

IN OTHER WORDS

What do we mean when we use the expression "in other words"? Are we not referring here to a mental process which consists in transferring meaning from complex wording to a simpler one?

If we look into some other field besides linguistics, could we not say, for instance, that teaching uses the same kind of activity, since a teacher has to transfer meanings usually expressed in textbooks into words understandable by the students? In music, when someone plays Verdi, or Schubert, or Beethoven, don't we say that he is interpreting the music of these masters? This would apply also to the composer-arranger who writes a part for one instrument. He is transposing the notes to fit the range of a particular instrument. Any interpretation of a play, any character in a play, belongs to this large conceptual field of reproducing a given meaning into a new and different context. The same process may occur in painting or photography, when an artist tries to reproduce a landscape on canvas or film. Even in abstract painting, the artist tries to express what he has in mind in different forms and colors. All these examples taken from different artistic fields show different ways of doing translations.

Translation also acts as a geometrical and physical concept. In geometry, it is a "transformation in which the origin of a coordinate system is moved to another position so that each axis retains the same direction, or equivalently, a figure or curve is moved so that it retains the same orientation to the axes." (The Collins English Dictionary, London and Glasgow, 1986).

The translational movement in physics is this movement of a body by which all the points of this body move along parallel curves. In that sense, the earth has a translational movement. In French, we also use the word "translation" in reference to the transfer of a dead body, or ashes of a dead body, to the cemetery or from one place to another. It may also be a legal term used for expressing the transfer of a property from one person to another.

If we want to define in generic terms the semantic field covered by this word, we will have to say first that we are dealing here with a process or a movement. Secondly, it is the movement of a physical thing, or a meaning, from one context to another. Thirdly, when it applies to semantic movement, it implies human ability to use a semantic support, signs, symbols or images, to operate this process. This ability itself is often called translation. One must remember that the ability differs from the movement itself.

We may see now that translation is not specifically limited to the linguistic field, but on the contrary, that linguistics is only one of the fields that uses the process of translation to transfer meaning from one language to another.

1. THE SKILL OF TRANSLATION

Matthew Lipman considers translation a "mega skill", i.e., "Enormous clusters or galaxies of skills which have been organized to function harmoniously and purposively." (Lipman, Presuppositions, p. 3). Besides the fact that he is obviously referring here to the mental act involved in the process of translation, his definition suggests two things:

First, it implies that the ability of translation involves several skills. Secondly, it implies that it is a skill that deals not with objects nor simple concepts, but with other skills: a mega skill is a skill of skills.

In the first sense, translation will be seen as a generic term that integrates several skills. According to Lipman, translation involves at least two other skills analogical reasoning and standardization. "Analogical reasoning is pertinent because an analogy is a resemblance between two relationships or between two complexes of relationships." (Lipman, Presuppositions, p. 5).

Translating Philosophy for Children program for instance, needs these two levels of analogical reasoning at three different semantical degrees. The first degree is the simple carrying over of meaning from one language to the other. The second degree deals with more abstract meanings, since we are translating philosophical concepts and theories which constitute in themselves a language within a language. This means that we have to integrate the program in the philosophical language already constituted in the receiving language. We must also take into consideration a third degree of complexity. We must keep in mind that the translating process also applies when we use a program for a different age group than the one for which it was originally intended. In that sense, we could say that Harry Prime is a translation of Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery, since it is a translation from the language of 11-12 year old children to the language of adults.

Standardization is also involved in translation because it is "the capacity to recognize diverse expressions as variant ways of expressing the same, or nearly the same thing." (Lipman, Presuppositions, p. 5).

The whole problem rests with the expression "nearly the same thing." When are we nearly saying the same thing? And when are saying different things? How can we know if our translation is accurate? These questions are relevant to the second aspect of translation as mega skill: a skill that deals with skills, not with objects nor concepts. Lipman argued that skills dealing with several skills are crafts or arts¹. Following this view then, translation would be a craft or an art. Most often today though, it is seen as a technique--even a computerized technique--or at best, a part of the science of linguistics.

People who translate Shakespeare's masterpieces or Apollinaire's poetry do not agree with this last position. As Merimee pointed out, "We can always translate the language, but this is not the same as translating the play." (Mounin, p. 14) It is easy to translate "good morning" by "bonjour" or "buenos dias" or "guten tag." A machine can do that. What about translating Suki, or Wondering at the World? Just as the interpretation of a musical work is considered an art, so the translation of novels or poems must also be considered an art. Translation is an art because it implies creativity. A translation is not just a mere changing of words, it is a re-creation of meaning. In order to translate, one must seize the relation between a meaning and the words used in a specific context of a specific language, and transfer this relation into another context of a different language.

The main criterion used to evaluate a good translation would then be its accuracy in transferring the right meaning to the right words, using the right style. Just as the interpretation² of a musical part needs the personal style of the artist to be transposed into music, so P4C programs need our own personal style to become more than mere imported goods, but a real native philosophical artwork.

2. HOW CAN WE TRANSFER MEANING?

Lipman considers translation as a semantic skill (Lipman, Presuppositions p. 3) i.e., a skill involved in transferring meaning. The main question here is: How is it possible to transfer meaning?

At first, it seems impossible to carry over the same meaning from one language to another. According to Lipman, it is not even possible in our own language. As Pixie pointed out at the end of her story, we never say the same story twice.

Since our discussion seems to come to a dead end, it is time now for us to check this point with a little exercise.

EXERCISE: Let's suppose

Let's suppose you are a teacher in a community of inquiry:

A child asks this question:

Can we really say the same thing in other words?

And you, as a good moderator, ask her or him:

Will you repeat your question please? (You cannot believe your ears, so you want to be sure that you understood well.)

But instead of repeating the same words, he or she says:

How can we make relevant translations? (My child is a master's student in Montclair.)

1. Is this child transferring the same meaning from one question into the other?
2. Think of a sentence and tell it to the neighbor on your right.
Neighbor on the right: Try to repeat this sentence in your own words. Tell your new sentence to your neighbor on your left.
Neighbor on the left: Tell to your neighbor on your right if his/her sentence has transferred the meaning that was in your own sentence.
3. Say aloud sentences that have been found semantically equivalent. The group will evaluate them.

This exercise shows that, under specific conditions, it is possible to transfer meanings relatively well. What are these conditions?

1. We must know the language used.
2. We must listen carefully to the one who talks.
3. We must know the situation or the subject he is talking about.
4. We must come to an agreement with the one who sent the message.
5. Any others?

All these conditions indicate that we are dealing here with rules of communication. Actually this question of transferring meaning belongs to the field of communication. We communicate directly or indirectly with other people through signs, symbols or images. Some people might say that we never come to real communication. Rilke, for instance, says in his Letter to a Young Poet, "For at bottom, and just in the deepest and most important things, we are utterly alone." (Rilke, p. 21) Or in St-Exupery's Little Prince when the fox delivers its secret, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye." (St-Exupery, p. 87) According to these two poets, real communication would be done without words. Let us admit that they did use words to communicate this message. Even though we might not have understood the essential, they did put their meanings into words, hoping that by chance, some other attending poet might find the path from the words to the heart. And sometimes this miracle does happen. Sometimes we do really feel, from the bottom of our heart, that we did communicate with some people we love, with some authors we read, with the actors in a play, etc. Who has never had this experience? Throw the first stone!

The first miracle is this great event: a child who learns to talk³ and expresses herself in the language of her parents. The second miracle is to learn a new language. Put any human being in a foreign country. Even though he has no idea whatsoever of the language spoken there, at length he will learn the native language; he will develop ways of communication with the native people. How is this possible? Languages are systems of signs and grammatical rules that bring a selective understanding of reality, a certain vision of the world to the one who uses it. Martinet, the French linguist, said, "The linguistics structure that an individual receives from his surrounding is essentially responsible for the way his vision of the world is organized." (Mounin, p. 50) Beyond the vision lies the real world. We can learn a new language because we can refer to the beginning to common situations lived by all humans. We share a common planet with the whole of humanity. We see stars, moon and sun in the same sky. We have some common ecological references. Since we are all humans, we also have a similar physiological organism. Even inside, we might say that we share common feelings of love and hatred,

joy and sadness, etc.

Sometimes, two languages share similar syntactic and grammatical forms. Most languages use personal pronouns, for instance. (Mounin, p. 209) Languages are grouped into families which share a common origin. We can refer to Greco-Latin origin for most of the occidental languages. We also have to admit, with Marshall McLuhan, that the earth is actually becoming a *Global Village*. Through electronic mass media, languages and cultures are coming closer and closer and influence each other more and more. In our modern world, the Occident touches the Orient and the isolated primitive people are becoming less isolated, more known, and less primitive.

Once we have learnt one language, it serves as a model to learn a new one. Once we have known two languages, then we are more capable to distinguish meaning from its linguistic sign. If one knows only the word *butter*, one may differentiate the thing from its linguistic representation, but one may not differentiate the word from its mental representation. If one knows two words to designate the same thing, *buerre* and *butter* for example, then it occurs in one's mind that the word is not the same as its mental representation. Now bilingual, the same person will understand that words and mental representations are two different ways of referring to a thing. She will distinguish, at last, the thing from the sign and the sign from the meaning.

Even when a person does not speak the newly acquired language too well, she is able to make herself understood by unilingual people. Take me, for example. You can understand by the way I talk that I am not a fluent English-speaking person. Nonetheless, you can understand well enough what I mean. Don't you? (Everybody says yes aloud here.) Even if I say, *me eat*, with my finger pointing to my mouth, you may come to understand that I am awfully hungry.

So the problem is not to know if we can or cannot transfer meaning through languages. We have to conclude here that translation is a universal mental skill used by all human beings in their common and uncommon activities. In other words, people are able to communicate even in the Babel tower. The question becomes then: How can we obtain a better communication? Or, in relation to our subject, how can we transfer meaning accurately?

3. HOW CAN WE TRANSFER MEANING ACCURATELY?

Just as Lipman talks about criteria for good reasons, so can we here list some criteria for good translations. A translation will be more accurate if:

1. The translator knows both the departing language and the receiving language very well.
2. The translator has a good understanding in both languages of the specific field the text is dealing with.
3. The translator has a good knowledge of the history of this field.
4. The translator has a good knowledge of the uses, customs and way of life presented in the text to be translated and the uses, customs and way of life of the people to which the translation is delivered.
5. The translator consults other translators and comes to an agreement with the author before editing his translation (if this author understands the receiving language).

All these rules may be summarized in the word experience. One need not be a professional translator in order to do accurate translation, but one needs to be experienced in the field one wants to translate, in the languages one wants to translate, and in the country's history and mentality. As J. P. Vinay puts it in one of the first Canadian manuals on translation, "A translator has to go beyond the signs to find the identical situations. From this situation must come a new set of signs which will be, by definition,

the ideal equivalence, the unique equivalence of the first ones." (Vinay, p. 22. See also figure 1 below).

Let us apply this principle to the translation of the Philosophy for Children curriculum. The novels and the manuals describe particular situations taken from American society. They also refer to American culture at large, and more specifically to American philosophy and poetry. One must first know these situations and these cultural references in order to find the corresponding situations and cultural aspects in his own culture (or the language of the culture in which the translation is made).

For instance, the flag question (Harry Stottlemeier Discovery, Chapters 9-12) might not have the same importance in different cultures: it may be more or less important.

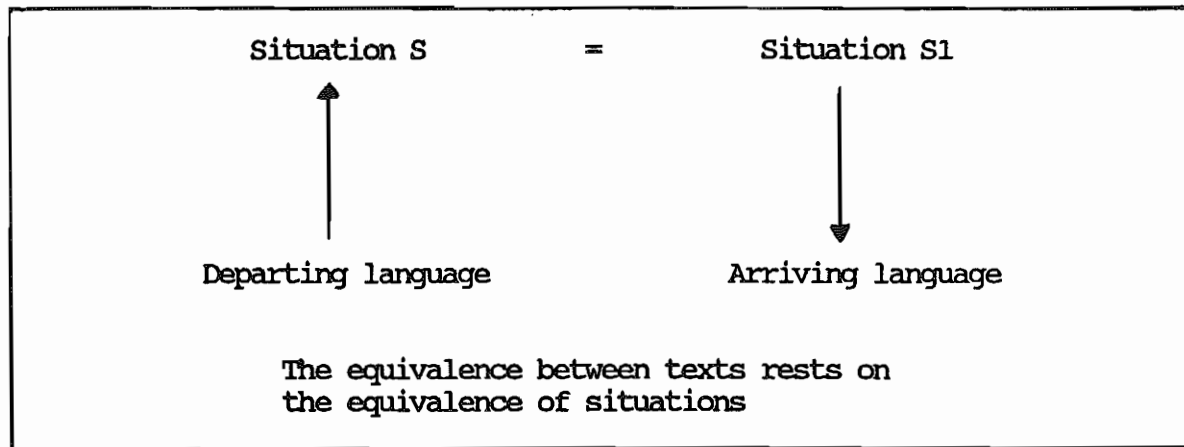


Figure 1 (Vinay, p. 22)

One has to find the most accurate situation, in which one could insert a similar dialogue. The same principle applies to philosophical concepts. For instance, in French, there is no word for translating the English word *mind*. The word *esprit*, for different reasons, does not always fit. The accurate wording will depend on the context in which the word *mind* is used. Once this context is known, one has to find a similar one in the French culture. It is only in this new context that one will be able to find the accurate French wording.

In conclusion, let us all assume here that the translations of the Philosophy for Children curriculum will help to spread the community of inquiry around the world. Each new translation will bring a new way of looking at the original story. As Pixie rightly pointed out, we never tell the same story twice. You have just heard my own personal way of looking at it.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Cf Lipman's Sonoma conference, presented at Mendham, August 1988.

² In French an *interprete* is the person that does oral translation.

³ It also happens, very often today, that a child does not learn how to talk, even though he is physically able to do so. This is also surprising in our very educated countries.

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