

SYMBOLS AND TRANSLATING

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ABSTRACT: This article proposes a discussion about the semiotic implications inserted in each translation choice and decision making. The author emphasizes that in any translation it is necessary to comprehend the words combinations in the texts rather than their isolated meanings. The iconic, indexical and conventional specifications of the meanings are also presented as well as the importance of non verbal signs in the communicative process between two or more linguistic communities. The five senses are also presented as the means by which we acquire any kind of knowledge. Eugene Nida still informs us, by using practical examples, that many semiotic symbols radically alter their functions and forms, according to the changes occurred in society itself. Finally two communication filters are presented (the emotional state of receptors and the presuppositions of the culture) as determining factors for the comprehension of a text and its subsequent translation.

KEYWORDS: symbols; translating.

As I began to help translators in various parts of the world, I realized that I needed more insight about the meanings of words and texts than is provided in most dictionaries, lexicons, and encyclopedias. Articles on semiotics by Jakobson, Peirce, and Sebeok provided some much needed help, and I sincerely tried to help translators realize the rewards of insight about the meaning of verbal symbols.

I was delighted with each edition of *Semiotica*, but I could not go along with Barthes and Derrida, who wanted every published text to be completely freed from its own cultural setting and therefore open for any and every interpretation that readers might wish to impose. This seemed to me to be completely con-

trary to a need for people to recognize the cultural circumstances that had prompted the production of a text and helped materially to contribute to its proper understanding.

I tried to help translators see the advantages of semiotic insights, but the focus of semiotics on individual words rather than semantic chunks of meaning did not impress translators, who felt that all they needed were good bilingual dictionaries, lexicons, and encyclopedias. In fact, some Chinese students memorized entire dictionaries of English with the hope that this would make it possible for them to speak English freely and effectively. Words are certainly important, but they are only tags for sensory baggage, and what is important is the contents of the baggage in order to understand other people and ourselves.

In comprehending the meaning of texts, it is not enough to know the standard meanings of isolated words but the way in which words combine in texts to specify various complex arrangements of entities, activities, states, processes, features, and relations. The definition of the English word *turn* as "to move around on an axis" is not of much help in such expressions as: *he turned the soil* (a reference to plowing), *the road turns at the bridge* (only metaphorically), *it's my turn* (order of activity), *the leaves have turned* (a change of color), *they turned the crowd against him* (an act of persuasion or force), *she just turned sixteen* (a marker of time), *the steak was done to a turn* (fried perfectly), *my father turned Catholic* (became).

Note also how the word *turn* can combine with postposed adverbs to produce quite different meanings, for example, *turned down the job*, *turned in early* (left work earlier than usual, or went to bed soon), *turn out well*, *turn off the heat*, *turn up the noise*, *turn away the crowd*, *turn back the clock*, *a big turnout* (either an unexpectedly large crowd or a wide uphill road for vehicles with inadequate brakes), *a turnover* (a rapid sale of stock or fast replacement of stock or people).

Traditionally, all such occurrences of words such as *turn* were regarded as having essentially the same underlying meaning or set of meanings, however strangely such meanings would be defined, and the contextual accompaniments would simply indicate which of the meanings of *turn* is to be understood. This is essentially the traditional atomic approach to meaning by claim-

ing that certain words have a number of meanings and the accompanying contexts merely point to the correct meaning. But it seems much more relevant to consider the various combinations of words as having molecular meanings that represent the combined semantic unit.

This principle of defining meanings in terms of molecular sets fits perfectly the implications of information theory that demonstrates how the role of any core word needs to be minimized while the role of the contextual words needs to be maximized. This is also precisely what some linguists have described in terms of semantic chunking. Words are not beads on a string, but clumps of meaningful units.

Iconic, indexical, and conventional signs

The basic semiotic distinction between iconic, indexical (often called deictic), and conventional meanings can be very helpful in recognizing quite different functions of words, objects, and events. For example, some words have a form that suggests an aspect of the meaning of the sign. Compare such terms as *babble*, *stutter*, *slobber*, *bowwow*, *cuckoo*, and such picture signs as those marking toilets for men and women, or consider the iconic meaning of Rodin's "The Thinker". Such iconic signs normally have the same analogous phonic or visual forms as their referents.

Indexical, or deictic, signs mark or point to certain meanings by means of color, form, or role, for example, a gesture of pointing, traffic lights, traffic lines on roads to mark lanes for cars, charts indicating wiring arrangements, different colored pipes to indicate the flow of different chemicals, and words that come in sets, for example, *here/there*, *this/that*.

But by far the largest and the most complex class of signs are conventional, for example, *mathematics*, *universe*, *influenza*, *eclectic*. These signs are also some of the most important, but the study of signs does not end with verbal symbols. Vestments often mark status within a religious order, and uniforms may indicate rank or activity or both, temples usually indicate the type of religious practice (compare, for example, Confucian, Bud-

dhist, and Taoist temples), flags (for country and team identification), sirens (the need for traffic clearance). But some of these signs are not immediately meaningful. For example, a red light usually implies some danger, while green suggests the opposite, and yellow is a handy anticipatory signal, and it generally occurs before red, although in some parts of the world it occurs before both red and green.

But the existence of different types of lights does not mean that people are likely to pay attention to them. A Haitian friend of mine insisted that he only paid attention to the facial expressions of oncoming drivers, and a colleague used to insist that stopping at a traffic light when there are no cars in sight was an insult to his intelligence.

Communication by means of senses

Semiotics also focuses attention on the fact that all the knowledge we acquire from other persons must come through one or more of the five senses: hearing, sight, touch, taste, and smell. But these five senses differ radically in the amount and quality of impact. Hearing and sight are certainly the most frequently experienced, and they often suggest reciprocity, for example, hearing and talking, seeing and being seen. We can receive information from outer space about distances and physical forces, but this is strictly one-way communication.

By means of contrast, touch, taste, and smell normally imply much closer communication and much greater impact. A pat on the back, a hug, or a kiss carries a good deal more meaning than "Thank you very much!" And the cinema open-mouth kissing, involving taste, touch, and smell, is almost a substitute for sexual intercourse.

Signs are not limited to a single word, gesture, or movement, but may involve an entire serie of related activities. When a voodoo priest makes a raffia image of a person and then shoots arrows into the image as he mutters deadly curses, he is using an iconic symbol. And when a voodoo worshipper cuts out of the New Testament a story of a miraculous healing and then makes

a kind of tea out of the printed text and gives the drink to a sick person as a remedy for any illness, he is using an indexical symbol.

Similarly some people in Cuba try to cure disease by washing a sick person and then they throw the water into the street so that some passer by will step on the moist dirt and carry away the disease. But some of the rites of spiritists who worship Santa Barbara are much more complex. In order to guarantee sexual vigor, a person's holy amulet is anointed with the blood of a rooster or a billy goat, two important sex symbols. This process is thought to guarantee unusual sexual power.

In fact, we all live in a maze of semiotic signs: lured magazine covers, murder reenactments, advertising that we know is not true, and political speeches that even the politicians know are humbug.

One of the serious problems involved in using semiotics to help people understand the nature and role of signs is that the terminology of semiotics is so generic that people do not know how to apply such concepts to daily experience, for example, such words as *iconic*, *indexical*, *conventional*, *target*, *source*, *transfer*, *similarity*, *difference*, *mediation*. As already indicated even the distinctions between iconic and indexical are not always clear.

For an analyst the relations between different aspects of a complex symbol may be indexical, but for the local people their activities may seem completely iconic, although in a reverse order. For example, Navajo healing ceremonies involving melodic chanting and sand painting are symbolic ways of dealing directly with disease by attacking iconically what is thought to be the real cause of disease, namely, interpersonal hostility. But for Navajos the use of pills would be merely indexical.

Sensory information is not, however, restricted to the five normal senses. For example, the proper functioning of all the organs of the body produces the sensation of health and physical well being. And the loss of sufficient blood sugar can signal the need for nourishment. Cramping of the bowels can signal the need for defecation, and rapid changes in elevation, whether in elevators or in airplanes, can produce vertigo, while complete weightlessness can overwhelm some people.

Symbols can also radically alter their functions and form. What happens when a statue of a saint becomes a local god or a trinket becomes a magic amulet? What has happened in a society in which news papers give much more space to horoscopes than to news about present-day developments in science? And how is it that some so-called civilized societies have more clairvoyants than school teachers?

Semiotics also needs a psychological component to help people understand what apparently happens when purely physical impulses are transformed into concepts. This process is more easily understood in the case of hearing, but analogous developments occur in all the sensory systems.

Uttered statements are only a series of purely physical vibrations in the air. These may strike a person's eardrums which begin to vibrate synchronously and pass such vibrations to the tiny bones in the ear. These bones pass such vibrations to the liquid in the semicircular canals of the ear, where the cilia pick up the vibrations. But all this is essentially physical. When, however, the tiny cells in the cilia detect the vibrations, the patterns of vibration are turned into electrochemical signals that are then transferred to specialized hearing centers and by means of highly specialized templates, or by even series of such templates, the impulses are then sent on to the conceptual centers of the brain, where the information is analyzed, classified, and stored for ready use. We may never know precisely what takes place in such communication any more than we will fully understand the expanding universe.

What is surprising about the mind is that it apparently never forgets anything completely. A friend of mine lived with his parents in Costa Rica until he was twelve years of age, and he spoke Spanish and English fluently, but after the family moved to the United States, he gradually lost his competence in Spanish. In fact, when he returned to Latin America in order to engage in linguistic studies, he insisted that he had completely forgotten Spanish. But within three months in Mexico City he was speaking Spanish without an accent and with conspicuous fluency.

Another friend had grown up in an Arabic-speaking area of the Middle East until he was about six years of age, and he was

sure that he had lost all of his ability to pronounce a number of unusual Arabic sounds. But when he started to study the sound structure of Arabic as a linguist, he was immediately surprised by the fact that the various sounds were so easily and accurately heard and reproduced.

On the other hand, the experience of people with the knowledge of a foreign language can be so emotionally negative that they are incapable of speaking what they once spoke well. A young Spanish-speaking boy from Mexico came to live with his parents in Los Angeles, California, but he was so determined to overcome his Latin background that he refused to be recognized as a Spanish speaker. Some years later, however, he wanted to return to Latin America as a teacher, but he was so emotionally blocked in his use of Spanish that he never overcame his self-imposed linguistic atrophy.

Communication filters

All sensory experience must pass through two distinct types of filters: the emotional state of receptors and the presuppositions of the culture. For example, such emotional states described as exuberant, joyful, happy, content, anxious, and fearful can seriously influence the interpretation of a message or even block completely the meaning of an utterance. This is one reason why good lecturers often like to make people smile or laugh before they launch into a really crucial part of a lecture.

And after a master of ceremonies has praised a guest speaker to the skies, he often wants to end with a joke that will show that the speaker is really a down-to-earth human being. But if the master of ceremonies does not do this, an experienced speaker will often start off with a joke on himself in order to identify with the audience.

The cultural presuppositions of a society can have an even greater influence on the meaning of a text. For example, in the Bible the Sadducees are described as wanting to catch Jesus in an inconsistency about life after death, and so they invented an extreme example of a woman who was married successively to

seven brothers without having produced any child. And therefore the question of the Sadducees was, "Now, on the day when the dead rise to life, whose wife will she be? Because all seven brothers had been married to her."

But in many parts of Africa, as well as in many other places, such a question is pure nonsense. No one would want to be married, even in heaven, to a woman who was evidently a witch that had caused the death of so many husbands. The question posed by the Sadducees becomes meaningless because of completely different cultural presuppositions.

Too many translators are blind to the cultural values and concepts that influence so greatly the interpretation of texts, for example, such ideas as 1. "there is always plenty of room at the top" (if a person is exceptionally competent in any type of activity, he or she will always be in demand), 2. "the end justifies the means" (historically a part of the justification for the Inquisition, and more recently for "ethnic cleansing"), 3. "limited good" (the belief that there is only so much good in life, and if anyone seems to have more than his or her rightful share, the excess should be taken away), "double causality" (the idea that in any serious tragedy, for example, death by lightning, there are always two different causes: the lightning and the practice of black magic by someone so as to guarantee the victim's being precisely where the lightning would strike).

The idea of double causality is very widespread. Even in the so-called civilized world millions of people believe in astrology, which is based on the belief that the events of people's lives are determined by two types of events: the natural happenings of every day existence and the position of certain planets, stars, and constellations at the time of a person's birth. So many people believe at least a little bit in so many unseen forces (even contradictory ones) that they do not recognize the incongruity in reciting a favorite passage from the Bible while they look up their horoscope for the day.

Too many translators assume that their task is simply to reproduce the meaning of a foreign-language text into their own mother tongue, because this is precisely what they have usually been taught to do. This, however, is a serious mistake, because

satisfactory translating is much more complex. When free-lance translators receive a text from a translation agency, they need to know what the publishers of the text really want. Do they prefer a bare-bones translation or do they want something that will appeal to a particular audience? This is precisely the information that a competent agency or publisher needs to communicate to translators: Who are the intended audience and what is the purpose of the text: entertainment, selling a product or an idea, or convincing an audience about some environmental issue? It may even be relevant to produce two or three different translations of a text for different constituencies and for different purposes. This is especially important in merchandising texts because responsible companies often want to test trial translations in the field.

Effective translating is never a humdrum activity.

