

On the interplay between systemic linguistics and cultural translation

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In the past there was a strong tendency towards keeping language and translation separate, which brought about a situation in which very little attention was paid to the contribution of linguistics to the art, science or craft of translation. When translation started to be seen more and more as an interdisciplinary subject, keener interest was taken in the findings of linguistics, and more precisely in what functional linguistics had to say about language in use inscribed in a certain context of situation or context of culture.

M.A.K. Halliday's systemic-functional grammar was one of the functionalist schools which soon became the object of study of some translation theorists, mainly Peter Newmark (see Newmark 1987). In my opinion, the literature on the relationship between systemic linguistics and translation is essentially translator-oriented, and is characterized by providing the translator and/or the interpreter with a repertoire of practical hints for discussion and applications of systemic grammar to particular problems encountered by the translator (an example of this is Taylor 1993). However, I still have not found any study which treats the links, already acknowledged, between Halliday's model of grammar and translation from an ontologic and epistemic point of view. I believe that only with studies of this kind is it possible to establish solid grounds to account for the reasons why such links exist and are possible, and

consequently predict, among many other things, the scope of applicability of systemic linguistics to translation practice.

This is the purpose of this article. I will explore the basic tenets of systemic-functional linguistics and I will try to characterize the way in which Halliday's grammar benefits from translation studies as regards some ontological and methodological issues. In contrast to previous related work, this will be a fundamentally linguist-oriented paper.

Whenever faced with the need to address linguistic matters in the light of social questions or social problems in the light of linguistic data, for that matter-, the usual formulation would picture a situation in which purely linguistic problems were discussed independently of, although in relation to, sociological matters in the way Fig.1 shows. The sociological component influenced the linguistic component, and viceversa, keeping both disciplines, sociology and linguistics, as isolated modules. This view presupposes a distinction between language and society as discrete objects.

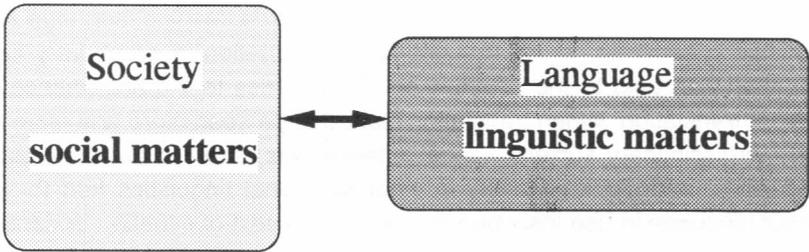
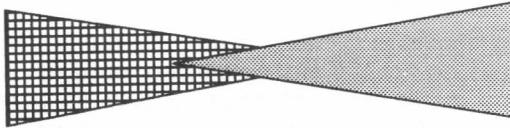


Fig. 1

However, there is, at least, another way of structuring the relationships between language and society, the one illustrated in Fig.2. Taking Halliday's idea of the social man (Halliday 1978), many linguists focus their attention on a fact: speakers from other cultures do not talk about issues in the way we do, or even issues in our own culture are not issues in other cultures (Kress 1989). This justifies, so they say, the need for a theory of language that takes up this point: the interconnection of linguistic and cultural questions. Such a theory of language views language and society as the two ends of a cline or *continuum*, and things are explained with reference to both ends of the scale using the features [\pm linguistic] [\pm social]. The starting point in this account is the producer of

language -speaker or writer- seen not as an isolated individual, but as a social agent, located in a network of social relations, in specific places in a social structure (Kress 1989: 5).

+ *linguistic*
- *social*



+ *social*
- *linguistic*

Fig.2

Philosophical grammars construe their hypotheses out of very different ontological bases, and their aims are likewise opposed. It is obvious that grammars of this nature -of the Chomskyan tradition, mainly- have no say in these questions. As Halliday (1984: 4) remarks,

whereas the limiting case of a philosophical grammar is a logical syntax (i.e. an artificial language -hence philosophical grammarians tend to refer to language as 'natural language'), the limiting case of an ethnographic grammar is an *explication de texte* (an interpretative commentary on a single-highly valued instance of language use).

Halliday's approach to linguistics favours a type of grammar devised in such a way that the speaker or writer of a language selects within the system of available choices, not *in vacuo*, but in the context of speech situations (Halliday 1970: 142). In fact, if we want to be precise in the use of systemic terminology, we should say that speakers "opt", not "choose", "since we are concerned not with deliberate acts of choice but with symbolic behaviour, in which the options may express our meanings only very indirectly" (Halliday 1970: 142).

Halliday's idea that man's language is influenced and conditioned by the social group he is in, of course, is not new in the world of linguistics. In response to a quest for, and a challenge to, the scientific characterization of a linguistic approach to language study, linguists like Sapir claimed earlier in this century that ties should be identified between linguistics

proper and neighbouring fields such as anthropology, culture history, sociology, psychology or philosophy. As regards language and society, Sapir realized that language was becoming valuable as a guide to the scientific study of a given culture, and added that the network of cultural patterns of a civilization was indexed in the language which expressed that civilization (Sapir 1929: 161). In his attempt to explain the linguistic phenomenon, Sapir argues that

language is a guide to 'social reality'. [...] Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular languages which has become the medium of expression for their society" (Sapir 1929: 162).

The idea underlying Sapir's and Halliday's hypotheses is captured in this quote by Hook (1969: 162): "It is not the existence of language that makes society possible but the existence of society that makes language possible."

By way of illustration, let's take a sentence like "He made a stand". A philosophical grammar would probably try to interpret the meaning of this sentence in terms of the truth conditions of the proposition, the result being either true or false in relation to a certain state of affairs in a given world. Hewson (1992) claims, however, that every sentence has a situational context which helps to determine the normal pragmatic interpretation. For the example we are considering, this linguist gives seven plausible interpretations: 1) that he made a pedestal for a statue, 2) that he leaned his bicycle on something, 3) that he created a way of getting on a horse's back, 4) that he was selling fruit, 5) that he bravely faced an attack, 6) that he refused to back down, and 7) that he took out his carpentry tools and made anything from a hatstand for the front hall to an egg-rack for the kitchen. Hewson (1992: 587) adds that "all of these possibilities are determined pragmatically both by the linguistic context of the discourse [...] and the situational context".

Systemic-functional linguistics incorporates these ideas in its model of grammar by means of two types of context. Halliday (1990: 25-26) says that the *context of situation* can be interpreted as the environment of the text, whereas the environment of the linguistic system is conceived as the *context of culture*. Why do we find so many different ways of speaking or writing? Why so many different possible meanings for a single token of

linguistic material? Halliday understands that speakers/writers share membership in a particular social institution, with its practices, its values, its meanings, its demands, prohibitions, permissions. Institutions and social groupings have specific meanings and values which are articulated in language in systematic ways. In this light, discourses are systematically-organized expression modes which give shape to the meanings and values of an institution (Kress 1989: 7), as Fig. 3 shows. Consequently, a discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organizes and gives structure to the way in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about.

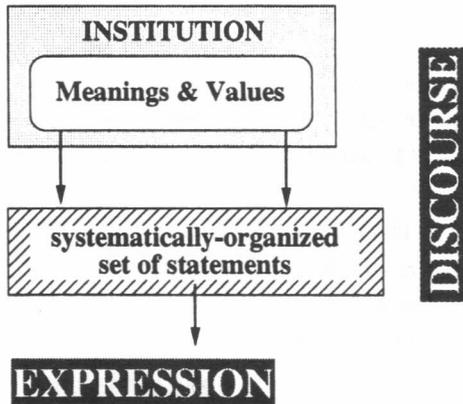


Fig.3

Whereas the idea that context constrains the possibilities of linguistic expressions is something commonly accepted by, among others, ethnographic linguists, there still remains a problem which deeply affects the characterization of linguistics as a science. I am referring now to the question of explicitness. Some philosophical linguists have been attacking Halliday over the years with regard to one very particular aspect of his way of approaching linguistics, namely, the way he presents his hypotheses. Halliday's writings are characterized by the lack of empirical argumentation in support of his ideas about language, which makes his works be like a mere flow of ideas, without really coming down to giving evidence in favour of his, why not call them, intuitions. Computer linguists like Bateman and Paris, Halliday friendly, encountered this problem when they experienced the need to incorporate a computational model of register theory in their text generation project (vid. Bateman & Paris 1991).

Bateman and Paris recognize that not all answers are valid for a particular situation and/or for a particular language user: people make use of their knowledge about other participants and about situations in order to communicate effectively. Therefore, it is desirable for computer systems to have knowledge about their users to achieve a closer imitation of human interactive linguistic behaviour (Bateman & Paris 1991: 81-82). In terms of information, these authors claim that the computer program should contain: a user's domain knowledge, the user's goals when using a system, the user's specific beliefs at particular points during the interaction, and so on. However, models containing information of this type are underdeveloped, and register theory is claimed to deserve much more description and explanation. Bateman & Paris (1991: 84) defend that registers are definable in terms of selections of situational features that call for the selection of particular corresponding linguistic features. The situational features which define registers are assumed to pattern paradigmatically, similarly to other levels of linguistic organization in systemic linguistics, that is, a network of interdependent choices, each of which may constrain the linguistic alternatives available in the discourse organization and the grammar (see Fig. 4).

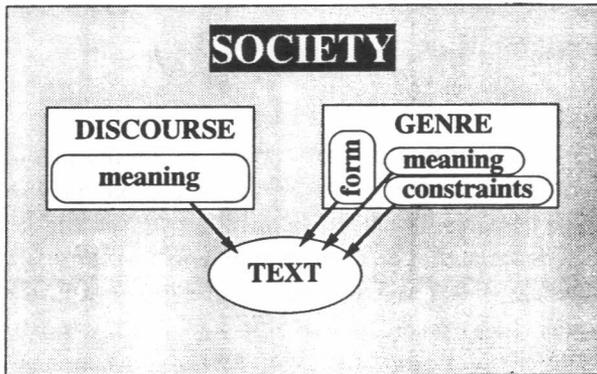


Fig. 4

So far I have been developing ideas from a purely linguistic standpoint, and nothing has been said about where translation fits in all this. Some of Peter Newmark's reflections on translation analysis will serve as the starting point in the discussion that follows about the role translation

studies might play in theory construction and theory testing in systemic linguistics.

In a seminal paper on translation and systemic-functional linguistics, Newmark (1987:293) claims that one of the basic concerns of the translator is meaning, therefore Halliday's grammar, meaning-based, becomes a serviceable tool for determining the constituent parts of a source language text and its network of relations with its translation. The translation analyst, he adds, needs a theory of grammar which identifies descriptive units such as: the text, the paragraph, the sentence, the clause, the group, the word and the morpheme. These units are identified in systemic-functional grammar.

On the other hand, translation studies benefit greatly from cohesion studies, and precisely the topic of cohesion is amply dealt with in systemic works such as Halliday & Hasan (1976) and Halliday (1994 [1985]). These authors claim that a very wide range of semantic relationships is encoded through links within the clause complex; however, discourse is identified when additional relations within the text are established, relations which are non-structural. In English, they say, the four ways by which cohesion is created are, namely: by reference, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical organization. These relations take place, not within the sentence unit, but beyond or around the clause.

Let's have a look at Fig. 5 now. The further up we move from the level of the morpheme towards the unit called "text", the further away we move from purely linguistic structural material into the disclosure of the social and cultural values encoded in a text. A text is produced in a context of situation within an overall context of culture, and the values and meanings of that particular culture are filtered down into the context of situation where that text arises. These values are embodied in the text through the linguistic units that make the text. Evidence of this is translation analysis: if we take an original text and a translated version of it, apart from identifying and contrasting linguistic patterns, an inevitable comparison is made between the context of situation and the context of culture of the original version, and the context of situation and the context of culture of the translated text.

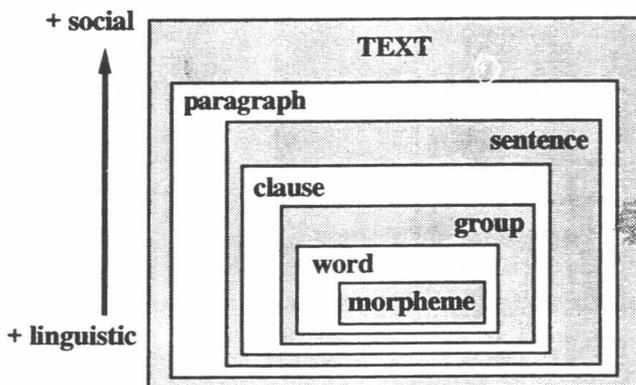


Fig. 5

Many cases of mistranslation can be accounted for in terms of a mismatch in the values represented in one, or both, of the contexts at play. Of course, some wrong translations are simply due to the translator's poor knowledge of one of the languages. In a translation of Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* we can read "La calle del mercado de Soho ardía de luz", and the English original says "The street market in Soho is fierce with light"; or "un mandato del lenguaje inglés" as the translation of "a command of the English language" (examples taken from Santoyo 1996). However, social and cultural values behind, for instance, some Caribbean dances are a challenge to the translator when texts by Gabriel García Márquez are rendered into English (Valero Garcés 1995). Much of the same could be said of the next example (taken from the magazine *Rondalberia Febrero/February* 1997: 31): the translation analyst may wonder to what extent it is possible to keep the meanings and values of a text by Camilo José Cela in an English rendering.

Source text:

El viajero, a la vista aún del Tajo y con el recuerdo puesto en el Jarama, en el Henares, en el Tajuña, en los ríos que cruzó, se divierte en componer, colgadas de la memoria, unas coplillas espirituales.

Translated version:

The traveller, still within sight of the Tajo river and still remembering the other ones he crossed -the Jarama, the Henares and the Tajuña- amuses himself by composing some half remembered, spiritual verses.

In this particular case, translating individual words raises no special problems; however, translation, as an overall process, becomes less possible, and not equally successful, when the constituents of language stop being universal and culturally overlapping (Newmark 1987: 299). Coming back to what Fig. 5 shows, it could be said that the further up we move in the direction of the arrow, the nearer we get to Newmark's idea of communicative translation, in other words, cultural translation. At the same time, the further up we go, the further away we move from purely linguistic translation, that is, semantic translation (or even cognitive translation, in a radical interpretation of the translator's intention), in the way Newmark understands the term (Newmark 1977, 1978, 1982). I must emphasize that it is precisely the pragmatic element, the cultural element, which makes the difference between a linguistic, semantic or cognitive translation, and a communicative, functional or cultural translation (Newmark 1977: 167, 168):

Communicative translation [...] is concerned mainly with the receptors, usually in the context of a language and cultural variety, whilst semantic translation is concerned with the transmitter usually as an individual, and often in contradistinction both to his culture and to the norms of his language. (Newmark 1977: 167)

Translation analysis and the practice of comparing different translated versions of an original text on the bases of systemic linguistics is undoubtedly a way of testing the theory, and ultimately leads to providing objective evidence in favour of one of the weak points in Halliday's grammar: methodology. In a thought-provoking article, Margaret Berry (1989) questions the existence of a coherent methodology in systemic-functional grammar, and makes two key claims: that the theory should be set up by means of explicit hypotheses, and that systemicists should make some effort to test them. My claim is that, by contrasting happy and unsatisfactory translations, it would be possible to establish, in a testable way, the situational features that make up the context of situation and the context of culture in terms of the needs expressed by Bateman & Paris discussed previously. Culturally and functionally inaccurate translations not only offer us the clue to what really counts as evidence for and against Halliday's views, but also makes a major contribution towards evaluating, refining and improving the theory.

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