

Semantic Field and Translation

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The idea of writing a paper on the issue of the semantic field and translation stems out from our contacts and work with our postgraduate students in the Translation Department. All in all, they seem to stress much on the mental processes of language and how they can be related to meaning in different languages than on translation proper.

This article attempts to embark on a linguistic exploration of meaning and avoid as much as possible any mentalistic (or behaviourist) talk on meaning. We shall first give some definitions of meaning, then see how meaning is related to translation through the concept of 'semantic field'. We assume that words are mirrors of reality as encompassed in our human past, present and future experiences. We shall thus leave the definition of reality to psychologists and philosophers and work on the basis that this reality is moulded by means of words and sentences as dictated by our own perception of the outside world.

In fact, this article tries to demonstrate that an approach to language for translation purposes would be more rewarding when the translator confines himself to observable facts. Reference to the very intricate mental processes of language in order to perform a "true" translation is, we believe, a diversion from the actual goal of the translator as well as a waste of his time and energy.

We shall start the debate on meaning and translation with Sapir and Worf's hypothesis on language and thought. "*Language shapes thought*", this hypothesis claims. Thus, we conceive of reality according to our language. Language is compared to 'a piece of cloth' from which different clothes can be made. Put otherwise, the same reality is cut differently according to different languages. This hypothesis triggered off in fact the whole debate on meaning.

In his book *Language* (1933), Bloomfield attempts a rigorous definition of meaning, avoiding as much as possible any reference to thought and symbolisation. He writes:

We can define the meaning of a speech-form accurately when this meaning has to do with some matter of which we possess scientific knowledge. We can define the names of minerals, for example, in terms of chemistry and mineralogy, as when we say that the ordinary meaning of the English word salt is 'sodium chloride (NaCl)', and we can define the names of plants or animals by means of the technical terms of botany or zoology, but we have no precise way of defining words like love or hate, which concern situations that have not been accurately classified - and these latter are in the great majority. (Language, p. 139)

This definition may be regarded as a prelude to the difficulties the translator encounters when he tackles a text where he has to extrapolate the meaning of a piece of language from SL (the Source Language) to express it in TL (the Target Language). We shall see that it would perhaps be better if one tried to map on the semantic field of SL onto that of TL and thus come to the closest possible translation.

The basic assumption behind the theory on the semantic field is that the lexical items (let's call them words) are not mere representations of concepts acquired by man through experience. They involve more intricate processes that we are not often aware of. They constitute areas or fields of inter-relations between linguistic signs on the basis of which each and every sign takes its "relative value". The case of colour words is often cited as a sound illustration of the semantic field. A colour word such as {blue} takes its meaning by virtue of its relation to the other colour words in the spectrum. It is only then that we demarcate it somehow from the other colour words. Put differently, one may look at the meaning of words in terms of components which are put to contrast with other components to form oppositions within a semantic field or "area of meaning" dictated by our perception of reality. A

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basic example would be the semantic field for {human race}. This field covers concepts such as [man / woman / boy / girl ...]. Each word within this field would then be assigned a number of semantic features such as [+ male, + adult...] to give it what we refer to here as a "relative value". It is "relative" because it is sometimes difficult to give a word "its meaning" by having recourse to antonyms and synonyms. As a matter of fact, what would be the antonym for {woman} in terms of semantic features? Both [+girl] and [+man] stand as potential opponents, and the choice is often very difficult to make.

Similarly, the meaning of a word may sometimes be closely related to the position it occupies in the structure of a sentence. Consequently, semantics has long been a kind of challenge to syntax without necessarily taking over it. The famous controversy between the generative semanticists and the interpretive semanticists following Chomsky's generative model (1965) is a clear indication of the idiosyncrasies resulting from theoretical persuasions on meaning.

Chomsky's approach to meaning in *Syntactic Structures* (1957) was based on the assumption that syntactic rules were totally independent from meaning which was then seen as a "residue". He stressed on the fact that syntactic rules were paraphrastic or meaning preserving rules. They related surface structure representations to deep structure representations without altering meaning.

Katz and Fodor's famous article on "The Structure of a Semantic Theory" (1963) came as a reaction to Chomsky's claim that syntactic rules paraphrase. The classical case of "*Nixon voted for himself*" that boils down to "Nixon voted for Nixon" in the terminal string, whereas "*Everybody voted for himself*" would give *"everybody voted for everybody" (which in fact is not used in a normal discourse), is a clear indication that Chomsky's rules are not always paraphrastic.

To round up this brief talk on the wide and wild area of meaning, mention should be made of some theoretical frameworks that attempt to categorise meaning for a better understanding of this aspect of language.

Linguistic communication by means of articulated language allows us to distinguish various shades of meaning. A careful distinction leads to the

categorisation of meaning into different types. The conceptual meaning, sometimes referred to in the literature as "denotative" or "cognitive" meaning is handled via contrasting features. Thus, the meaning of the word {man} will be specified as [+human, +male, +adult] as opposed to {girl} which is [+human, -male, -adult]. The connotative meaning refers to the communicative values of words. If the word {man} is characterised by the features [+human, +male, +adult], then the three features (human, male, adult) constitute the basis of an acceptable use of the word {man} and the meaning it entails. The connotative meaning is often defined as peripheral in contrast with the conceptual meaning which is regarded as a codified type of meaning. Thus, for the conceptual meaning of {woman}, one gets [+human, -male, +adult] which refers to any woman in the world. The connotative meaning, on the other hand, is peripheral in that the features that characterise the word in question may change from one culture to another. Thus, a woman in Europe may be characterised as [+gentle, +emotional, +monogamous...] whereas a woman in the Arab World may be characterised as [+housewife, -courageous, +obedient...]. The conceptual meaning is often related to linguistic referents whereas the connotative meaning may take linguistic, visual or auditory referents. It may be represented by a drawing, an advert, or a sound (a noise such as a baby cry asking for milk, or water, or food, etc.).

The stylistic meaning involves the social settings in which language is used. At the level of pronunciation, for instance, style may be standard, dialectal, colloquial, local, etc. (cf. Classical Arabic, Literary Arabic, Educated Spoken Arabic, Colloquial Arabic, etc.). It may also include male vs. female speech or "sexlects".

Stylistic variation is also categorised. Crystal and Davy (1969) give some guide-lines to stylistic variation. It may represent a relatively permanent type of style as in the case of idiolects (individual speech variety), dialects (social or regional varieties) or a stereotyped style (e.g. The style of Arabic used during the Nahdha). Discourse also forms part of stylistic variation, be it in speech or in writing. A love letter, a monologue or a dialogue represent as many stylistic variations encountered in language. Relatively temporary features of style appear in the language of medicine, or advertising.

Finally, the reflective meaning usually refers to cases of conceptual meaning, or what is known as synonymy. A word may "reflect" the general

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meaning of another word, as in {woman} and {lady}, {child} and {infant}, respectively. The collocative meaning, on the other hand, involves possible meaning associations that a word may suggest (semantic relatedness). For example, the words {pretty} and {handsome} can be related to the semantic field of {good-looking}. In cases of meaning overlapping, the meaning of a word may overlap with that of another, as in {a pretty girl} and {a handsome girl}. Both are acceptable in English but they refer to different judgements of {a girl}. When one says “a pretty girl” he is referring to her face features in the first place. When he says “a handsome girl” he may be referring to the way she’s dressed. Quasi-synonymous verbs such as {wander} and {stroll} are also cases of collocative meaning. Yet, one may sometimes wander without necessarily strolling (or vice-versa). The thematic meaning generally involves focus. When one focuses his speech on a particular event, he may use different syntactical constructions (or strategies) to give a ‘particular’ meaning to what he says. This is usually done through the active/passive constructions where the focus is either on the agent (active form) or the patient (passive form), as in:

Agent: Jack drives a car.

Patient: A car is driven by Jack

This overall picture on the various types of meaning is far from being exhaustive. Nevertheless, it presents a sound basis for the translator who has to be aware of these differences in SL in order to equate them as best as possible with meaning differences in TL.

It thus appears that the debate on meaning is a very intricate and complex matter, though a very exciting and interesting one. It becomes even more interesting when one tries to relate this to the problem of translation and whether translation is possible taking into account the gaps (lexical, syntactic, semantic, cultural etc.) that may exist between different languages. To illustrate this, suffice here to mention the classical example between German and English, or cases of “mistranslations” between languages with the same cultural backgrounds such as British English and American English.

Among other things, German has a phrase that represents a gap in English and which is often cited in the literature on language gaps. The content plane “brothers and/or sisters” in German commutes with the expression plane “Geschwister” which in isolation is equated with the English expression plane “brothers and/or sisters”. Suppose now that the translator comes across a

sentence in German like "Ich kenne seine Geschwister". How shall he translate this into English? Neither "I know his brothers" nor "I know his sisters" will satisfactorily translate the sentence of SL into TL. On the other hand, translating it by "I know his brothers and sisters" would give more information than needed because he may have no brothers or no sisters. This leaves us with the alternative translation "I know his brothers or his sisters" which again is not used in English as it represents a nonsense.

Other types of language gaps may be seen in the semantic field of a word or expression used in closely related languages. Thus, while "pavement" in American English refers to a paved road or roadway, it refers in British English to a 'walking' rather than a 'driving' or 'cycling' area. The latter is rendered in American English by "sidewalk". Thus, a sign post such as "No Cycling on Pavement" in the United States takes an opposite meaning in Britain because the semantic fields of the word "pavement" mismatch rather than meet.

The translator should be aware of these meaning mismatches between SL and TL. He should also view language as inherently heterogeneous which implies that differences or misunderstandings are bound to occur since meaning boils down to a mental process to which we have no access. It's only then that he may as well try to understand how can the concept of semantic field be applied to translation and how it can help him map a meaning from SL onto a meaning in TL and vice-versa rather than go for the word-for-word type of translation that most of our students seem to favour in their translation tasks.

For the sake of illustration, let's take the classical case of colours as it represents the most frequently cited example in lexical equivalence. Colours and similar continuous phenomena are often difficult to translate from one language to another as the borderline may be dim or difficult to delimit. Take the case of the usual French shades of blue which are: Bleu/ Bleu clair/ Bleu ciel / Bleu roi / Bleu pétrole/ Bleu ardoise/ Bleu canard/ Bleu nuit / Bleu marine/ Bleu foncé. The shades of Blue encountered in English are Blue / Sky blue / Light blue/ Dark blue / Blue black /. Suppose we had to translate a word like "bleu pétrole" in English. "Bleu pétrole" is a dark bleu stretching towards the green. Let's say a greenish blue. Now if we compared the semantic fields for "Blue" characterised as [+colour] in the two languages, we get something like:

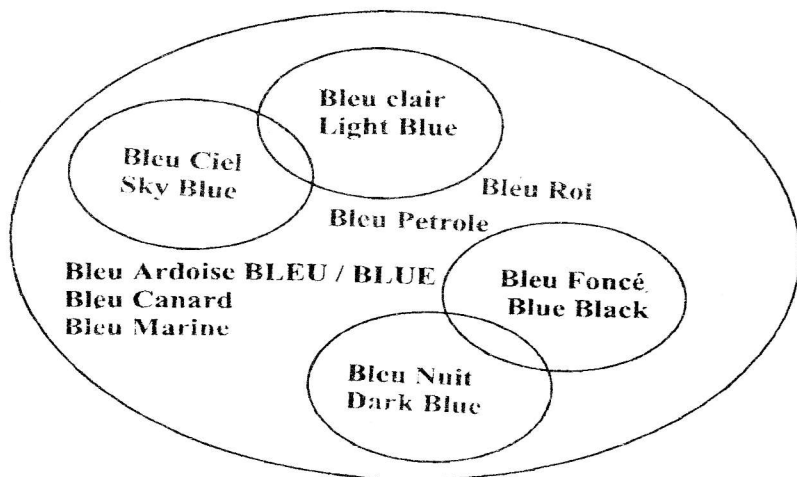
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FRENCH:

Bleu → B.Cl. → B.C. → B.R. → B.P. → B.A. → B.Cd. → B.N. → B.M. → B.F.

ENGLISH:

Blue → Sky blue → Light blue → Dark blue → Blue black Bleu Clair



The pie chart above shows that when the sub-semantic fields (or ingredients) within the semantic field for French Bleu vs. English blue match, the translation from SL on to TL is quite straightforward. Nevertheless, a word like “Bleu Pétrole” doesn’t seem to have an equivalent in English and this is where the problem lies for the translator. He might be tempted to translate it by “Dark Blue”, but dark blue in English does not involve any green in it. The alternative would be “Blue Black” but blue black appears to have an equivalent

in our schematised semantic field for blue. He’s thus left with either the global term Blue or a paraphrase using the English structures “greenish bleu” or “bluish green” where the choice of the first one is, we believe, the closest in meaning to the French construct “Bleu pétrole”.

We may push the case further. “Bleu Roi” refers specifically to the blue colour of the French Flag. Therefore, a sentence like “Je voudrais la robe en

bleu roi” may be translated as “I’d like [prefer(?)] the blue black dress” which is not exactly the same colour as the French counterpart. These are but basic instances of semantic mismatches that the translator often encounters.

Other continuous phenomena such as temperature may also be a source of translation difficulties. If this is the case, we can only approximate the meaning in TL by looking at the semantic fields in both languages and opt for the closest possible meaning. The English temperature words hot → warm → cool → cold characterised as [+temperature] do not always match on a one-to-one relationship with lexical terms from other languages. The semantic fields for English and Spanish indicate that the choice is a difficult one at times:

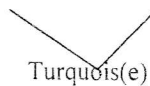
ENGLISH : hot → warm → cool → cold

SPANISH : caliente, calido, caluroso (hot) → tibio, templado (warm) → fresco, (cool) → frio (cold).

A one-to-one relationship (or a word-for-word translation) does not often seem to be possible and the task of the translator would be to map somehow the semantic fields in both languages in order to come up with translatable terms.

Other cases exist in terms of colour mismatch. The French colour word ‘turquois(e)’ is a case in point. “Turquois(e)” is equated in English dictionaries to a “bluish-green” or a “greenish blue”. Locating this word (and the meaning it bears) in relation to the spectrum of colours in English and we get something like:

Red → Orange → Yellow → Green → Blue → Purple.



We thus see that unlike the definitions of the dictionaries, the cognate for ‘turquois(e)’ lies somewhere between Green and Purple in the English spectrum of colours. We shall leave this issue open to debate and further investigation.

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