IS TRANSLATION A LINGUISTIC
OR A CULTURAL PROCESS?

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1. The English term "linguistic" has a general and a special meaning. In ordinary or standard language ("Gemeinsprache") *linguistic* means "of language", "belonging to language" ("sprachlich"), *language* taken in its everyday meaning, as in *English language, German language* etc. Thus, an expression like *a linguistic sign* may be paraphrased by *a sign of language* or, in more technical language, *a verbal sign* ("ein sprachliches Zeichen"), something one says or writes. *Language* has another, broader, almost metaphorical meaning when one speaks, for instance, of the language of animals or the language of nature. Language in such cases means any system of signs.

By contrast, in an expression like "linguistic terminology" ("Fachsprache") *linguistic* means "of linguistics", "belonging to linguistics" ("linguistisch")[1]. Here again, *linguistic* may refer to (a) the theory of language, as in *the linguistic theory* ("die sprachwissenschaftliche/linguistische Theorie"[2]) *of the structuralists* or (b) the science of language as, e. g. in neurophysical or biological approaches to language or the "organism" theory of the beginning of the 19th century[3] or a not-yet-begun fractal theory.

"Culture" has been defined in literally hundreds of ways (cf. Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1963; Baller and Kosolapow 1964). Here again a distinction can be made between standard and terminological use and in both the extensions of "culture" and "civilization" are not in a one-to-one relation to German "Kultur" and "Zivilisation". For

what follows we shall adopt Göhring's definition of "culture" modifying an older definition by Goodenough (Göhring 1978; Goodenough 1964; cf. Vivelo 1978, 36-39):

> "Kultur ist all das, was man wissen, beherrschen und empfinden können muß, um beurteilen zu können, wo sich Einheimische in ihren verschiedenen Rollen erwartungskonform oder abweichend verhalten, und um sich selbst in der betreffenden Gesellschaft erwartungskonform verhalten zu können, sofern man dies will und nicht etwa bereit ist, die jeweils aus erwartungswidrigem Verhalten entstehenden Konsequenzen zu tragen."

This definition may be summarised as follows: culture may be understood as the whole of norms and conventions governing social behaviour and its results.

Three remarks must be added:

(a) The 'whole' should really be understood in a holistic way, i.e. meaning more than the mere sum of norms and conventions (cf. Nagel 1965, 225-235).

(b) In analogy to linguistic usage we distinguish between para-,[4] dia- and idio-cultural phenomena.

(c) As language may be regarded as a norm governed phenomenon (cf. Heger 1969) and from a socio-linguistic point of view as a system of conventions, the above definition of "culture" includes language as one of its elements.[5]

Thus, a first answer to the question formulated in the title of this paper may be derived from the preceding definitions: although translation in its ordinary sense is generally thought of as a (primarily) linguistic transfer process it is, as such, at the same time a cultural process, because language is part of culture.[6]

2. Another possible source of an answer to the initial question may be modern philosophy. The evolutionary theory of knowledge ("evolutionäre Erkenntnistheorie") as developed by Eccles (1970), Lorenz (1941; 1987) and Vollmer (1983) defends a "parallel" evolution of the human brain to world evolution and therefore asserts that the human brain functions analogously to the "functioning" of the world. Therefore, perception and interpretation of the world are in principle a faithful representation ("Abbildung") of the world outside the human brain. The brain is in accordance with the "world" as far as it is necessary for man's survival to "know" the world.

Thus, human behaviour, biological, socio-cultural and linguistic, is parallel to the world (of which man is an element). Again, culture and language merge in a particular way: language as an element of culture.

3. A third possible answer to our question may be derived from anthropological and sociological theories of enculturation or socialization of the child:[7]

For the infant, "in the beginning" the world surrounding it is a constant passing of sensory impressions out of which gradually "holistic parts" are momentarily sorted out only to be forgotten and substituted by other impressions moments afterwards. As the infant begins to fix perceptions and, by and by, under the guidance of elders (parents etc.) and a little later play-mates, learns to distinguish and name things and happenings (first passively as a combination of "holistic parts" and sound impressions, later on actively as attempts to pronounce their names) the world passes from momentary impressions and chaos to a more or less ordered jumble of "things" and movements, a kind of often repeated and interrupted TV novela. Constant corrections in the active combination of impressions and sounds lead the child to a gradual world view as deemed "correct" by the "educators" who, themselves, are biologically and socially conditioned to enforce and reinforce their world view and thus make possible communication within the framework of an understandable and energy saving economic behaviour.

"Correct" behaviour essentially means the behaviour of the previous generation (that of the parents and older relatives). Cultural behaviour as taught to a child therefore is always a sort of "frozen" culture, retarding innovations in order to guarantee the continuation of communication between the generations. And language as a system of "frozen" signs designates this frozen culture and therefore "lags behind" cultural developments to a certain extent. (This is one of the reasons why culture and language are not in a one-to-one relation to each other. Cf., for example, that everyone still speaks today of the *rising sun* and we all know that 'in reality' it is the earth which moves.) The relationship between language and culture can best be understood as a dynamic or, better, dialectic one (cf. Sartre 1985 for the implications of such an approach).

Enculturation or socialization ensure a tight relationship between culture and language, although there is no (or not necessarily) a one-to-one relationship between language and culture.[8]

4. Taking together evolutionary philosophy (2) and enculturation (3), i. e. the adaptation of brain functions to the "world" and initiation of the infant into a specific "world view" ("Weltanschauung"/"Weltsicht" – cf. Weisgerber 1962ff; Whorf 1956), i. e. "culture", we get a fourth combined answer to our question.

Translation involves linguistic as well as cultural phenomena and processes and therefore is a cultural as well as linguistic procedure, and as language, now understood as a specific language, is part of a specific culture, translation is to be understood as a "cultural" phenomenon dealing with specific cultures: translation is a culture transcending process.

There is never a guarantee that the enculturation of a child will succeed completely. Elders will correct a child's verbal and nonverbal behaviour in so far as it deviates significantly from their own expectations – and "significantly" means for them noticeable. Smaller deviations may, therefore, go unnoticed and become a lifelong habit in the child. (We call it the "generation problem" and speak of "language" and "culture change".)

In any case, translation analysis will have to take into account phenomena of deviation. They are one reason amongst others why translations of the same text by different translators are bound to differ. Enculturation is an overall process, not a mathematically exact result – as, by the way, biological phenomena never are, (cf.Witte 1987, 109-136; Witte 1989).

5. Up to now we have looked at "culture" as a rather static phenomenon. After defining it as the whole of the conventions and norms of a society we may say that "behaviour" means practicing culture. In its broadest sense as an all embracing physical as well as mental process, including thinking and, of course, speaking and writing, listening and reading, behaviour is culture-as-action. All behaviour is goal-oriented, teleological.[9] "Skopos" (scope) oriented, as I have called it elsewhere (cf. Vermeer 1990).

To translate means to do something, to act. Here we have translation as a culture specific process, acting.[10] By the way, I am not so sure about thinking being a goal-oriented action in every case. Maybe it is partly just "happening", 'one can't help thinking'. Thinking is only partly linguistic and within this only partly grammatical. But we may leave this problem on one side for the moment.

6. We are 'people of the world', which means (amongst other things) that we "act" inevitably in a given situation taking this situation, or parts of it as far as they seem relevant to us, into account whilst acting. Linguistic, or as one more commonly says, verbal behaviour or "communication" is situation sensitive, as is all interaction. Interaction and therefore communication is always directed towards an interaction or communication partner. Taking her/him into consideration whilst "acting" means that we try to foresee her/his behaviour, moods, reactions to our behaviour, her/his knowledge ("Weltwissen") etc. And it also means that we know that (s)he knows that we do this and that (s)he does the same with reference to us. "Reflexive co-orientation" is the term for such knowledge and behaviour (Siegrist 1970).[11]

Reflexive co-orientation warns us not to transgress Grice's maxims for adequate behaviour. Except that such maxims again are culture specific (cf. Vermeer 1986, 247-268).

The conclusion is that translation as a sort of communication is subject to culture sensitive reflexive co-orientation and behavioural maxims. Except that translation deals with two cultures. Therefore, the target text will deviate in some way (or more exactly: in a specific way) from the form and content (and more often than not) scope (and therefore meaning) of the source text.

(Here I cannot go into details and prove my affirmation further. I refer the reader to my publications, especially Vermeer 1990.)

7. Let us return to language. The use of language is predominantly social (one talks to another person or group of persons, less often to oneself; as for thinking I have already mentioned that it is only partly linguistic). Today the primary social function of language seems to be of what Katharina Reiß called the "informative" type (Reiß 1983). (Perhaps 'in the beginning' it was more of a phatic or socializing type than nowadays; it may continue to be in very small communities where everyone knows anyway what happened and is going to happen. No necessity of telling it again.)

I should like to take language now in the broad sense mentioned above, comprising all that can be "informative" or "communicative". Thus, a broken twig may tell (inform) the scout that his group passed here and took such and such a direction. Traffic and other pictorial signs have long since been called tertiary signs of language, because they are derived short forms of information which may at any time be reconverted in ordinary linguistic utterances. (Writing has been called the secondary level of language.) One has also spoken of the language

may be understood as part of stylistics (or stylistics as part of rhetoric, it does not matter which way we take it). What is important is that translation is also a rhetorical act and therefore a complex communicative process. And we know already and expect its being repeated here that rhetoric is culture specific.

9. A general distinction is that between oral and written translation (interpretation vs. translation proper or translation in a strict sense). The essential differences between these two types of translation are that (1) in oral interpretation the communication partners and the interpreter normally act in each other's presence (face-to-face communication); the interpreter may even change his roles quickly from an interpreter to a commentator, explicator, even communication partner; (2) in written translation (much as in writing elsewhere) the translator does not enter into direct communication with her/his partner(s), but has to anticipate to a much greater degree than in the case of the interpreter what the target receptor knows and what she or he does not know etc. (cf. what was said above about reflexive co-orientation).

When in face-to-face communication something is not heard or understood, it may be repeated or paraphrased, discussed, modified, varied etc. During interpretation one partner sometimes addresses the interpreter directly: *Tell me what he has said*, and the interpreter then often acts as direct "mediator": *He said ...* (instead of translating in the speaker's first person singular). Interpretation clearly is goal-oriented, addressee sensitive, always subject to its specific situation (cf. the work done by Knapp + Knapp-Potthoff 1985 etc.) and not a "faithful" word-for-word rendering of a 'source text'. (Cf. the immigrant's child helping her/his mother in market bargaining.)

Again we have a clear example of translation being situation specific and situation being a complex phenomenon in which partners behave as real persons and not merely as "moving tongues". Translation is culture specific.

10. In written translation culture specificity is not less obvious. In 1984 Justa Holz-Mänttäri presented her "frame" for "translational acting" showing the main roles in a translation process to be represented by one or more persons or institutions (and sometimes in personal "union" of several roles for one person or institution). Holz-Mänttäri mentioned the initiator, the commissioner, the text producer, the translator, the target text applicator and the receptor

roles. Each person representing a role is an extremely complex phenomenon. (We'll come back to this, too.)

If translation is a process going on between a group of persons, each with their own interests and often enough intentions[13], in their different roles one can easily imagine that translation is not a purely linguistic transfer from one language to another. (That is one of the reasons why back translations do not work.)

11. Ultimately, there is still one more reason why translation should not be considered a "linguistic" phenomenon (alone). Linguistics in its modern sense deals with existing languages or language constructs and with communication as a consummated act. Linguistics is a "static" theory (or science[14]) analysing 'what is', whereas translation, contrary to "retrospective" linguistics, is a "prospective" (Postgate 1922) (teleological, scope-oriented, therefore "predictive" – but not wholly predictable) process. Translation as here understood is a professional activity which already presupposes a thorough knowledge and practical command of the respective working cultures and their languages. It therefore presupposes linguistics as well as cultural anthropology. But it is not part of linguistics nor even of comparative linguistics as is often maintained. Comparative linguistics compares, as its name says, existing structures of two or more languages (for example, the Latin ablative absolute with the Greek genitive absolute or plural formations in several Romance languages). But there being no one-to-one relation between such structures in a translation process in a given situation for a given text, translation cannot follow prefixed rules of "equivalence"[15].

12. To draw a final conclusion from the above remarks: Translation may be defined as a transcultural acting, acting being understood (as it "is") as teleological (scope-oriented, prospective) behaviour. Translation never is (as comparative linguistics may be said to employ) a transcoding of a source text into a target language.

On the contrary, an important conclusion from the foregoing conclusion would be that translation is rather a target text production ("designing") for a specific "scope" in a target situation for a specific target addressee (or addressee group) starting from an already existing source text. (And it is left to the just mentioned factors and the individual translator's skill in how far the source text and its elements will or can be taken into consideration in this designing process.)[16]

13. Generalizing the preceding definition, "translational acting" can be defined as a scope oriented transcultural text production under

given and clearly specifiable (and specified) circumstances. These culture specific circumstances predetermine to a great extent the text to be produced. A secretary with years of experience knows exactly how to word a business letter for a given purpose (and addressee) so that her boss will be fully satisfied with it – and her. There are several ways of writing a business letter. But under known circumstances the text is more or less fixed so that the secretary has no need of a "source text" to be translated and not even of much more information than receptor's address, certain data and the purpose of the letter.

Of course, a business letter is perhaps one of the simplest text models with the least variations. A literary novel will be at the other extreme of hardly predictable texts. Nyholm (1980, 231) considers novels ("Romane") etc. to be underdetermined ("unterdeterminiert") as to their text-type and function. (And yet, a thorough analysis reveals the time when and the authors by whom it was written; and the subject also follows more or less culture specific conventional patterns.)

14. Automatic translation, as it is approached today, cannot work. It is not enough to know a lexicon and its grammar to produce a text. But to start "top down" from culture specific conventional patterns might be one way to come nearer the desired result – provided such patterns will one day be known in detail. Who knows ...

Notes

1   A common mistake in German translations from the English is to translate *linguistic* in both cases, general as well as terminological, by "linguistisch". But German makes a clear distinction between "sprachlich" and "sprachwissenschaftlich/linguistisch".

2   Sometimes a distinction is made in German between *linguistisch* referring to modern, particularly structural linguistics, and *sprachwissenschaftlich* as denoting pre-structural linguistic theories since the beginning of the 19th century.

3   For an interesting blending of socio-biological views with an organismic theory v. Bonfim (s. a. – cf. Klinger 1990, 22-25).

4   I take the term from Gerstenkorn (1971, 155-169).

5   Translation is defined by Terracini (1957, 56) as a transposition of language from one culture to another ("trasporlo da una forma culturale ad un'altra"). Cf. ib. (96): "la traduzione non è una riproduzione, ma una trasposizione da un ambiente culturale ad un altro". – Pergnier (1978) is much too traditional to be able to contribute to the subject in question.

6   We shall not go into details here as to the exact relation of language and culture. They certainly do not stand in a simple one-to-one relationship to each other, and this is by no means implied in the above assertion about language as an element of "culture".

7 It is not necessary to make a distinction between "enculturation" and "socialization" here.

8 "[L]a lingua ora è in piena armonia ora si trova in conflitto" with culture (Terracini 1957, 11).

9 It is unnecessary to detail here the vast literature on the subject. Cf. for some sampling Vermeer (1986).

10 That is why Justa Holz-Mänttäri (1984) speaks of translation as "translatorisches Handeln". We shall see more of it soon. Cf. Nyholm (1980, 230): "Jede Kommunikation ist eine soziale Handlung zwischen agierenden Personen".

11 The oldest formula of reflexive co-orientation I know of is found in João de Barros' *Décadas* of the 16th century. – Co-orientation is also valid for literary texts: "Der Schriftsteller konzipiert zwar sein Werk im Hinblick auf eine bestimmte Lesergruppe, von der er sich bestimmte subjektive Vorstellungen gemacht hat. Er weiß aber nicht, ob er überhaupt einen adäquaten Leserkreis erreicht. Die tatsächlichen Leser kennen dagegen im allgemeinen die Entstehungssituation des Textes nicht genau, sondern verstehen den Text aufgrund ihrer Erfahrungen." (Nyholm 1980, 229)

12 Whether an utterance is considered communicative or not depends either on the producer or on the receptor (or on both); see above.

13   For a differentiation between intention and function cf. Nord (1988).

14 Cf. the discussion about the term "science", e. g. in connection with Wilss (1977) and (1982).

15 The term "equivalence" has been much misused throughout discussions on translation. I should like to avoid it and rather speak of "adequacy" in translation. Cf. Reiß in Reiß + Vermeer (1984).

16 We shall not talk about culture specific restrictions on what is said here. Translation theories may act as such culture specific restrictions. – For further details for translation as culture specific acting see Vermeer (1990). As an introduction cf. Ammann (1990).

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