

SEMEMICS AND TRANSLATION

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We use theories, like tools, to accomplish certain objectives. Since objectives vary, we do not all use the same tools; and if our objectives change, we modify the tools we use to reach these objectives. In linguistics we do not all have the same goals. Therefore we should not be surprised at -- or be angry with -- a comparativist if his theory differs from that of a descriptivist, or a dialect geographer if his theory differs from that of a glottochronologist.

My objective is to translate the Bible into Gahuku,¹ a language which was not previously reduced to writing. My goals therefore require me to have a linguistic theory which I can use for two purposes:

- (1) the analysis and description of the Gahuku language
- (2) translation of materials from other languages into Gahuku.

For the first purpose, most of us who are members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics have found the theory of tagmemics as outlined by Pike² a very satisfactory tool. But translation is a far more complicated goal. It requires a knowledge of the structure of not one but at least two languages; and the level of knowledge needed for translation is far deeper than just that of phonology and grammar. We have found that to do translation which will correctly and effectively communicate a message from one language to another, we need to reduce the message in the source language to its basic or underlying structure, which we will call the sememic structure; and then we need to determine how that sememic structure may be expressed or realized in the target language. And in order that we may have solid theoretical grounds for what we do, we have modified our tool -- which in this case is tagmemics -- in two ways. We have postulated in addition to Pike's three "hierarchies" (phonology, grammar, lexicon) a fourth level of sememics. And between each of the levels we have introduced realization rules³ by which the units of one level are realized (represented, manifested) by units in the next level. The result has been exciting, for we are now able to handle from a theoretical level some of the most complicated facets of language.

We may illustrate the effectiveness of these theoretical insights by referring first to rhetorical questions. We may say that utterances which take the form of a question

grammatically fall generally into two categories:

- (1) those which are intended to elicit information,
- (2) those which are not intended to elicit but to convey information.

Take for instance the two sentences in English:

- a. Is it burnt?
- b. Is it burnt!

The form of these two is the same grammatically, but intonation tells us they are quite different in function. The first one is intended to elicit confirmation or denial of a certain proposition. The second is intended to communicate the information in that same proposition, with an added element of intensification. Now if we were to try to translate these into Gahuku, there would be no trouble with a literal translation of the first. But it would be impossible to translate the second using the interrogative form of the verb. We must recognize that the second utterance is in English a grammatical realization, usually considered interrogative, of an underlying sememic structure which contains an intensification sememe but not an interrogative sememe. This intensification sememe can be realized in English by a combination of an interrogative grammatical form plus, phonetically, a certain intonation pattern (or graphically by an exclamation mark); or it could be realized alternatively by an indicative form plus the adverb very. Gahuku, however, does not allow the use of a question plus intonation for this purpose; rather, another device must be used. Gahuku does have rhetorical questions, but does not use them for all the same functions as English does, nor does it use all the same forms. Thus every time a question is translated from some source language into Gahuku, the following must first be determined:

- (1) is it a real or a rhetorical question (i.e., is an interrogative sememe manifested or not)?
- (2) if it is rhetorical, what is its sememic function?
- (3) how may that function be realized in Gahuku?

Many times translators have tried to translate rhetorical questions without going through these three steps. Sometimes the results can be disastrous. In one language the following passage was translated literally: "If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, doesn't he leave the ninety-nine and go in search of the one that went astray?" But since this form in the target language was used to convey contempt, it meant to the readers "certainly he wouldn't be so foolish as to do a thing like that!" In another language the following rhetorical question was translated literally: "Who is wise and

understanding among you? The readers subsequently asked "why didn't the writer say who was?" In another language, when Jesus's rhetorical question "who are my mother and my brothers?" was translated literally, the readers were completely bewildered that Jesus did not know the members of his own family.

As a result of our examination of rhetorical questions in the New Testament, we have been able to establish at least nine distinctive sememic functions of the rhetorical questions found there. We can alert translators as to which function the question in a particular passage has, and we can alert them to investigating the correct means of realizing these functions in their target languages, and thus avoid the dangers of literal translation.

Pronominal realizations provide another area where insights concerning sememics and alternate rules for realizing sememic units have proved very helpful in understanding the process of translation. Ordinarily in English when a speaker or writer refers to himself (EGO) he says I or me or my or mine. But under certain conditions he refers to himself in some other way. In the introduction to a book he may say "the writer"; in a formal speech he may say "the speaker"; in a letter he may say "yours truly"; in the middle of a technical article he may say "we" -- when in each case he really means "I". This leads us to posit four levels of linguistic structure and the sets of realization rules by which units of one level may be realized in the structure of the next lowest level. We have a sememic level in which we have the sememe ego. This sememe is usually realized by a lexeme 1st singular, but under certain circumstances it may be realized by a lexeme 1st plural (usually called the "editorial we") and sometimes by a noun phrase. The 1st plural lexeme is usually realized by a morpheme such as 1st singular subject or 1st singular object and these are in turn realized by the correct phonemic form. But our investigations of more than fifty New Guinea languages so far have not turned up any language which has alternate semo-lexemic realization rules for ego -- i.e., speakers never say we when they mean I, nor does one refer to himself using he or a noun phrase agreeing with a 3rd person singular verb. Thus we have found it necessary to alert translators to a long list of New Testament passages in which the best evidence indicates that the original writers were using one of these alternate realization rules available to him -- but which are not available in our target languages.

For example, when Christ refers to himself as "Son of man", we are forced to translate "I the Son of man", or perhaps even "I", otherwise the reader will conclude

that Christ was referring to someone else. When John writes "that which we have heard . . . we write to you", we must translate this as "I write to you", or the readers will ask "who was helping John write?" When John writes that among the witnesses of a certain event were "the two sons of Zebedee" and since we know from elsewhere that those two sons were John himself and his brother James, we were forced to translate this into Gahuku saying "I and my older brother, we two," otherwise the readers would never realize John was speaking about himself.

This we see again that for translation we need to get behind the "surface structure" and determine the underlying sememic structure and meaning content; we need to discover what the writer in the source language intended to convey, and then to use the available realization rules to express it in our target language.

Metaphors are a third area where linguistic insights have not only enabled us to see the nature of the difficulty in translation but to provide avenues of solution for translation in specific instances. A metaphor is a linguistic construction in which the writer or speaker uses an alternate set of lexemes to convey certain information which may be expressed straightforwardly using other lexemes. These alternate lexemes, if taken in their literal sense, in combination state something which is contrary to reality. It is this clash with reality as perceived by the hearer that usually signifies to him that a "figure of speech" is being used. Quite often metaphors violate normal lexical structure; that is, they bring into a grammatical construction lexemes which do not ordinarily occur together, causing what is sometimes called a "collocational clash".

Thus, if I call someone a fox, it is immediately apparent that this statement violates reality, and that something other than a literal meaning is intended. Furthermore, there is a violation of lexical structure. In an equational clause in English, when the subject is a pronoun or noun referring to a human, the complement cannot be a noun whose referent is non-human. Tagmemics would state that such restrictions are part of the rules of lexical structure.

Metaphors are acceptable and understood because of one phenomenon: one or more semantic components or attributes of the lexeme(s) used in the metaphor are the same as the components or attributes which are really intended to be conveyed to the hearers or readers. This, in calling someone a fox, the attribute of craftiness or slyness or cunning, which we in English ascribe to foxes, is meant to be understood.

When we come to translating a metaphor, we can do so literally only if those semantic components of the metaphorical lexeme used in the target language are the

same as those of the source language lexeme, and if they are obvious to the reader of the translation. To a reader who knows nothing about the ways of foxes, calling someone a fox would have either zero meaning or some other meaning than that which was intended. Sometimes it is assumed that semantic components and attributes are in the realm of universals, but such is not the case. If in English we call someone a pig, the attribute of gluttony is usually in mind. But in New Guinea languages the attribute suggested by the word pig has been variously given as greediness, untidiness, incestuousness, or laboriousness.

Thus we need to establish what meaning is suggested to the hearers if we retain a metaphor in translation. In one language where the passage "take up your cross and follow me" was translated literally, the informant was very happy with it. When asked as to its meaning, he replied that it referred to the necessity of taking along and erecting a cross every time someone was buried. In another language, in the passage where Jesus, suggesting that he came to help Jews and not foreigners, says "it is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs", where the woman replies "even the dogs under the table eat the children's leftovers", the informant was sure he understood the literal translation. But what he understood was that in this case the reason the woman's daughter had an evil spirit was that someone had taken some of the scraps of food she had carelessly dropped and used them to work sorcery.

In translating a metaphor, the first step is thus to decide what is intended by the author; that is, we must go beyond the lexemes given to determine what is really being conveyed -- the sememic content. Then there are several alternatives in translating. We may (a) retain the metaphor, or (b) substitute one from the target language with the same sememic content, perhaps in addition stating specifically the semantic components of the metaphorical lexeme(s) that the author desired to convey. "Go tell that fox Herod" was translated in one Mexican language as "go tell that coyote" because a coyote is thought to be very cunning. In Gahuku we translated that passage as "tell that man with a dog's soul". Another alternative is (c) to formalize the comparison and add non-metaphorical lexemes (i.e., transforming the metaphor into a simile), again stating perhaps the common semantic components of the metaphorical and non-metaphorical lexemes. Thus we might translate the passage as "tell that man who is as cunning as a fox". Or, (d), we might remove the metaphorical lexemes and substitute non-metaphorical ones. Thus we might simply say "go tell that crafty man". The decision in each case of how to translate a metaphor will depend on the availability and acceptability of metaphors in the target language (i.e., do they have such realization rules generally and specifically), on the amount of semantic components in

common between the metaphorical lexemes used in the target language and the non-metaphorical lexemes which might otherwise be used, on the seriousness of any lexical clash as seen by the target language readers, and other factors.

Translation is thus not simply a process of substituting the nearest lexical equivalent in the target language for its source language counterpart. We must go beyond the lexical level to the sememic level and determine what sememic units are being realized by the lexical units used in the source language. Then we must determine what devices and rules are available in the target language for the lexemic realization of these units, in such a way as to preserve as closely as possible sememic and not lexical or grammatical equivalence. Our expanded tagmemic model is able to provide the theoretical understanding we need to account for some of these complex linguistic phenomena, and at the same time is providing keys to their solution in order that our translations may convey to the readers that which was truly intended by the original writers.

Paper originally delivered at the August, 1968 meeting
of the Linguistic Society of the University of Papua & New Guinea.

Footnotes

¹ Gahuku is the mother tongue of some 6,000 people in villages surrounding Goroka in the Eastern Highlands of the Territory of New Guinea, and is understood by that many more people in adjacent language areas. Research on the language under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics was begun there in 1959.

² Kenneth L. Pike, Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behaviour. (2nd rev. ed.) The Hague, Mouton (1967)

³ I am indebted to Sydney M. Lamb for this term, but the linguistic model assumed here cannot be equated with that of Lamb's Stratificational Grammar.