

SEMANTIC VALUES AND STRUCTURAL MEANING IN THE ANALYSIS OF SPOCK'S BABY AND CHILD CARE

Marcos Antonio Morgado de Oliveira
UFSC

I - Introduction

ANY PAPER ON TRANSLATION CANNOT AVOID making comments on the hard task of translating, the difficulties a translator might have, and the quality of the final product. This one could not be different, although my intent is mainly to look at the adequate or inadequate choices that the translator has made when translating the text to be analyzed here. But before starting anything, what is the real subject of translation? What role does a translator play?

According to Vinay & Darbelnet (1995), '...translation is used for making known what has been said or written in a foreign language. Consequently translators themselves do not translate in order to understand, but to make others understand. They have understood the text before translating it.'(p. 8). Therefore, translation helps one to fulfill her/his needs for information, but it possibly creates a problem for the translator. S/he might understand the source text, but might not be able to make others understand. That is, the translated text might not represent the source text properly because of the choices made by the translator. Thus, the quality of a translated text will depend upon the translator's abilities and knowledge of the languages and cultures in question. Or, as Schnaiderman (1996) states, '...chego à conclusão de que os limites

da tradução são única e exclusivamente os limites da competência do tradutor, desde que não se considerem fatores contingentes como tempo disponível, possibilidades de reflexão etc.' (p.24).

Having said that, I will analyse the translator's choices, in the first instance, at word level, or more specifically the differences in meaning between the words chosen and the words of the source text. That is, to what extent the translator paid attention to 'particularisation' and 'generalisation' or differences in extensions or semantic values of the words of both languages. And, I will also look at the 'structural meaning' of the message in the translated text in comparison to the 'structural meaning' of the source text (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995).

II - The corpus

I have chosen to work with a book titled *Baby and Child care* by Dr. Benjamin Spock because of my involvement with the subject and the rearing of my own child. The book, said to be a best-seller worldwide, has 687 pages and it would be impossible to work on it as a whole. Therefore, I have decided to focus on the instances that I found problematic. For the analysis at word level, I concentrated on the headings and sub-headings of chapters and their sections and also some sentences. For the analysis of the 'structural meaning' of the message, I concentrated on some paragraphs of different chapters and sections. Also, the English language edition of the book is the fourth while the one in the Portuguese language is the fifth. Although there are some additions to the fourth edition, I have worked on parts of the text that clearly have remained the same.

III - A Theoretical basis

1) at word level

Vinay & Darbelnet (1995) explain that ‘The most basic lexicological distinction between words occurs at the level of the range of their extensions.’(p.58). That is, the meaning of a given word might vary in extension from one language to another. For instance, “‘Skin’ corresponds to ‘*peau*’ but ‘*peau*’ is not necessarily always skin, because the skin of certain animals is called ‘hide’ (e.g. cows, elephants).”(p.59). Thus, in my analysis I will assess the extension of the meanings of the words chosen in Portuguese in comparison to the extension of the meanings of the words in English.

2) The meaning of the message

‘[Structural meaning] emerges from the structure created by the lexical elements and the order into which they are put by the rules of the grammar.’(Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995, p.165). That is, changes in word order and verb tense, addition or omission of lexical elements among other things might change the meaning conveyed in the source text. Thus, I will assess how the translator has worked with structural meaning in some instances of the translated text.

IV - The Analysis

1) at word level

The first word which called my attention when analysing the translated text (TT) was the choice made for the translation of the word *parents*. In English, according to the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*, parents are one’s mother and father, and not only one or

the other. In the following examples, the translator chose to translate parents as either mother or father:

- a. Spoiling comes on gradually when *parents* are too afraid to...
Os maus hábitos despontam aos poucos, quando a *mãe* tem medo de...
- b. I think that *parents* in our society should be aware...
Acredito que as *mães* de nossa sociedade devem se conscientizar...
- c. ... and the *parents* are afraid to deny them this pleasure...
... e sua *mãe* teme contrariá-lo, ...
- d. Can the *parents* comfortably accept their cross feelings?
Consegue o *pai* conformar-se com suas zangas?

It seems that in the examples above the translator assumes that the readership of this book is made up of only women who are or will be mothers. One semantic value of *parents* is that of both the mother and the father and its counterpart in Portuguese is *pais* that, although it is the plural of father, it is also used to refer to both the father and the mother. Therefore it is quite strange that the translator opted for such a solution which seems rather biased.

A second instance refers to the translation of the word *baby*. One of its meanings is that of a small child who cannot walk or talk yet. In Portuguese, there is a cognate word, *bebê*, that fits the same meaning but, the translator opted for *filho* and *ele*:

- a. Enjoy your *baby*
Deleite-se com seu *filho*
- b. *Babies* aren't frail
Ele não é frágil

In the first example, the word *filho* refers to a boy which is not what the word *baby* means. *Baby* in English does not have gender and a possible option to be used instead of *bebê* could be *filhos*, which, like *pais*, can refer to both a boy and a girl.

In the second example the word *ele* could have been used to match the word *baby*, because the word *bebê* in Portuguese has a masculine gender. But in the example the word *babies* is in the plural and, therefore, the word *ele* does not seem to fit.

The next instance is with the word *care*:

- Books about child *care*, ...
- Livros sobre a *higiene* da criança, ...

The extent of the meaning of the word *care* here is much broader than the extent of the meaning of the word *higiene*. The word *higiene* is related to cleanliness, that is, keeping one clean in order to avoid diseases. *Care*, on the other hand, refers to everything that is involved in the task of looking after a child, for instance, such as feeding, clothing, playing and also hygiene. Thus, the option used does not seem to be adequate.

One last instance at word level refers to the translation of the word *catch*. One of the many meanings that this word has, and which is the one referred to in the source text, is the sort of game where children throw a ball to each other. In the examples below, the option made by the translator seems actually mistaken:

- a. The man who is eager for his son to become an athlete may take him out at an early age to play *catch*.
O homem, ansioso para que seu filho se torne um atleta, pode levá-lo cedo demais para aprender *luta*.
- b. A game of *catch* is fine if it's the son's idea and if it's for fun.
Uma *luta* é ótima quando a idéia é do filho e é levada a efeito como diversão.

The meaning of *luta* does not correspond to the meaning of *catch* and is therefore unsuitable. What made the translator decide for *luta* instead of *jogo de bola* is rather puzzling and arbitrary, since not even the context seems to support such change.

These problematic choices presented here are not the only ones

concerning word choice. There are many others but, as mentioned above, it would be impossible to discuss all of them here.

2) The meaning of the message

Some changes in the structure of the sentences below show how the meaning was changed in the TT.

- a. You hear that a baby is easily spoiled by being picked up too much but also that a baby must be cuddled plenty;
 Você ouve dizer que pegar a criança a todo momento contribui para deseducá-la, e que também a criança não deve ser mimada em demasia.

The conjunction *but* translated as the conjunction *e*, the addition of the negative and the choice of *mimada* as *cuddled* clearly show distortions in the message. The idea of contrast that is brought by the use of *but* was changed into an idea of addition with the conjunction *e*. Similarly, the verb *to cuddle* carries an affectionate meaning which is not conveyed in the word *mimada*, and the addition of the negative had contributed to make the whole sentence sound odd.

- b. They get the impression that they are meant to have no needs themselves.
 Adquirem a impressão de que são quase desnecessários.

Here, the author explains how much children are demanding, and because of that he emphasizes the idea that parents seem not to have time for themselves. By translating the verb in the passive voice as active and as if it were the verb to be, and also the negative + the noun *needs* as *desnecessários* was enough to pass the funny idea that parents are not needed or they can be discarded.

- c. ... cleaning up messes that an infant makes with food

and that an older child makes with play...
... limpar a sujeira que o bebê faz com seus alimentos, ver
como ele usa os seus brinquedos...

The translator simply ignores the subject *an older child*, adds a verb, *ver*, which is not in the original, translates the verb to *make* as *usa* and the word *play* as *brinquedo*. What the author meant was that parents are most of the time after their kids to clean up the mess they have just done, which seems not to have been understood by the translator.

d. The father may be home in time to give the bath before
the 6 p.m. or 10 p.m. feeding.

O pai pode até gostar de lhe dar o banho antes das refeições das 18 ou das 22 horas.

Again, it is difficult to know why the translator opted to ignore the whole chunk *be home in time* and translate it as *até gostar de*. In the source text it is meant that the help of the father is important, while in the TT the message became something like 'the father does not do it but, if he tries, he might even like it'.

e. On the days when you don't give him a full bath, give a
sponge bath in the diaper area.

Nos dias em que você lhe der banho completo, faça uma limpeza com uma esponja molhada na região da fralda.

In this example the negative was omitted and was enough to change the meaning completely. The way it was translated, the sentence became odd since when one bathes a child, one will surely clean the diaper area.

f. He can sit in the waiting room with some old magazines
and worry about how the labor is going...

Poderá afundar numa poltrona da sala de espera durante longas horas, relendo revistas velhas ou acompanhando com

a imaginação o trabalho do parto...

In this last example the translator decided to add some other words that were not in the original text. Funny though, this decision helped the translated text sound more dramatic than the original one. The verb *afundar*, the time expression *durante longas horas* and the translation of *worry* as *acompanhando com a imaginação* all helped the translator to make this part of the text rather poetic. Although *worry* does not correspond to *acompanhando com a imaginação* this example shows that a translator is able to work on a text and come up with not totally bad results.

As with the previous analysis, many other instances of problematic translation were left out. The point here was not to list all of them but instead analyse some of them.

V - Conclusion

Criticising is, obviously, much easier than being responsible for the translation of a text and responding to all the counter-arguments that such translation may give rise to. It is difficult, or almost impossible, to know under which conditions the translator had to work. Most of the time, the major constraint is time itself or its availability. The 'possibilidades de reflexão', as Schnaiderman puts it, mentioned above are also another constraint.

The fact is that, although we know about such constraints, the analysis presented here shows examples of inadequate choices made by the translator and consequent loss of the intended meaning present in the original. That does not mean that all the translated text is mistaken. Basically, most part of the work was fairly reasonable.

Finally, the sort of analysis carried out in this paper is helpful, to a certain extent, since it reveals some of the complexities and requirements involved in the job of translators.

References

- COSTA, L. A. (ed.) 1996. *Limites da traduzibilidade*. Salvador: EDUFBA.
- SINCLAIR, J. (ed.) 1995. *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.
- SPOCK, B. 1977. *Baby and child care*. (4th ed.). New York: Wallaby Books.
- SPOCK, B. 1985. *Meu filho, meu tesouro: como criar seus filhos com bom senso e carinho*. V. Rumjanek (trans.) (5th ed.). Rio de Janeiro: Record.
- VINAY, J.-P. & DARBELNET, J. 1995. *Comparative stylistics of French and English: a methodology for translation*. J.C. Sager, M.-J. Hamel (trans. & eds.) The Netherlands, USA: John Benjamins Publishing Co.

