The Translation Paradox

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Abstract

The study of translation can shed crucial light on the extent to which thoughts that are first organized in one language can be successfully transferred through another, and thus on the nature and extent of language differences. Language requires that thoughts be selected, categorized, oriented, and combined, and each language places its own constraints on these processes, which are illustrated here with attempts to translate from the Native American language Seneca into English.

1 Introduction

If one believes, as I do, that different languages organize thoughts in different ways, one cannot help wondering how it is possible for the thoughts that are expressed in one language to be expressed equally well in another language. And yet we find people translating from one language to another all the time, apparently with considerable success. There seems, then, to be a translation paradox.

This paradox would not be recognized by everyone. Ray Jackendoff, for example, wrote that "pretty much anything we can say in one language can be translated into any other, preserving the thought that the original language conveys" (Jackendoff 1994: 185). Quite different is the view expressed by Dan Slobin: "The language or languages that we learn in childhood are not neutral coding systems of an objective reality. Rather, each one is a subjective orientation to the world of human experience, and this orientation affects the ways in which we think while we are speaking" (Slobin 1996: 91). It would seem that for Jackendoff there is no translation paradox, whereas for Slobin the paradox is real. Is there any way to resolve these opposing views?

To begin with, it would be a mistake to take the extreme position that the differences between languages are so great that they make translation absolutely impossible, or to think, at the opposite extreme, that they are so trivial that there is no problem at all. The question should be the extent to which translation is possible. It is an important question, not only for practical reasons, but because it forces one to confront the basic nature of language. There may in fact be no question in the study of language that highlights more directly the need to understand what language is, how languages differ, and how much of language is universal.

Language is a way of associating thoughts with sounds (see Chafe 2002 for an elaboration of the remarks that follow). Languages are the way they are because it is obviously impossible for every unique thought to be associated with a unique sound. Before languages can do anything with them, it is necessary for thoughts be organized, and of course for sounds be organized as well. No one would deny that different languages organize sounds in different ways, and one might expect *prima facie* that different languages would organize thoughts differently as well. Thoughts are more elusive, more difficult to understand "scientifically" than sounds, and for that reason any investigation of them is bound to be more controversial. But to understand the problems associated with translation there is no way to avoid confronting the nature of thoughts, and what languages do with them.

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Introspection suggests that thoughts have at least three distinguishable components that are accessible to consciousness. First, there are perceptual experiences that provide our most immediate contact with reality, even though they may include a significant amount of interpretation of that reality. Perceptual experiences may be immediate, or they may arise through remembering and imagining, in which case they acquire the degraded form known as mental imagery. Second, we also experience emotions and attitudes that may accompany and be stimulated by our perceptual experiences, or may arise internally. I will refer to them as evaluative experiences. These two components of thought, perception and evaluation, can be at least partly independent of language. But a third component is inner language itself, which organizes both perceptual and evaluative experiences in accordance with the organizational principles of some language. A great deal of thought has this verbal quality. The basic components of thought, then, to the extent that we are conscious of them, include experiences that are perceptual, evaluative, and verbal, typically interwoven with each other.

One way of organizing experience, whether any linguistic organization has been applied to it or not, is its organization into what I will call *ideas*: ideas of events and states, accompanied by ideas of the persons and objects that participate in them. These ideas, furthermore, are located within a multidimensional universe of time, space, epistemology, society, and the relations that ideas bear to each other. This organization of thoughts into ideas and their orientation is probably universal and independent of whatever language one may speak.

But thoughts, even though they are organized in this way, cannot simply be plugged into language without further adjustments. At least four major kinds of adjustment appear to be necessary. First, thoughts are always more extensive and complex than anything a language can express, so they must first be reduced to something manageable. To turn thoughts into words, speakers must first select the thoughts that they wish to express. Second, since each idea is likely to be a unique experience, it must be categorized in a way that will allow it to be treated by language in the same way as other experiences that might be categorized in the same way. Ideas must be interpreted as instances of categories. Third, since ideas can be oriented in many different ways and no language is able to give expression to all those ways, speakers must choose among possible orientations. Ideas have to be placed in time, space, epistemology, social interaction, and with relation to other ideas in ways that are favored by the particular language. Fourth and finally, since ideas and their orientations never occur in isolation from other ideas and orientations, speakers must decide on ways of combining them. Ideas and orientations must be joined together in some way. These four processes are summarized in figure 1. Each language provides its own resources and its own preferences for each of these processes, and no two languages handle them identically. In this sense every language dictates what may be called its own semantic structuring, and it may differ more or less from language to language.

Figure 1: Processes by which thoughts must be adjusted to language

Selection
Categorization
Orientation
Combination

I will exemplify these processes here from my own attempts to translate from the Native American language Seneca into English. Seneca is one of the so-called Northern Iroquoian languages, currently spoken by only about a hundred people in western New York State. My work has brought home to me the possibilities and problems that arise in translating from this language. Seneca is radically different from English, and attempts to translate between the two can show especially well the kinds of difficulties that can arise.

It would be possible to choose examples in which translation is hindered by the fact that some Seneca ideas are difficult to express in English simply because English speakers have never needed to express them. There are, for example, objects and events in Seneca culture that are absent from the the mainstream culture of English speakers. In a sense such problems are trivial, because they can be overcome by borrowing or inventing new English words. The examples here are not of that sort, but involve ideas that could potentially be shared by speakers of both languages. Such examples can be more interesting, since they draw attention to more pervasive differences that can exist without regard to whatever subject matter is being talked about.

2 A brief example

Each of the four processes listed in figure 1 can be illustrated very briefly with the sentence in (1), which was uttered by a Seneca speaker as she began to tell a folktale. A free translation is shown on the right. (For more on this particular story, see Chafe 1998. Here I am using the symbols "ô" and "ê" for nasalized vowels. The apostrophe indicates a glottal stop, and the accents show a heightened pitch.)

(1) Né:' gyô'ô nónêhji wáónôhgwáge:eya's.Long ago there was a man whose wife died.

I believe that the thought conveyed by the translation corresponds reasonably well to what the speaker was thinking. But "reasonably well" is a hedge, and we can now examine several reasons why such a hedge is necessary.

2.1 Selection

The speaker chose to begin her story by verbalizing the idea of an event. It was an event that formed the background of a plot in which the man in question married again, and a conflict then arose between his second wife and his daughter by his first wife. One noticeable difference between what the speaker said and the English translation is the fact that she did not separately introduce the man. The Seneca lacked anything that would correspond to the English phrase "there was a man". Although the last word in (1) can be translated as "his wife died", there was no further specification of who he was.

According to the Seneca way of organizing thoughts there is a tendency to focus more on events and states as global entities, with less attention to characterizing separately the participants within them. It is only a tendency, but differences of this kind can make something "sound like a translation" unless adjustments are made. To add in the English "there was a man", as I did in (1), provides little additional information, but it accords better with English rhetorical practices. One might object that differences of this kind are cultural rather than linguistic, not differences between the two languages as such. Such differences, nevertheless, do influence the shape that language takes, and they raise the question of whether, at a certain level of discourse, the boundary between culture and language becomes obscure.

2.2 Categorization

The idea that was verbalized in (1) was categorized in Seneca as an event in which someone was affected adversely by the death of a spouse. The *-'s* suffix at the end of the last word in (1) functions as a so-called applicative, adding a participant to the simpler, intransitive idea of the spouse dying, with this added participant being someone who was adversely affected by the event. A more colloquial, although perhaps stylistically less appropriate translation might be "there was a man whose spouse died on him". The idea of a spouse dying can be categorized adequately in each language, but the further resources Seneca makes available for that purpose have no wholly satisfactory English equivalent.

2.3 Orientation

Events may be oriented with verbal affixes or with separate adverbs and particles. The first word in (1), the particle *ne:'*, has no English equivalent. It means something like "it is the case that", indicating that what follows is being asserted. Its use is determined by Seneca discourse patterns, and in English it is usually best left untranslated. The second word, *gyô'ô*, shows that the speaker did not observe this event directly, that she heard about it from someone else. It is used widely in Seneca for all kinds of secondhand knowledge, but is especially common in stories. It would be possible to extend the translation to read "long ago, it is said, there was a man whose wife died". But although "it is said" might be acceptable at the beginning of a story in English, to repeat it each of the 62 times it appeared in the Seneca story would be less than felicitous.

The third word in (1), the adverb *nónêhji*, can be translated "long ago", although the manner in which this word activates an ancient oral tradition and its associated emotions is lost. In today's English-speaking community, use of the roughly corresponding phrase "once upon a time" would seem quaint, but *nónêhji* is a familiar way of orienting a Seneca listener to an entire world of familiar, if imaginary events.

There is nothing in Seneca that corresponds to the past tense included in the English word "died". The fact that this event took place at an earlier time was surely present in the speaker's thoughts, and we have seen how it was established by the adverb *nónêhji*. But Seneca has no obligatory requirement, as English does, for pastness to be expressed on every verb. This is a good example of how different languages force thoughts to be oriented differently, even when the ideas themselves may agree. So far as translation is concerned, the past tense in English does no violence to Seneca's expression, even though it fails to correspond to anything overtly expressed.

The prefix *wa-* in the last word of (1) orients this event in accordance with one of three options for placing events on a scale of reality, ranging from "factual" through "predicted" to "hypothesized". These three options are roughly captured in English by "she died", "she will die", or "she might die", and it was the implied factuality of the first that was chosen here. Its factuality was judged, of course, within the imagined folktale world, not with relation to the actual world inhabited by the speaker as she told the story.

2.4 Combination

We come finally to the fourth way in which thoughts must be adjusted to a particular language: the resources made available for combining them. We can note, first of all, a preferred Seneca pattern by which ideas are first given various orientations by means of adverbs and particles before the ideas of the events and states and their participants are themselves verbalized. Thus, in

(1) there were the orientations of assertion (*ne:'*), secondhand information (*gyô'ô*), and mythical time (*nónêhji*) before the idea of the dying itself was expressed. The translation, with the words "long ago" at the beginning, accounted for one of these orientations but not the other two. With a longer passage the rhetorical effect of accumulated orientations at the beginning of a statement would be more evident.

It is especially relevant that Seneca is a polysynthetic language, and as such it usually includes more information within a verb than English does. The last word in (1) includes not only the idea of the dying, but also the idea that the person who died was a spouse, as well as the fact that this event adversely affected a single male individual, not to mention the factual orientation. These ideas and orientations are associated with segments of sound in the manner shown in figure 2.

Figure 2

wá	ó	nôhgwá	ge:eya	's
factual	[single male affected]	spouse	die	adversative

It is of some interest that this language packages within a single word not only the categorization of an event (spouse-dying), but also a reference to one or more of the participants in it. Regardless of the language one speaks, it is impossible to think of events without simultaneously thinking of their participants, and Seneca combines both within a single word, whereas English separates them. There may in fact be a relation between this strategy of integrating events and their participants morphologically and the tendency not to present a participant in a separate introduction, as discussed above.

Seneca grammar thus combines ideas and their orientations in ways that are markedly different from the dictates of English grammar. Nevertheless, such differences may not in themselves be a serious impediment to translation. It may in fact be the possibility of translatability across *grammars* that led Jackendoff to the view quoted above. If Seneca expresses the idea of some event, say, with the single complex word *wa'áie'* and English expresses a similar idea with the two simpler words "she died", the thoughts themselves are not radically different. It may be that the greatest difficulties for translation lie in differences in categorization and orientation.

3 A longer example

One brief sentence like that in (1) can scarcely provide enough data for any general conclusions. There is not enough space here to examine a large collection of data, but we can at least look at a slightly more extended example. The following is an excerpt from some remarks that were made with regard to a local political situation. For peculiar historical reasons, the city of Salamanca, New York, is located entirely within the Allegheny Seneca Reservation. Since the nineteenth century white property owners in Salamanca had been paying to lease their land from the Senecas, but the amounts were small and sometimes nonexistent. The leases expired toward the end of the twentieth century, and the Senecas negotiated to enforce considerably larger payments. Understandably, these negotiations aroused strong emotions on both sides. The speaker summarized his own views as shown in (3). The English on the right expresses his thoughts more or less adequately. But what are the implications of "more or less"?

(3) The Salamanca Lease Controversy

(a) Da: ne:’ nô: hê:né:h,	And I guess they thought
(b) êyágwatgá’ negê’ ne yôêdzá’,	we would give up the land,
(c) ôgyôêdza:dé’ ne’hoh,	our land,
(d) næ: da’áô ne’hó nô:yawêh.	but it was impossible for that to happen.
(e) Da: ne:’ gáíô:ní nê:gê: hodínô’kwê’ôh.	And that was the reason they got mad.
(f) Næ: da:digwe:gôh,	Not all of them,
(g) ne:’ shô: neh,	just
(h) ne:’ ne da:diyêde:íh.	those that didn’t understand.
(i) Nô: gaya:sô neh,	I guess you could say
(j) honôhsigwé:ót ne’hoh.	they were stirring up trouble there.
(k) Da: negê’ nô: næ:h,	And I guess
(l) êgáiwíyoak nô: ne ae’ wêdôshô’ôh.	things will settle down eventually.
(m) Næ: ní:’ a:yê:’ sô:gá:’ dé:gê’se neh,	As for me I don’t think less of anyone
(n) hadinôge:nyô’ ne hadí:nyô’ôh.	among the white people that live there.
(o) Ôgwádéó’shô’ honôtga’de’.	A lot of them are my friends.

3.1 Selection

So far as this speaker’s choices of what to verbalize are concerned, there may be little here that is peculiarly Seneca. Although such differences are subtle and easy to overlook, it would seem that the thoughts the speaker chose to express here reflect his reactions as an individual, and were not significantly influenced by either his language or his culture.

3.2 Categorization

The passage categorizes several ideas in ways that are not easily reproduced in English. One example is to be found in line (b), where English provides no exact parallel for the root of the verb *êyágwatga’*. I translated it “give (something) up”, but in other contexts the same root might be translated “supply” or “provide”. In religious contexts it is used to refer to God’s actions in providing the essentials for life on earth, and certainly “give up” would not be appropriate there. The fundamental notion is one of making available something that will benefit the recipient. Because of the context in (3) this action would involve the Senecas “giving up” their land, but the word the speaker used does not in itself have the same connotation of being victimized.

Line (l) might be more literally translated as “the matter will continue to be good again sometimes”. With the word *êgáiwíyoak* the speaker was predicting a future state in which good feelings would prevail, and the *-k* at the end of this word indicated that this state would continue. The idea conveyed in English by “things will settle down eventually” is thus only an approximation to what the speaker was thinking.

The most problematic item in this passage is found in lines (i) and (j). The word *honôhsigwe:ot* at the beginning of (j) can be translated literally as “they are standing up a fork in it”, a Seneca idiom used to express an idea that is similar to the English “they are stirring up trouble”, which employs another and quite different idiom. By definition, idioms involve two distinct ideas, in the Seneca case the idea of sticking a fork in something (the literal meaning) and the idea of causing trouble (the idiomatic meaning). This speaker’s thought was focused on the idea of causing trouble, but his use of the idiom simultaneously activated what I have called a

"shadow meaning", the idea of sticking a fork in something. In English the idiomatic meaning conveyed by "stirring up trouble" comes close to what the speaker had in mind, but the shadow meaning of stirring something is of course quite different. Although their idiomatic meanings may be similar, the literal meanings of idioms in separate languages are often very different, as here. The idiomatic meanings of the "sticking a fork" idiom and the "stirring" idiom allow the translation to succeed up to a point, but only as long as their shadow meanings are ignored.

That brings us to line (i), in which the word *gaya:sôh* means literally "it is called". For the speaker, (i) was a metalinguistic comment on what he was about to say in (j). He was saying that the idea he was about to express could be captured with the "sticking a fork" idiom. My translation "I guess you could say" is inaccurate in suggesting that the speaker was hedging his evaluation of the situation, whereas in fact he was hedging his choice of a way to categorize it.

The categorization expressed in the word *dé:gê'se* in line (m) presents another problem. The verb root *-gê-* in the middle of this word can be translated with the English word "see". Here, however, it is followed by the same applicative marker *-'s* that we met at the end of the word *wáónôhgwáge:eya's* in (1), where it showed that the spouse's death had adversely affected her husband. In *dé:gê'se* it indicates that seeing something adversely affected another person. The *de-* at the beginning of this word is a negative prefix, and thus the literal meaning is approximately "I don't see it in a way that adversely affects him". The translation "I don't think less of him" approaches a similar idea from a very different angle.

3.3 Orientation

We can observe in (3), as in (1), the absence of any past tense marking. In this case, however, there was no word like *ónêhji* to orient the ideas to the past, and as a result the entire passage, as it stands, is ambiguous with respect to its temporal orientation. The speaker could just as well be describing a current situation, and it is only the larger context, including knowledge of when the lease controversy took place, that would lead a listener to interpret the passage as describing something from the past. Without such knowledge I could equally well have begun the translation with "And I guess they think we will give up the land", etc. But language is always created in a context, and the absence of past tense marking, although it is potentially ambiguous in isolated examples, is seldom so in practice.

The particle *næ:* or *næ:h* occurs in lines (d), (f), (k), and (m), and like various other Seneca particles it is difficult to translate directly. This one emphasizes or highlights some idea, and it is a good example of an orientation that is expressed with a particle in one language and prosody in another. It is best translated by raising the pitch on the target word in English, as follows:

d but it was *impossible* for that to happen
f not *all* of them
k and I *guess*
m *I* don't believe I think less of anybody

In line (m) the force of the Seneca words *næ: ni:'* might however be captured more accurately with the translation "as for me", the translation given in (3).

3.4 Combination

As we saw in (1), the manner in which ideas and their orientations are combined in Seneca is very different from their manner of combination in English. To pick just one example from (3),

the word *da:digwe:gôh* in line (f) contains the following (roughly translated) elements in this order: “negative” - “masculine plural” - “be all” - “stative aspect”. The English translation “not all of them” captures a similar thought, but fails to specify that there are at least three of them (as opposed to only two), and that they are males, although in Seneca a masculine prefix is used for a mixed group as long as it contains at least one man. The same masculine plural designation appears in line (n), referring to the white people who live in Salamanca.

In general, however, as noted above, despite the very different ways of combining ideas and orientations that are characteristic of a polysynthetic language, such differences need not in themselves be a major impediment to translation. Problems arise more conspicuously from incompatible categorizations, from different shadow meanings when they are present, and from orientations that have no easy equivalences.

4 Translation and memory

But now it becomes of considerable interest to consider the fact that people do not usually remember for very long the specific language they used to express their thoughts. Whereas the thoughts themselves may persist in memory for long periods, though perhaps in distorted and attenuated form, that is not true of the way they are verbalized on any particular occasion. We are left, then, with the following question. Although translations may not capture fully the particular categorizations, orientations, and combinations that are used to verbalize thoughts on a particular occasion, given that those phenomena are more or less ephemeral, if the translation succeeds in approximating them in an even roughly satisfactory way, does this not mean that in the end, whatever differences existed between the thoughts of the original and the thoughts engendered by the translation tend to fade away, with roughly the same thoughts remaining in the minds of the original speaker and the recipient of the translation? Does the answer then not depend on how well the translation succeeded in conveying the *ideas* expressed by the original - the ideas themselves, and not the manner in which they happened to be categorized and oriented and combined on a particular occasion?

To make this question more concrete, would the fact that a bilingual Seneca-English speaker heard the Seneca on the left side of (3), or whether such a person heard the English on the right, make any difference in the long run? Would he or she remember the ideas that had been expressed in essentially the same way? If specific language is ephemeral, to what extent is the memory for thoughts affected in the long run by whatever language they happen to have been expressed in?

I have no final answer to this question, but it is an important one, and I would like to make one further suggestion. Introspective and anecdotal evidence suggest that the thoughts conveyed by language pass through at least three stages in the minds of language producers and receivers. At the first and transitory stage - the moment when language is produced and received and for a short time afterward - there is immediate and richly ornamented knowledge of the ideas that were expressed and the evaluations associated with them, and also of the ways in which those ideas were categorized, oriented, and combined.

Within a very short period, however, at least some of those categorizations, orientations, and combinations will have faded from memory, whereas the ideas and evaluations will have been retained. This is stage two, and it lasts much longer, probably with a gradual degradation in memory. It is during this stage that we might say that a translation has been relatively successful, because most of the ideas and evaluations that were in the mind of the source language speaker have been successfully transmitted through the target language. To be sure, there may still be a

residual mismatch, because those categorizations, orientations, and combinations, even after they themselves have faded, may have affected the nature of the ideas and evaluations themselves. Thus, the Seneca speaker who uttered *wáónôhgwáge:eya's* in (1) had explicitly in mind the fact that the husband was adversely affected by the death, and that aspect of the idea would not have been explicitly communicated by the translation "his wife died", although anyone might infer that a husband would be likely to regret the death of his wife. But if some differences of this sort remain in stage two, they will have diminished. The question of the adequacy of translation may hinge on this stage, the memory stage, where ideas and evaluations may have been more or less successfully transferred across the different languages.

But there may be a stage three. If stage two retains the ideas and evaluations of the original thoughts, stage three retains only the evaluations. When enough time has passed after thoughts have been experienced and transmitted, all that remains may be memory for the emotions or attitudes that were at first just one component of those thoughts. People may remember nothing more than how they or someone else felt about something, not what that something was. The remarks on the Salamanca lease controversy may provide an example. Eventually one might remember only that the speaker's attitude toward the controversy was a charitable one, and that he was willing to forget the animosity that had been generated by it. One might be left with nothing more than the memory that the speaker was, in that context, a "nice guy", without remembering exactly how one was led to that conclusion.

If I am right about this stage three, we are left with another important question. To what extent are *evaluations*, apart from the ideas with which they are associated, affected by language differences? Is, for example, the attitude expressed in the Seneca word *êgáiwíyoak*, literally translatable as "the matter will continue to be good", adequately communicated with the English "things will settle down"? Although I can hardly demonstrate it now, it may be that languages differ significantly in the ways they express and communicate evaluations, and that this kind of difference is in the end the hardest problem for translations to overcome. It may include an aesthetic component as well, and the aesthetic dimension is well known as a particularly difficult if not unsolvable translation problem.

Let me summarize the points I have tried to make. I began with the suggestion that thoughts, to the extent that we are conscious of them, have three distinguishable components: ideas, evaluations, and inner language. Ideas embrace events and states and their participants, and they are located within a multidimensional thought space of time, space, epistemology, social interaction, and relations to other ideas. Evaluations include emotions and attitudes. Ideas and evaluations may to some extent be organized as inner language before they are overtly expressed, although that is not always the case. For thoughts to be fully verbalized, they must be adjusted to language in four distinct ways, which I termed selection, categorization, orientation, and combination. For each of the four I gave brief examples of differences between the Seneca and English languages, each difference potentially a source of distortion in translation. I suggested that the most significant distortions may arise because of differences in categorization and orientation. I then speculated on whether the ephemeral nature of specific choices of linguistic expression may in the long run leave the recipient of a translation with a closer approximation to the thoughts that were originally expressed, since the specific language will have faded. More speculative still is the possibility that memory sometimes retains nothing more than the evaluative component of the original thoughts, so that we are left with the question of how effective translations can be in capturing emotions, attitudes, and beauty as well.

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