the level of language: the kinds of words used to express a concept in one culture are not the same as those used to express a concept in another culture. If one expresses the same semantic concept in a different way, one is not, in fact, expressing the same semantic content, since the mode of expression is part of the content.

Take, for example, one of the headlines in this article, *"chèvre et chou"*. The headline is, of course, an encapsulation of the proverb, *"ménager la chèvre et le chou,"* used, in this context, to explain Australia's attitude to the dispute between Washington and Wellington over port calls by ships which may be nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed. What does it mean? Two different emphases are possible when interpreting this proverb; a negative one, along the lines of failing to take sides, or sitting on the fence, and a positive one, implying keeping both sides happy, or strengthening ties with both sides. From the article itself we learn which of these interpretations the author intended here — it is clear that Australia is using the opportunity afforded by the dispute to strengthen its ties with both sides — in other words, the positive interpretation.

When we come to encode or translate, however, it is obvious that more questions arise. We could take one of the positive interpretations suggested above, of course, or we could attempt to imitate the style of the French by choosing an English proverb equivalent to the French one. Harraps and Collins, for instance, suggest "to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds." In many ways, this is an excellent parallel: it incorporates the idea of a positive courting of different sides with opposed interests, precisely the idea the writer seems to be attempting to convey here. It also incorporates the connotation "proverb," clearly one which is not in the French. But the proverb itself also carries a lot of other connotations. It is, of course, British, not North American. Even assuming, however, that we are translating into British English — and we will find proverbs in general used with much greater frequency in British than in American or Canadian English — it seems clear that the connotations of the two proverbs are not the same. Whichever option we choose, though we present the same content, this content is fractionally transformed.

But the translation will also differ from the original in that the point of view taken by the writer of the original, and the inclusion of certain points and exclusion of certain others, are determined at least in part by the culture in which the piece is written and in which it will be received. (Kenneth Burke's pentad provides a systematic and thorough way of examining a text in relation with its context.[4]) When point of view, inclusions and exclusions are transposed to another culture, they will no longer be totally appropriate, and they will therefore no longer have quite the same meaning.

The purpose of the article in question is to explain the changes that have taken place in the United States' position in the South Pacific since the second World War. Included is a thorough historical background of US activities in the area, particularly the evolution of ANZUS and of tuna fishing by US fishermen. Excluded is any detail regarding the activities of the other major outside power operating in the region, France. Included also is ironic comment on the US attitude to its declining power in the area.

If this article were translated into English, it would probably be for the *Le Monde* section of the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, the major readership of which is expatriate British. Such readers might well appreciate and profit by the background of US activities in the region, though they would probably be somewhat more conversant with them than would *Le Monde*'s readers. They might well miss any explanation of French activities in the region during the period in question, since the author claims that these activities have been influential on what has happened to the US position in the region, and they might well have much less knowledge of them than would *Le Monde*'s readers. Finally, the writer's sardonic attitude toward US arrogance in the region is an essentially French attitude, developed in part at least as a result of the competition between the two powers in the South Pacific. Had the article been written for, say, *The Guardian*, the attitude toward the changes in the US position would probably have been at least somewhat more sympathetic.

Both linguistically and contextually, then, a translation of this article will remain a translation. The inevitable linguistic differences between a translation and its original have been most thoroughly explored by those theoreticians influenced by Jacques Derrida's writing on language. A number of their articles were collected in *Difference in Translation*.[5] What sets this collection of articles apart from most writings on translation, particularly semantic translation, is that, far from seeing the gap between the translation and the original as a failing, on the contrary they celebrate it, or, at the very least, describe it as inevitable.

Derrida, of course, emphasized the gap between the signifier and the signified; there is already a gap between the original text (signifier) and its meaning (signified); if we apply this idea to the translation process, the same thing will pertain; there will be a gap (slippage) between the original text (which now becomes the signified) and the translation (the new signifier). Again, the particular interest of the writers in this collection is literary translation, but, again, what they assume about a gap's being inevitable seems also to apply to semantic translation.

Similarly, however closely the translator adheres to the meaning of the original, he will be unable to precisely produce it, because the very act of moving the text from one culture to another makes it strange in, among other ways, those contextual ways I suggested above. Meaning is in part formed by the context in which a text appears, and a changing context alters the meaning of even a semantic text. George Steiner has shown as clearly as anyone how the context affects the meaning of a text — that is, how a text is altered when it is put into a foreign context, and how, in turn, the existence of the translation reflects back on and alters the original[6]. Steiner's focus was, of course, on literary, rather than semantic, translation, but his point is also valid for the latter.

It may be objected that articles such as my example from *Le Monde* are not purely semantic in intent: there is an element of artistry in the writing. The two most completely semantic texts to be translated, at least in the Canadian government context, are perhaps job descriptions and weather reports. In the case of the former, the work does not entail translating from one culture to another: this is because there **is** only one culture — the Canadian federal government culture. Thus, in the case of job descriptions and certain other government documents, even if the process is accomplished through interlingual translation, what is actually involved is a kind of parallel drafting (intralingual translation, albeit from one language to the other). In the case of weather reports, the fact that what is really taking place (whatever the mechanics by which they are produced) is parallel drafting is even clearer. The word *cloudy* and the word *nuageux* are equally

removed from (or, if it comes to that, equally close to) the cloudy day which is there for all to observe.

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I have shown, then, that the ideal of a perfect parallel between the source text and the translation — a perfect translation of meaning, in other words — is unattainable, even in the case of semantic translation. The closest resemblance will always be obtained in the case of parallel drafting, because there is one less signifier-signified relationship with its inevitable gap between the two. This does not mean, of course, that we should not strive, like latter-day Don Quixotes, to attain the impossible, but rather that we should not be surprised if we do not completely achieve our goal.

My discussion also bears out a contention I have made elsewhere[7] — that literary translation theory, although it is exploring a phenomenon which differs in many ways from semantic translation, nevertheless has much to teach the latter. Furthermore, if it is true that the perfect semantic translation is impossible, this has important implications for the evaluation of semantic translation. The Canadian government, for example, has made a concerted effort to develop an objective method of evaluating this kind of translation. Yet the question always remains: who decides, and on what grounds, that a certain phrase constitutes an error?

Notes

1. See the introduction to *Imitations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, Noonday Press ed., 1962), p. xi.
2. *L'Analyse du discours comme méthode de traduction* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1980), p. 13.
3. R.-P. Paringaux, *Le Monde*, sélection hebdomadaire du 8 mai au 14 mai 1986, nº 1958, p. 2.
4. See Elizabeth Neild, "Kenneth Burke, Discourse Analysis and Translation" (*Meta* 31-3, 1986), pp. 253-257.
5. Ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985).
6. See *After Babel* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 300-301.
7. Neild, ibid.