

HOT DOGS AND OTHER INEDIBLE THINGS or what can we teach students of translation about extralexical meaning?

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Resumen

Una causa principal de errores de traducción es la interpretación errónea del significado extraléxico en el texto en la lengua original. A través de ejemplos de traducciones del inglés al español y viceversa, este artículo presenta algunos de los tipos de errores que una mala interpretación del significado extraléxico puede producir, y considera el tratamiento del problema dentro de la enseñanza de la traducción. El artículo estudia las dificultades que resultan de cambios en el significado de la palabra en contextos de diversos tipos, de la interpretación de las expresiones empleadas por su valor asociativo, y de la alteración del significado impuesto por la situación en que se produce el enunciado. Se recomienda la sistemática incorporación a los programas de estudios de abundantes ejemplos y ejercicios prácticos para que los alumnos puedan reconocer los tipos de significado extraléxico, pasando después a buscar su significado dentro del conjunto del texto.

Palabras clave: traducción, pragmática, significado extraléxico

Abstract

A leading cause of translation errors is incorrect interpretation of extralexical meaning in the source language text. This article discusses the problem in the context of teaching translation. The article illustrates some of the most frequent kinds of errors caused by incorrect reading of extralexical meaning, using examples from English and Spanish translations, and considers how the problem can be dealt with in translator training programs. It is principally concerned with difficulties resulting from changes in word meaning in various kinds of context, from the interpretation of expressions used because of their associations rather than because of their lexical meaning, and from variation of meaning dictated by the situation in which the utterance is produced. The recommendation is to help the translation student become aware of the types of extralexical meaning he may encounter, and understand them in the total context, by systematically incorporating abundant examples and practice into translator training programs.

Key words: translation, pragmatics, extralexical meaning

Résumé

Une interprétation incorrecte des éléments extralinguistiques significatifs du texte de départ est l'une des principales causes d'erreur en traduction. Cet article a pour but de présenter les cas les plus fréquents d'erreur due à l'interprétation inadéquate du sens extralinguistique et propose une réflexion sur les moyens de traiter ce genre de difficultés dans le cadre des études de formation de traducteurs. Les difficultés analysées proviennent du changement du sens d'un mot en fonction des différents types de contexte, de l'interprétation de phrases toutes faites compte tenu de leur signifié et non de leur valeur associative et, finalement, du changement du sens du mot imposé par le contexte situationnel dans lequel se produit l'énoncé. La solution avancée est d'incorporer de façon systématique, aux programmes d'études de formation des traducteurs, le plus grand nombre possible d'exemples et d'exercices pratiques qui permettent aux élèves de prendre conscience de l'existence de différents types de signifié extralinguistique et de chercher le sens dans le contexte global.

Mots clés: traduction, pragmatique, sens extralinguistique

Sumario

1. The problem of extralexical meaning in translation 2. Types of extralexical meaning that can lead to translation errors 3. Dealing with extralexical meaning in translation study programs 4. Conclusion

1. The problem of extralexical meaning in translation

Although errors in translation can have a number of causes, one of the most frequent is an incorrect reading of the source language (SL) text, and an important cause for incorrect readings is, in turn, the failure to take extralexical meaning into account. Who hasn't been confused, sometimes frustrated, often amused by a mistranslation that, under analysis, revealed the translator's unfamiliarity with the meaning of a term in a particular situation? Spanish TV viewers, for example, watching a dubbed-in version of "Heaven Can Wait" recently, must have been perplexed, to say the least, when James Stewart, in a burst of enthusiasm over a bit of good news, struck his palm with his fist and exclaimed, "*Perro caliente!*".

The matter of extralexical meaning, then, needs to be given special attention in translator training programs, and the present paper, being an attempt to contribute to this end, is especially directed at those working in degree programs in translation. Traditionally, translators have been self-taught professionals, free to acquire their training as best they could, and therefore, solely responsible for the quality of their work. But in recent years Spain has seen the creation and proliferation of programs in translation and translation studies, including university degrees in those fields; as of February 1996, holders of a Spanish *licenciatura* in translation and interpretation can acquire the status of *traductores jurados* without the otherwise required examination; and it would not be going too far to surmise that translation will eventually take the same route as journalism did in requiring a degree in the field in order to engage in many areas of professional activity.

This being the situation, translators, linguists and other professionals involved in translating programs find that we have a new option with regard to the errors made by professional translators: where we used to be limited to critical activity, lamenting the errors, or enjoying them, as the case may be, we now have access to most of the apprentice translators in Spain before they have the opportunity to commit their translational faux pas in public and so, presumably, can help them avoid that embarrassment. This, of course, is not to say that trained translators are not going to make mistakes - all translators do; but we can, to a certain extent, obviate the need to learn everything the hard way. And this leads back to the title question, what can we teach students of translation about extralexical meaning?

Pragmaticists sometimes define meaning by saying that situation is meaning, but we need not go to such extreme limits, and by restricting this concept with some marker of frequency like "often" or "in many cases", we can arrive at a better working basis for this discussion of extralexical meaning. In fact, Newmark (1991:117) points out that an utterance can be purely referential, with no situational meaning at all, so we needn't feel guilty about hedging in this way. For our purposes, extralexical meaning is any meaning that does not derive exclusively from the literal sense of the lexeme. So, with this definition in hand, we can go on to look at one of the most thorny problems in translating - that of understanding extralexical meaning.

That most translation errors originate in the comprehension stage of the translation process, as said at the beginning, seems a safe assumption, so that the focus here will be on students' problems with comprehension (and it is understood that although the references are to English and Spanish, the principles are equally applicable to other languages).

2. Types of extralexical meaning that can lead to translation errors

As a preliminary analysis, and with no pretensions to an exhaustive taxonomy, it would be useful to classify the difficulties to be discussed in one of two ways: either by types of text, context, or sociolinguistic situation in which the extralexical meaning is most likely to occur, or by ways in which meaning is expressed other than by purely lexical means. The briefest of reflections will make clear that the first option will not be productive; except in a very limited, well-defined class of lexemes¹, extralexical meaning can surprise us almost anywhere. We are left, then, with the option of identifying types of extralexical meaning in order to determine what we can tell our students about each. A review of some of the errors in published translations, including spoken TV and cinema texts, ("published" because we can assume that these were done by professionals and so represent pitfalls that are not exclusive to learners) reveals several kinds of extralexical meaning that typically lead the translator astray.

To begin with, it must be said that one of these, in particular, the category of idioms, causes surprisingly few problems. Although idioms in most cases do not depend on the lexical meaning of their components, they are, nevertheless, fairly easy to work into the program of studies as part of vocabulary acquisition. Their "situational" meaning has long since given way to a fixed, unified lexical sense that can be included in vocabulary lists or found in dictionaries, so that "sour grapes," "chew the fat," or "hard cheese" are not normally in danger of being translated as edible items, even by novice translators.

But consider another category, that of "contextual" meaning, which is really a combination of lexical and extralexical meaning. In this category, although there is no question of the word losing its lexical meaning, the sense of a polysemous word (or a homonymous word) is selected from the set of its possible senses because of the context in which it appears, a context usually marked by other lexical items from the same conceptual area. Context, of course, is a blanket term which can include the topic of the text, the period in which it was written, the register, and a number of other conditioning factors. With reference to context, and excluding the class of words referred to in note 1, Newmark says: "I think that all words have extra-contextual meanings and contextual senses; sometimes these two types of meaning are identical - occasionally they appear to be remote from each other but there is always some connection between the two." (1991:89)

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Newmark discusses a scale of contextual boundedness on which he places at the "unbound" end "technical terms and brand names, which are semantically independent, normally translated or transferred one-for-one and free of linguistic as well as situational and topic context." (1991:89)

We are justified, then, in including contextual meaning in our analysis of types of extralexical meaning.

In this case it would seem that, as with idioms, the possibilities of misinterpretation of a term are minimal; for example, words such as "cell" or "tissue" in a text on histology are not likely to be understood as, respectively, a place in which to keep prisoners or a paper handkerchief. But, alas, even experienced translators are guilty of disregarding contextual indications to produce a completely illogical reading of the SL text, which is then passed on to the translation. One example of this problem comes from a textbook for translators no less: the book offers for translation practice a selection from *Traducción y literalidad* by Octavio Paz which ends with the following sentence: *En cuanto a las relaciones entre individuos aislados y que pertenecen a la misma comunidad, cada uno es un emparedado vivo en su propio yo*. The passage is followed by a number of questions to be answered by the student, one of which is "Why is each man a 'living sandwich'?"

A second example shows how a reader (in this case the translator) can impose on a text a preconceived context of his own, thereby annulling the real contextual markers of meaning. The example is the first stanza of a poem by Emily Dickinson: "I never saw a moor/ I never saw the sea/ Yet I know how the heather looks/ And what a wave must be." This poem was included in a volume of United States poetry in Spanish translation by a Spanish American poet and translator; the Spanish version begins: "*Jamás he visto un sarraceno, / y jamás el mar contemplé*". Such indifference to context is surprising in an experienced translator, as is such a lack of sensitivity in a poet, but the most interesting thing about the translation is that having chosen "sarraceno" for "moor", the translator uses this term as the basis for a totally new context in which he misreads "heathen" for "heather" (Yet I know how the heathen looks), and so his version continues: "*Pero sé cómo es el pagano ...*".

Sometimes the problem lies in the translator's not being familiar with the cultural context, or in disregarding it. Spanish students of mine were logically puzzled recently by a text in English that first spoke of "the Sabbath" and later referred to the same day as Sunday. They were unaware that in English "sabbath" used in a Christian context has a different referent from that of the same term used in a Jewish context. An example of mistranslation because of not understanding the cultural reference is the scene in an American film, dubbed into Spanish, in which one character says to another, "*Se ha ido a Los Angeles a una reunión de las Noches de Colón*" (Knights of Columbus, an organization of Roman Catholic men). In this case the incorrect translation had no effect on the story itself, but other texts may not fare so well.

And one other example, this time from the world of television, that points up the translator's need to be well acquainted with the source language culture is the translation of the title of an episode in the TV series "Murder She Wrote." The episode in English is called "Hannigan's Wake", a title that evokes James Joyce's work "Finnegan's Wake", used somewhat playfully in the TV title and only for its resonance, as it has no other associations with Joyce's novel. Even if it had been translated as "La vigilia de Hannigan" to correspond to "La vigilia de Finnegan", as Joyce's title is sometimes translated, the evocative value

would be minimal in Spanish. What is inexcusable here is that the translator does not understand the word "wake" in its cultural context - the story is a mystery involving the death and funeral rites of an Irish-American - and translates the title as "*El despertar de Hannigan*". (In any case, the noun "wake" would never be translated as "*el despertar*".)

Our responsibility, then, in regard to contextual meaning as defined above, is to help the student refine his awareness of the entire text, so that smaller units and individual lexemes are seen as logical parts that contribute to the whole. "Awareness" is the keyword here, and it is pertinent in dealing with the other types of extralexical meaning discussed below.

To continue with this survey, and still within the area where lexical meaning is not lost but is conditioned by factors outside the purely referential sense of the term, we should include the concept of associative meaning. Here the word or expression, while retaining its literal sense, is used in the text not because of this sense but because of the associations the word evokes. That the associative meaning in such expressions is more important than the lexical meaning becomes obvious when you consider that some other expression with different lexical meaning but similar associative value can be substituted for a term of this type without affecting the message of the utterance.

The following is an example, again from a textbook on translation, of how not understanding associative meaning can cause an incorrect reading, with the consequent incorrect translation. This time the text to be translated was an article of literary criticism from the Spanish newspaper, *ABC*. The article speaks of "*la España negra . que asoma en los textos medievales y que toma cuerpo en la novela picaresca, en Quevedo y Cervantes, y que continúa como un guadiana literario hasta nuestros días con *Ciro Bayo, Solana, Noel, ...*" (emphasis added). The underlined part bears the following explanatory note for the student: "A *literary guadiana* has little or no meaning for the English reader. He would need to know that the writer is referring to the River Guadiana in Spain and is thinking here of a literary stream or current. So this might be translated: *a Spanish literary current*." It is evident that the meaning of the simile has been completely lost on the textbook writer, who does not understand the association of the Guadiana with something that disappears and resurfaces sporadically*

Finally, we can return to the hot dog problem, i.e., situational meaning. This is what is often considered purely extralinguistic meaning, it is a matter of a word or an expression losing its literal meaning in favor of an unrelated meaning dictated by the situation in which the utterance is made. Other illustrations of situational meaning are Nida's well-known example: "*Damn* used in church bears quite a different connotation from the same word used in a beer hall, even though uttered by the same person." (1974:93), and one used by Hurford and Heasley in their book on semantics (1983:3-5). In this book the authors describe two different conversational situations in which the same two expressions, "Oh. Are you?" and "That'll be nice for the family", appear with different meanings. In the first conversation, a bus stop encounter between casual acquaintances, the expressions are merely polite phatic devices used by one speaker on learning the other's vacation plans. In the other conversation, a husband-wife confrontation, the wife uses "Oh, are you?" to

indicate angry disagreement with the husband's announcement that he is taking the car on a trip, when she needs it to take the children to school. To his reply that they will just have to go by bus, she makes the ironic rejoinder: "That'll be nice for the family. Up at the crack of dawn, and not home till mid-evening!" The translator may or may not use the same expressions in translating the two conversations, but it is essential that he first recognize their totally different situational meaning.

3. Dealing with extralexical meaning in translation study programs

Now, having reviewed some of the main types of extralexical meaning in terms of the problems they present for translation, we can turn to the question of how we can help our students cope with them. From what we have seen, it is clear that there cannot be a neat package of recommendations, and it is equally clear that nothing will replace extensive experience in the source language and a reasonable familiarity with the source language culture. On the other hand, several basic difficulties in the comprehension phase of translation show up as common to all these problem areas: 1) recognizing nonliteral meaning in a text; 2) understanding what type of extralexical meaning is involved; 3) discovering what the expression in question actually means in the text.

In helping students with the first, and, arguably, most important of these processes, we can look to Grice for guidance, basically by invoking his Cooperative Principle, and specifically his Maxim of Relation or Relevance. Students tend to smile when we tell them they must assume that a writer is writing to communicate something to the reader, and that he expects to be understood; nevertheless, the aspiring translator will sometimes struggle futilely to extract meaning from the literal sense of a word or expression in a text when common sense should tell them that some other type of meaning is involved. So one major objective in teaching comprehension of the SL text should be getting the student to believe in the Cooperative Principle and to trust his instinct when it tells him that the text, read literally, makes no sense.

A catalog of problem types, similar to that presented here and preferably augmented by the instructor's own experience, will provide a basis for orienting the student with regard to what type of extralexical meaning is involved. As for the third problem, finding out what the extralinguistic meaning of the expression really is, a look at each of the types identified, can perhaps provide some insight.

Idioms, as said, pose fewer problems than might be supposed, and translation of unfamiliar idiomatic expressions is normally a question of consulting an appropriate dictionary. There is the basic problem, however, of recognizing something as an idiom, and the translator must, once again, trust his sense of logic to tell him when the literal meaning of an expression is irrelevant to the sense of the text; he can then proceed to consult his sources to determine the appropriate meaning.

In the case of contextual meaning, the type of context that determines the meaning of a term will be all-important: for example, while the context of topic will prevent most

students (but not one of mine) from translating Spanish "*sobretudo*" as "overcoat" when in the SL text it means "especially", and will tell the them whether "crane" is to be translated as "*grua*" or "*grulla*", the context of register is what will indicate the meaning of "aim" and "make" in "I aim to make the show in Reno this year", in a conversation between two cowboys who are rodeo riders. The students need the experience of working with texts that that require them to identify and translate expressions that are influenced by various types of contextual meaning.

Associative meaning is a more difficult and more complex question, because this is an area in which familiarity with the SL culture is essential: it is necessary in order to realize when a term has been used for its associative value and also in determining the scope of the shared association, which will normally coincide with the assumed readership. This, in turn, will be a clue to what informants or sources should be consulted to find the associative meaning. Although examples are not found in abundance, practice with this type of meaning should not be neglected.

In the case of purely situational meaning, a problem that appears especially if conversation is being translated, students must be encouraged to enter into the spirit of the SL text and to give preference to the logic of the conversational exchanges, the reason for each utterance, rather than to the lexical items in isolation. Translation practice should include the aim of seeing the text as a coherent unit in which expressions that may seem irrelevant must be deciphered in terms of the specific situation.

4. Conclusion

Solutions to the various kinds of difficulties are many and tend to overlap, but the basic premise is that the first goal in translating is complete understanding of the SL text; a corollary of this is that the translator must be alert to all kinds of meaning, and especially to extralexical meaning, which may not always be apparent on a first reading. Students should not be allowed to develop the slipshod habit of proceeding to translate a text they do not fully understand or that does not really make sense to them. Comprehension calls for persistence, even though in actual practice deadlines do not always permit sufficient research. Students need to be encouraged to delve into all possible manifestations of SL culture, to use that culture as a basis for assigning meanings, to rely on their logical instinct when interpreting a text, to be aware of the text as a whole and of how the meaning of its components contributes to that whole.

Obviously, what are offered here are not new or revolutionary ideas but simply reminders that comprehension is not just a matter of dictionaries and syntactic rules; it requires an all-out effort on the part of the translator in the interest of professional excellence. In the final analysis, this is really a matter of attitude toward the task, and we can offer nothing that will be of greater assistance to students, in this problem of comprehension and in other aspects of translation, than a program that teaches them to set exacting standards for themselves.

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