TRANSLATING WORDS AND (THEIR?) MEANING

Bianca-Oana HAN, Assistant Professor, PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureş

Abstract: It has been a never-ending debate among scholars concerned with translation issues whether they should translate the word or rather the meaning it implies. The difficulty is raised by the idea according to which different languages can never be completely rendered by translation without losing certain valuable aspects, which might therefore throw the process of translation under a dark shade. In the same light of human understanding, scholars dealing with communication issues draw attention upon a different aspect: what is the situation with the words that do not even mean what they appear in the first place in the original language? What about the meta-language and 'reading between words'? We will try to prove that the users of languages need to be able to decode words in a double-folded instance: i.e., they need to translate the words and their meaning.

Keywords: translation, meta-language, metalinguistic awareness

In their book, *Talk Language –How to Use Conversation for Profit and Pleasure*[1], Pease and Garner remind us that people tend to hide behind words more often than they are willing to admit; that, in order to express their feelings, beliefs, opinions they seem to employ words in meaningful or meaningless combinations, depending on the ability of the interlocutors to decode the hidden message, the one that lies beyond the initial meaning of words.

This is a matter of understanding human nature and its need to sometimes polish, embellish the reality expressed. If people chose to directly state their minds, in plain, clear-cut ways, than understanding would probably be simplified, clearer, explicit but, conversations would appear blank, void of substance, missing aesthetic value, and sometimes considered even offensive. People realised the power and importance of choosing words carefully, in order to complete social functions of communication, relation, persuading, etc.

Thus, from the Ancient times, people realised that right wording, rightly used was able to convince, to manipulate people. Being the only species able to utter words and develop a language, the human being felt the need to indulge into this particular activity. Therefore, they felt the need to make proper use of the prerogative, i.e. to use language at its most. This implies expressing human feelings by means of linguistic means like lexical items, but also non-linguistic, still language-related, means like metalinguistics.

According to an online dictionary definition[2], the term refers to that "branch of linguistics that studies language and its relationship to other cultural behaviours. It is the study of dialogue relationships between units of speech communication as manifestations and enactments of co-existance." Thus it requires our understanding that language cannot be used aside from human behaviour.

[1] Alan Pease, Alan Garner, *Talk Language –How to Use Conversation for Profit and Pleasure*, Simon and Schuster Ltd. London, 1989

[2] Acc. to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metalinguistics

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An interesting concept regarding this theme would be the one referring to "*metalinguistic awareness* which implies the understanding that language is a *system of communication*, bound to rules and forms the basis for the ability to discuss different ways to use language[3]. In other words, it is the ability to consciously analyse language and its subparts, to know how they operate and how they are incorporated into the wider language system.[4] An individual with such ability is aware that linguistic forms and structure can interact and be manipulated to produce a vast variety of meanings. Words are only arbitrarily and symbolically associated with their referents and are separable from them."[5]…

In order to clarify this notion, Douglas R. Hofstadter invites us, in his article 'Metamagical Themes'[6], to analyse the sentence below:

Their is four errors in this sentance. Can you find them?

Hofstadter argues that "Three errors announce themselves plainly enough, the misspellings of *there* and *sentence* and the use of *is* instead of *are*. (…) The fourth error resists detection, until one assesses the truth value of the sentence itself - the fourth error is that there are not four errors, only three. Such a sentence (referred to as a 'self-referencing sentence') asks one to look at it in two ways, simultaneously as statement and as linguistic artefact- in other words, to exercise metalinguistic awareness."[7]

We have argued so far that the human is the only one able to use words to express oneself: what if words are not always enough or necessary to send the intended message? What if they are just a 'means to an end' but this end is much more meaningful than the words appear to imply in the first place? It would appear that the speaker needs to be able to decode the primary message of words, the one implied by the surface meaning of the words used but also the secondary message of words, the one contained in the deeper surface of words used.

Peter Trudgill[8], an honorary professor of sociolinguistics at the University of East Anglia, England observes that "none of us can unilaterally decide what a word means. Meanings of words are shared between people-they are a kind of social contract we all agree to-otherwise communication would not be possible."

The meaning that words receive in the recipient's mind depends on a number of factors: his ability to decode the words from the linguistic point of view, i.e. if he understands the language used as a vehicle; the importance the message has to the receiver, i.e. if the message is of high importance, it will be endowed with different 'values' than for a different 'indifferent' recipient.

This being the case, one can only imagine how difficult translation of such a complicated issue as a *message*, has become; a translator of a text needs to perform multiple operations in order to render the right message from the original into the target language; the

[3] Baten, K., Hofman, F., & Loeys, T. Cross-linguistic activation in bilingual sentence processing: The role of word class meaning. Bilingualism: language and cognition, 14(3), 351-359., 2011, doi:10.1017/S1366728910000246

[4] Beceren, S. Comparison of metalinguistic development in sequential bilinguals and monolinguals. The International Journal of Educational Researchers 2010, 1(1), 28-40.

[5] Acc. to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metalinguistics

[6] Douglas R. Hofstadter, Scientific American, 235, No. 1 [1981], 22-32

[7] Patrick Hartwell, Grammar, Grammars and the Teaching of Grammar College English, Feb. 1985

[8] Qtd. by Richard Nordquist in *There was no Golden Age* http://grammar.about.com/od/words/a/langmyths6.htm

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words need to be stripped out of their onion-like layers of meanings in order to be exposed to the receiver, thus to make sense. This *sense* prepared for the receiver is actually the result of a contextual-bound, circumstance-related, culture and psychological specific factors that await decoding.

In the same article[9] Trudgill recounts the history of the word *nice* to illustrate his point that the "English language is full of words which have changed their meanings slightly or even dramatically over the centuries."

Derived from the Latin adjective *nescius* (meaning "not knowing" or "ignorant"), nice arrived in English around 1300 meaning ‘silly’, ‘foolish’ or ‘shy’. Over the centuries, its meaning gradually changed to ‘fussy’ then ‘refined’ and then (by the end of the 18th century) ‘pleasant’ and ‘agreeable’.

Just as words were proved to have changed their meaning over time, they are also prone to change every time they are used new, due to the flexibility power they may be endowed with. This change in meaning is obviously influenced by the exhaustive use of the words, by the fact that language is a living entity, in a continuous change, thus flexible, never the same.

Therefore, although humans are the only ones lucky enough to have words at their service in order to express themselves freely, clearly they also are the ones unlucky enough to be tricked by words that are not dealt with, managed and mastered appropriately. Words can become their user’s best friend or fierce weapon in need, but also their worst enemy if not handled carefully.

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[9] idem

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