

TRANSLATION AND THE MODERN THEORIES OF MEANING

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Since translation is, above all, an activity that aims at conveying meaning or meanings of a given-linguistic discourse from one language to another, rather than the words or grammatical structures of the original, we should look briefly at the most recent developments in the field of the study of “meaning”, or semantics.

Until the 1960s, ‘translation theory’ remained an obscure and barely explored domain or discipline positioned uncomfortably in academic institutions somewhere between literary studies and linguistics. In fact, in both literary studies and linguistics, some leading standpoints claimed or implied that translation is in theory impossible, however much it may be practiced (Beaugrande, 1997).⁽¹⁾ Notable instances include Edward Sapir's (1921:222) suggestion that we might imagine 'a work of literary art can never be translated' insofar as the 'effects' due to 'the formal "genius"' of

a 'language' or to 'the color and the texture of its matrix' 'cannot be carried over without loss or modification'; and Noam Chomsky's (1965:201) avowal that linguistics cannot be expected to specify any 'reasonable procedure for translating between languages' because 'an encyclopedia' of 'extralinguistic information' would be demanded.

The asymmetry between translation and semantics might be viewed as one of the many consequences of a massive asymmetry between theory and practice (cf. Beaugrande 1997).

Since "translation has often been defined with reference to meaning" (Catford 1965:35), this paper aims at tracing the fullness and reduction of **meaning** in the modern theories of meaning by reviewing these theories as interpreted by their innovative theorists.

Three technical tools have blossomed in the twentieth century to contribute to understanding language, "but at the same time when clumsy used, threaten to reduce meaning to one dimension" (Poythress 2004).

These tools are Symbolic logic, Structural linguistics, and Translation Theory. This paper will deal with them in chronological order, so it will be easy to follow the evolution of the concept of meaning in them.

1. Symbolic logic

Logic can be traced all the way back to Aristotle. Although various abbreviations were accomplished through symbols, even in the works of Aristotle himself, the use of symbols in an explicit formal system, blossomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Symbolic logic began with George Boole (1847) and Earnest Schroder (1890-1905). It was developed further by Gottlob Frege (1879), and finally culminated in the Principia Mathematica of Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead (1910-13) (Britannica 2000).

The distinction between truth and validity is the fundamental distinction of formal logic. Suber (1997) illustrates that it is only by the clearness and familiarity of this distinction, logicians see things .

In (Ibid) Suber puts the following table to show this distinction:

True Premises, False Conclusion		
0.	Valid	Impossible: no valid argument can have true premises and a false conclusion.
1.	Invalid	Cats are mammals. Dogs are mammals. Therefore, dogs are cats.
True Premises, True conclusion		
2.	Valid	Cats are mammals. Tigers are cats. Therefore, tigers are mammals.
3.	Invalid	Cats are mammals. Tigers are mammals. Therefore, tigers are cats.
False Premises, False conclusion		
4.	Valid	Dogs are cats. Cats are birds. Therefore, dogs are birds.
5.	Invalid	Cats are birds. Dogs are birds. Therefore, dogs are cats.
False Premise, True conclusion		
6.	Valid	Cats are birds. Birds are mammals. Therefore, cats are mammals.
7.	Invalid	Cats are birds. Tigers are birds. Therefore, tigers are cats.

(Peter Suber 1997)

Through the seven samples arguments above Suber establishes the following general principles of logic:

- **True premises do not guarantee validity.**
(Proved by cases 1 and 3 in the table above.)
- **A true conclusion does not guarantee validity.**
(Proved by cases 3 and 7.)
- **True premises and a true conclusion together do not guarantee validity.**
(Proved by case 3)
- **Valid reasoning does not guarantee a true conclusion.**
(Proved by case 4.)
- **False premises do not guarantee invalidity.**
(Proved by cases 4 and 6.)
- **A false conclusion does not guarantee invalidity.**
(Proved by case 4.)
- **False premises and a false conclusion together do not guarantee invalidity.**
(Proved by case 4.)
- **Invalid reasoning does not guarantee a false conclusion.**
(Proved by cases 3 and 5.)

"Therefore, while the truth of propositions and the validity of reasoning are distinct, the relationship between them is not entirely straightforward"(Ibid). The sharp separation of semantics from syntax used in symbolic logic leads to clear distinction between the validity of an argument (semantics) and the deductibility of the conclusion from axioms and premises (syntax).

The basis of modern symbolic approach is the logical relations among whole sentences and its great power is based on the important notion of a propositional function. It works well in uncovering logical fallacies in informal reasoning. But what about its limitation? Since human communication occurs in long discourse and social interaction, the use of mathematical logic, which requires that we begin with isolated sentences, will involve a reduction of the full richness of this communication. What is worthy to be mentioned here is that the symbolic logic requires

that a sentence be isolated from its situational context, therefore it treats the sentence in terms of its truth value. But the meaning of a whole discourse or of one sentence within it includes more than the fact that it is true or false.

Symbolic logic is so obviously reductive in its approach to meaning.

2. Structural Linguistics

As it does with symbolic logic, this paper needs to appreciate the value of linguistics and also to inquire after its limitations. It will focus particularly on the issue of how linguistics treats meaning.

2.1 Ferdinand de Saussure, 1906-11

Structural linguistics had its origin in the lectures of Ferdinand de Saussure in 1906-1911, which were compiled into the book *Course in General Linguistics*⁽²⁾.

Saussure broke new ground by drawing the distinction between diachronic and synchronic linguistics and drew different distinction between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech). For Saussure, *langue* referred to the unobservable underlying structure of language and *parole* was the outward manifestation of that structure (Lyons 1981:9-11). Linguistics will study language (*langue*) as a system, instead of studying speech (*parole*). That is, it will deal with all native speakers by studying their common systematic regularities, rather, than the particularities of every individual speech by every individual speaker.

A reasonable approach to the meaning of a particular communication (*parole*) should put into consideration three factors: the speaker, the audience, and the circumstances. These factors highly affect the slight differences of a particular speech or text. The meaning of a particular *parole* depends on the particular words and their meaning. But it is not simply mechanical product of

word meaning, but includes a complex particular texture that varies with circumstances. Saussure cut off the variations in order to study “the system”.

Saussure (1959: 65) cut off the influence of syntagmatic context (that is textual context) when focusing on word meaning, and this move flattens out the complexity of meaning. Later on Saussure added context back in with his distinction between syntagmatic and associative (or paradigmatic) relations (Ibid; 124-27). But the reduction of meaning has been done since the consideration of syntagms still relies on words as its starting point.

Saussure introduced a model for linguistic signs with three parts: the “sound –image” or signifier, the “concept” or signified, and the “sign” that consists of both parts together. "For example, the word arbor in Latin associates the concept of tree with the sound-image of a sequence a+r+b+o+r" (Ibid; 65). This associates the meaning with the concept while the form consists in the sound-image. This move defines more rigorously the distinction between form and meaning. But it introduces a subtle reductionism in the thinking about meaning. Children often learn the meaning of milk and soap, cats and dogs, from their occurrences in the social situation where there is reference to a real-word object. Saussure has left out reference and settled on concept. The language system does not directly refer to objects in the world in the same way that specific speakers refer to such objects in specific speeches (parole). But one can never understand meaning in its fullness if one leaves out reference.

When shifting from "meaning" to "value", Saussure proposed another reduction. Saussure says, “language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others” (ibid; 114). By the word “value” Saussure means the significance that

particular unit has in apposition or contrast to neighbouring units, while the word “solely” signals the reduction.

2.2 Leonard Bloomfield, 1933

The second development of structural linguistics occurred with Leonard Bloomfield’s publication of *Language* in 1933. In this book Bloomfield claimed that linguistics phenomena could properly and successfully be studied when isolated from their nonlinguistic environment. Adhering to behaviourist principles, he avoided all but empirical description.

As Saussure did, Bloomfield (1933:27) asserted the fundamentality of the correlation between sound and meaning. He introduced meaning in connection with life situation in which language is used to accomplish practical tasks. To understand human behaviour, Bloomfield used a simple stimulus-response model. In this regard he states “...in all science like linguistics, which observe some specific type of human activity, the worker must proceed exactly as if he held the materialistic view”. (Ibid; 38)

Bloomfield who equated meaning with the situation of utterance, soon reduced the task to “constant and definite meaning” for any one form (ibid;158). By this Bloomfield ignores the influence of context. So meaning is effectively reduced to the meaning of an expression that is independent of the larger context.

2.3 Noam Chomsky, 1957

The third field of research in the regard of structural linguistics is Noam Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structure* 1957. Chomsky broke with the dominant structural school which held that language is essentially a system of syntactical and grammatical habits established by means of training and experience. Chomsky, by contrast argued that human beings have an innate facility for

understanding the formal principles underlying the grammatical structure of language. It is this innate capacity that explains how young children , after hearing the speech of their elders, are able to infer the grammatical rules underlying ordinary sentences that they had never heard before. Chomsky (1957: 13) stipulates that a language was “a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite on length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.” Chomsky also assumes that the sequences fall neatly into grammatical and ungrammatical types, which he acknowledges is an idealization. Chomsky’s definition, which subjected language to a mathematically-based analysis of syntax, ignores the role of context, both the context of situation and the context of a discourse in paragraphs and larger sections (ibid; 15). Exactly in the next sentence after his definition, Chomsky declares that “All natural languages in their spoken or written form are languages in this sense,...”. There are also hints that grammaticality is independent of meaning which is true only as a first approximation (Ibid).⁽³⁾ In long run grammatical categories make sense only in the service of meaningful communication.

Chomsky in (Ibid; 45) also introduces the significant distinction between kernel and nonkernel sentences. Kernel sentences are simple active-voice sentences like John read the book. Nonkernel sentences include passive-voice sentences, such as “The book was read by John,” and derived expression like “It was John who read the book.” Expressions like “John is reading the book” must be also considered. All complex sentences as well as other types of sentences that derive from two or more kernel sentences, arise from applying optional transformational rules to the original set of kernel sentences (Ibid). So a sentence like “I was reassured by John’s reading the book” derives from two distinct kernel sentences, namely “John read the book” and “It reassured me”.

According to Chomsky, the more than 4,000 existing languages present a surprisingly similar syntax, in spite of their phonologic and graphic differences. This fact allows languages to be translated from one into another (Ibid).

A semantic analysis depending on Chomsky's schema shows that the meaning of a sentence is the sum of the meanings of the kernel sentences from which it is derived, plus the semantic relations between kernels that are specified by the grammatical links between them. Such analysis captures some of the core meaning, but as a total account of meaning it is obviously reductionistic.

2.4 J. C. Catford, 1965

One of the defenders of structural integrity was Catford (1965), who distinguished between rank-bound translation and unbounded translation (cf. Catford 1965:24-25). Rank-bound translation is a method of translation that maintains equivalences at the word, or even morpheme, level. According to Catford, rank-bound translation is the only feasible method to use between languages that have similar structures at the morphologic and syntactic level. As far as unbounded translation is concerned, the equivalence would be found at more complex levels like sentences. Catford in (ibid) admits the reduction in both types when he limits their domains:

A word-rank-bound translation is useful for certain purposes, for instance, for illustrating in a crude way differences between the SL and the TL in the structure of higher-rank units- as in some kinds of interlinear translation of texts in 'exotic' languages. Often, however, rank-bound translation is 'bad' translation, in that it involves using TL equivalents which are not appropriate to their location in the TL text, and which are not justified by the interchangeability of SL and TL texts in one and the same situation.

Catford's approach to translation clearly differs from that adopted by Nida since Catford had a preference for a more linguistic-based approach to translation. His main contribution in the field of translation theory is the introduction of the concept of types and shifts of translation.

3. Translation Theory

In tandem with linguistics a theory of translation developed in the twentieth century and profited from the development of the structural linguistics⁽⁴⁾. But while linguistics initially focused largely on issues of phonology and grammar, translation had to deal directly with the meaning and all its complexities. Based on a solid foundation on understanding of how languages work, translation theory recognizes that different languages encode meaning in different forms, yet guides translators to find appropriate ways of preserving meaning, while using the most appropriate forms of each language.

Conventionally, it is suggested that in order to perform their job successfully, translators should meet three important requirements; they should be familiar with: the source language, the target language, the subject matter.

Based on this premise, the translator discovers the meaning behind the forms in the source language and does his best to produce the same meaning in the target language- using the forms of the target language. Consequently, what is supposed to change is the form and the code and what should remain unchanged is the meaning and message (Larson 1984:3-11).

3.1 Eugene Nida

In consultation with other pioneers in the field of translation, Eugene Nida developed the theory of “dynamic equivalent” or “functional equivalent” which stressed the importance of transferring meaning, not grammatical form (cf. Poythress and

Grudem 2000 : 75-90). Nida (1947:23) explicitly speaks about translating “fullest meaning” instead of a bare minimum.

When Nida published his theoretically advanced work, *Toward a Science of Translating* in 1964, he was aware of the formalistic approach in generative grammar. Nida was affected by both, Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structure*, and Katz and Foder’s article “The Structure of a Semantic Theory” (Katz and Foder 1963 :170-210).

In the first three chapters of this book, Nida refused to be reductionistic. He referred to Roman Jakobson’s classification of meaning into emotive, conative referential, poetic, phatic, and metalingual dimensions (Nida 1964:40-46). In (ibid; 48), Nida spoke explicitly about many dimensions of meaning and he was so bold to say:

... no word ever has precisely the same meaning twice, for each speech event is in a sense unique, involving participants who are constantly changing and referent which are never fixed. Bloomfield (1933, p. 407) describes this problem by saying that “every utterance of speech form involves a minute semantic innovation.”

Making use of the insights of Chomsky’s generative grammar, Nida focused on what he called “linguistic meaning” in chapter four of his book. He looked at the meaning associated with distribution of a word with larger contexts and within grammatical structures (ibid; 41-42). According to Nida linguistic meaning often appears on “two levels”. The first is the meaning derived from the kernel construction and the second is the meaning supplied by the particle terminal construction (Ibid; 56).

Nida was aware of the reduction caused by the concentration on “linguistic meaning” so, in the following chapter, he discussed the “referential and emotive meaning.” (cf. Ibid; 70-119, and Nida and Taber 1964: 56-98).

Nida (1964:68) points out that all languages show “remarkably similar kernel structures.” So if meaning can be decomposed into

these kernels, then it can be transferred more easily from one language to another. In addition, the nonkernel structures do not necessarily reveal directly the underlying semantic relations. For example, the sentence “he hit the man with a stick” used in (Iid; 61) contains ambiguous construction. It may mean either that he used the stick as an instrument, or that the man who received the blow had a stick in his hand. Such ambiguous constructions often have to be translated differently depending on the underlying meaning.

In fact, generative grammar originated as an attempt to describe grammar, not meaning. For this the reduction occurs from the reductive moves took place within the theory of transformational generative grammar, which Nida was using as a model. Nida admitted that transformations actually change meaning when he talked about “two levels” of linguistic meaning, “the second of which is supplied by the particular terminal construction,” (Ibid;65). In fact, Chomsky himself warned against understanding generative grammar as psychological theory. From a semantic point of view, the speaker does not necessarily start psychologically with a kernel sentence (Chomsky 1965:9).

3.1.1. Translation and Science

The rigor and prestige reached by the natural sciences in the twentieth century have urged social scientists to achieve the same rigor within their own fields. Translation is one of these fields. The existence of the word “science” and “scientific” in translation discussion can also signal a problem. A field dealing with human being contains innate complexities and multi dimensions (Poythress 2004). In such a situation rigor and fullness of meaning will often be like two ends of seesaw. If one goes up, the other must go down (ibid). Kelly (1979:34) delineates the problem: "Linguists' models assume that translation is essentially transmission of data, while hermeneutic theorists take it to be an

interpretive re-creation of text. It is hardly surprising then, that each group, sure that it has the whole truth, lives in isolation from the other".

Nida noticed this problem and entitled his book *Toward a Science of Translating* in 1964. Nida's title does not say, "The Science of Translating", but "Toward a Science of Translating". The word "toward" shows that we have not yet arrived at a full science, but science is still a goal revealing out the reduction of translation to science. Some state this fact strongly;

"There can be no science of translation in the strict sense, and Nida's own

practical discussions are proof of it. The formalization of meaning constitute a danger, because it can lead to reductionistic approach to Translation by those who do not see the partial and one-sided character Of Nida's proposed procedure." (Poythress 2004)

Componential Analysis

The other encroachment of reductionism is in the componential analysis of meaning. In keeping with its formalistic and reductionistic programme, generative grammar soon adopted the use of componential analysis in its study of meaning.

Crystal (1988:62) defines componential analysis as "a semantic theory which has developed from a technique for analysis kinship vocabulary devised by American Anthropologist". It is also defined as "an attempt to discover the ultimate meaning units out of which particular set of words appears to be composed in some systematic way" (Wardhaugh 1977:163).

Larson (1984:84) gives two kinds of meaning components: the **generic components** which the words share as the **central components** and the **contrastive components** which distinguish a word from other words of the set. The words man, woman, boy, and girl share the generic component HUMAN BEING, and each has its own contrastive components. The word man has the contrastive components ADULT and MALE, woman has the

contrastive components ADULT and FEMALE, boy has the contrastive components YOUNG and MALE, and girl has the contrastive components YOUNG and FEMALE. Each word contrasts with every other word by at least one contrastive component.

When the analysis concerns kinships terms and well defined, limited areas of meaning an analysis into meaning components may yield significant insight. It is of value for the language learner who is trying to appreciate key meaning contrasts in a new language (Poythress 2004). Nida saw the value and introduced “componential analysis” of meaning connection with his instruction about translation (Nida:1964 82-87). But Nida also indicated some limitations “By analyzing only the minimal features of distinctiveness, many supplementary and connotative elements of meaning are disregarded” (Ibid; 87).

Newmark (1988:114) states that the componential analysis in translation is not the same in linguistics:

...in Linguistics it means analyzing or splitting up the various senses of a word into sense-components which may or may not be universals; in translation, the basic process is to compare a SL word with a TL word which has a similar meaning, but is not an obvious one- to -one equivalent, by demonstrating first their common and then their differing sense components. Normally the SL word has a more specific meaning than the TL word, and the translator has to add one or two TL senses components to the corresponding TL word in order to produce a closer approximation of meaning.

Wardhaugh (1977:163) states that this kind of analysis is useful for anthropological linguists and it can solve the problems of collection and register.

Lyons (1968:476) says that this is not impressive despite the sophistication of the devices that has been developed, and it depends upon the construction of syntax on which it is working.

Aitchison (1999:87) indicates the inaccuracy of saying that the meaning of words as being 'composed' out of a heap of separate components. The words 'component' and 'componential analysis' have therefore faded out of fashion. Nowadays, people tend to talk of words having semantic properties, which are somewhat more satisfactory, since it does not imply that these properties are building blocks which need to be assembled." (Ibid).

The danger in using 'componential analysis' comes from the carelessness of some practitioners who may overlook it to be the definite statement about meaning (cf. Poythress 2004).

The reductionism in this approach is one of the reductionism seen in Nida's use of kernel sentences. Unfortunately the formalistic, scientific cast of the theory may make it difficult to take criticism (Ibid).

Conclusion

Modern theories of meaning show great tendency to reductionism and the dangers of reductionism remain as long as the prestige of scientific rigor pressure on the linguists and translation theorists. "Rigor is possible in linguistics and translation when we isolate a sufficiently small piece of language, or one dimension of language, and temporarily ignore the residue that dose not clearly fit into a formalized models offer insight, but the clumsy the doltish and the arrogant can still misuse them."(Ibid).

Reductionistic forces can be uncovered in semantics (semantics features, semantic domains), structural grammar (kernel sentences, transformational generative grammar), treatment of grammatical categories, discourse analysis, and the relation between word-meaning and sentence meaning.

Better translators have always known that translation is an art; Nida's and others' technical tools are only properly used as one dimension in the process of trying to do justice to total meaning.

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Footers

1 This paper was composed in September 1997 at the Gaborone Sun Hotel, where the author was quartered pending his accommodation in university housing and where he did not have access reference libraries and data banks except for what was stored in his laptop.

2 Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics (New York/Toronto/London: McGraw-Hill. 1959)

3 See also the more extended discussion on pp.92-105.

4 For a broader context, see L.G. Kelly, The True Interpreter. A History of Translation Theory and Practice in the West.(New York: St. Martin's.1979)