A Semiotic Approach to the Study of Translation

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This is not a presentation!
Just a few words about terminology and some other general issues regarding the translation from a linguist’s viewpoint
Translation:
Why is it so difficult?
Translation is difficult because languages are different, in many ways
Linguistic diversity

- **Phonological** diversity: languages sound differently
- **Semantic** diversity: languages shape differently the meanings of the words
- **(Meta)-semiotic** diversity
- Diversity of the **knowledge structure**
Phonological and semantic diversity
What’s meta-semiotics?

- Louis Hjelmslev’s theoretical framework: well-forgotten, but still valid approach
- Languages are **semiotics** (or semiotic systems)
- Semiotic systems have a plane of expression and a plane of content
What’s meta-semiotics?

- A semiotic system per se can become the expression or the content of a higher semiotic entity termed **meta-semiotics**

- Two types: **denotative** vs. **connotative** meta-semiotics
Semiotics

diagram

expression
content
Connotative Meta-Semiotics

- expression
- content

content
Denotative Meta-Semiotics

expression

expression
content
In other words

• Denotative meta-semiotics: speech about speech (texts on grammar, stylistics etc.)

• Connotative meta-semiotics: the way of speaking about something is meaningful in itself (stylistic diversity and every other connotations)
Examples

- **Slang, jargon** and other stylistic and sociolinguistic registers: they are the expression of sociologically relevant information about the speaker, e.g.:
  - I like it vs. I am down with it
  - U K? vs. Are you ok?
Examples

- **Rhymes, metrics** and other poetical features. They express aesthetic values, e.g.:
  - *I like Ike* vs. *I'm madly for Adlai*

- **Sacred** texts. Their exact wording express religious values.
To translate a meta-semiotic system means to translate at least two different, highly structured systems.
Presuppositions and knowledge structure

• Linguistic communication process is additive: we add small pieces of information to the huge background knowledge shared by the speakers

• The comprehension of a single sentence implies some presuppositions
Source of the background knowledge

- **Biological** (e.g.: self-consciousness, body parts)
- **Cultural** (e.g.: the structure of the world)
- **Situational** (e.g.: the notion of ‘now’ and ‘here’)

Examples

• P. Grice defined the notion of conversational implicatures, e.g.:
  ‣ Where is John? — The door of the office room n. 5 seems locked. — Neither did Mary show up today
  ‣ (The speaker implies that there exist an objective link between John and the office room n. 5, known to his audience)
The translator has to make available to his target audience all the necessary background knowledge implied by the source text.
Conclusions

• Translator must individuate all the meaningful levels and structures of the source text

• Then, then the most important level is to be identified and translated first

• The remaining levels are translated or ignored depending on how sophisticated is the translator’s technique