

Semantics and Translation for Spanish Learners of English

BRIAN MOTT



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for Spanish Learners
of English

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Preface

It is now twenty-five years since I published my first textbook for Spanish learners of English, *La composición escrita en inglés: método y ejercicios gramaticales* (1985). Since that time, writing textbooks for my students has become an almost constant activity for me. In the early years, it was no easy task because of the heavy teaching load I had at the University of Barcelona, working, as I was, in both the Faculty and the University Language School (EIM: *Escola d'Idiomes Moderns*); more recently, this has been rendered even more difficult by the increasing pressure to engage in research and publish work of an academic nature in preference to basic teaching matter. Furthermore, when so much good material is already available in print, it is not easy to justify yet another book in any one field. In this particular case, I would emphasize that the utility of the present text lies in the fact that it deals with both semantics and translation at the same time and offers a course specially designed for the learner of English whose native language is Spanish, whether he or she is actually pursuing studies in translation itself or engaged in learning about other aspects of English Language, Linguistics, Literature and Culture as part of a degree course. Naturally, the material will also prove to be useful to English students of the Spanish Language, who require the same kind of contrastive knowledge as their Spanish counterparts.

This new text is based on an earlier one entitled *A Course in Semantics and Translation for Spanish Learners of English* (Barcelona: PPU [Promociones y Publicaciones Universitarias], 1993). The book made it into a second edition (EUB [Ediciones Universitarias de Barcelona], 1996), but has been out-of-print for some time now, though still on the reading lists of the Spanish-English, English-Spanish translation classes run at the University of Barcelona. For this reason, and particularly in view of the fact that students often inquire about the text, I decided to bring out an updated version.

Since semantics became a course separate from translation in the English Department of the University of Barcelona in 1996, along with elements of pragmatics, I have also written a text on semantics and pragmatics: *Introductory Semantics and Pragmatics for Spanish Learners of English* (Barcelona: Publicacions i Edicions de la UB, 2003, 2009). However, the present coursebook

is an attempt to teach just those elementary and practical aspects of semantics that are most relevant and essential to the field of translation.

Students of translation, and students of language in general, often lack sufficient insight into the workings of the subject to enable them to fully appreciate the aims and the ultimate implications of the courses they are taking. In my own case, in retrospect, I realize only too well that analysis of the large body of lexis which I had to organize when preparing my doctoral thesis on Aragonese dialectology would have been much easier if I had possessed a deeper knowledge of language, and of semantics in particular, at that time, not to mention lexicography.

Translation is a subject which, more than any other in the field of language and linguistics, requires ideally a very broad-based education since, in the process of transferring a text from one linguistic medium to another, it is necessary for the translator to have not only a fine knowledge of two languages and to be sensitive to subtle shades of meaning, but also to be aware of the different cultural frameworks within which each of the languages he or she is working with is used.

Although the chapters of this book vary slightly in their approach (for example, the tone of chapter 3 is less technical and academic than that of some other chapters), the text as a whole is intended to have a practical bias. For this reason, I have preferred to use the term *translation* rather than *translation theory* in the title. Many coursebooks on translation present the student with the latest theory about what is supposed to go on in the mind, brain or cells when we translate, and they make a fetish of diagrams, schemata and models. In my text I hope to have laid emphasis on description, exemplification and practice over and above abstraction and, at the same time, to have provided advice for the student on tackling some of the recurrent problems that the translator is likely to encounter, many of which can be coped with by resorting to the appropriate translation strategies.

There is no special section on sentence meaning in this book, this being closely connected with the field of pragmatics, which is now a major branch of linguistics requiring detailed attention beyond the scope of the present piece of work. However, importance is attached to ways of analysing word meaning (chapter 6), in particular through prototypicality theory. Considerable attention is also paid to the diachronic phenomenon of change of meaning (chapter 8), since it is important that the student of translation be made aware of the fluidity and volatility of the acceptations of words, and the fact that their existing meanings and the new ones that they may acquire are generated by the multiple contexts in which they are used, and these contexts are indeed very varied and will shift over time.

The bibliography has been updated as accurately as possible in order to take account of the rapidly appearing new editions of textbooks and dictionaries, but the many excellent publications on pragmatics have been excluded as the subject is not covered in the present volume, as explained above. Extensive bibliographies are no longer practical in coursebooks for undergraduates. Accordingly, the bibliography appended to this text attempts to list the most useful and readable publications, and only a few items are suggested at the end of each chapter for further reading.

BRIAN MOTT
March 2011

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I am also extremely grateful to various other people for taking the trouble to draw my attention to typographical errors and inaccuracies in the first edition of the earlier version of this textbook published in the 1990s under the title *A Course in Semantics and Translation for Spanish Learners of English*. Among these are Maria Rosa Ena Vidal, Peter Harvey and Stuart Poole. I also wish to thank Dr Philip Banks for the information on the Albigenses in section 4.2.1.

1.1. WHAT IS TRANSLATION?

Translation involves replacing a text in the source language with an equivalent text in the target language. Such a process is, of course, a fine art and requires, not least, a first-class knowledge of the two languages in question on the part of the translator. It also demands an awareness of and sensitivity to the cultural background against which the source language text is set in order for its content to be rendered accurately in the target language and, therefore, sufficient background knowledge relating to the target language, too, in order for the CULTURAL TRANSFER to be achieved successfully. The competent translator will strive to achieve DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE, whereby the form of the original is appropriately restructured by skillful manipulation of the different syntax and lexis of the target language so that as little of the meaning of the original as possible is altered. Precise transference of meaning is crucial to good translation. If the meaning is lost or distorted through an attempt to preserve intact the original form (syntax and words), or if the message, which is the vehicle for the communicative intention of the translator, is skewed through addition of material or, conversely, omission of facts and ideas, then the resultant translation will be bad.

The quality of a translation will be reflected in both its faithfulness to the original and in the extent to which it is comprehensible to the reader. A successful product will not read or sound like a translation; it will not give the impression of being some kind of “interlanguage” or “third language”, but will produce in the reader or hearer an effect similar to the one produced by the original text in its readership or audience. This is the essence of dynamic equivalence, which aims at pragmatic parallelism over and above formal parallelism.

1.2. TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATION THEORY

Just how proficient the translator will become in achieving dynamic equivalence will depend principally on practice, reinforced by conscientious diction-

ary research and observant reading, i.e. reading not merely to extract information from a text, but paying careful attention to the language the text is couched in, i.e. the linguistic medium through which the information is expressed. In this way, he or she will come across unfamiliar words and new turns of expression to increase his or her vocabulary, which can never be large enough when one is translating, and translations will often be found for words and phrases that have hitherto been an unresolvable difficulty.

Just as learning to write requires constant practice in composition, learning to translate requires regular practice in translation. Practice makes perfect, as the saying goes. It is important to make this point since many people who need to learn to translate for some reason or other — perhaps they are following a course in translation as part of their foreign language degree at a university — are under the impression that some kind of abstract theory will assist them in the acquisition of this skill. Certainly, theoretical knowledge is important background preparation and provides a deeper understanding of the practical tasks involved, but there is no theoretical construct or set of principles that can be applied infallibly in every translation situation, nor indeed any hard-and-fast set of rules that the translator can learn and store away ready for all contingencies. So much depends on acquiring linguistic sensitivity until the day when what is correct in a language actually sounds correct. There is no law of translation because laws admit of no exceptions, and language is full of exceptions. Although words have a non-contextual, dictionary meaning, context is the overriding, determining factor in all decisions involving translation. Context has primacy over any rule or theory, and will take precedence over the primary or dictionary meaning of a word since it is the meaning which derives from the relationship between words that is more problematic than the actual core meanings of the individual words themselves.

Too much theory can in fact be more of a hindrance than a help. It is the centipede problem. If a centipede had to watch his feet, would he ever walk again? Similarly, if a juggler were conscious of his every flick of the wrist, would he be able to juggle? Or take the case of pianists: the habit of placing the fingers in certain positions during the performance of a piece of music is what eventually leads to a perfect rendition, rather than the memorizing of each and every single note to be played.

A metacognitive awareness of the general principles governing translation, or any other skill for that matter, can do no harm and may be useful, but these principles will eventually need to become automatized, and the translator will need to learn to bring them spontaneously into play without being fully conscious of them the whole time.

What will be of particular use to the translator when dealing with the most recurrent problems are what we call TRANSLATION STRATEGIES. A translation strategy is a consistent way of tackling a commonly occurring translation difficulty, for example, the translation of the English passive voice into another language, or the rendering of Spanish *quedarse* + past participle (*nos quedamos atónitos*), and many of such strategies will be dealt with in chapter 3 of this book.

1.3. RESPONSIBILITY OF THE TRANSLATOR

Because it is such a difficult task and requires great skill, translating a text is a considerable responsibility for a translator. It is so easy to misconstrue the facts and, without wanting to gloat over the enormous quantities of bad translation that have been done (often because of poor working conditions and meagre remuneration), I would like to quote just one or two well-known cases in which incorrect translation has had far-reaching effects, or has even changed the course of history.

In 1877 the Italian astronomer Schiaparelli carried out an intensive study of Mars and drew attention to certain straight, regular lines crossing the red areas. He observed about a hundred of these and called them *canali*. Unfortunately, the semasiological field of Italian *canali* covers both *canals* and *channels* in English. Now, Schiaparelli was referring to *channels*, which are natural formations, rather than *canals*, which are man-made, but *canali* was mistranslated as *canals*, and it was not long before it was being suggested that the lines Schiaparelli had seen were irrigation ditches dug by intelligent beings in order to convey water from the snowy poles of the planet to the arid regions near the equator. Thus, this error of interpretation for many years provided the rationale for stories about Martians, notably *The War of the Worlds* (1898) by H. G. Wells, which is a harrowing, apocalyptic tale of southern England invaded by creatures from the red planet. The lines on Mars are now known to be illusions caused by the chance alignment of large craters and other features of the Martian surface.

The importance of translation is also brought home to us by the allegation that, in the Japanese telegram sent to Washington just before President Truman gave the order for the atomic bomb to be dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, the word *mokasutu* was mistranslated as ‘ignored’ instead of ‘considered’ (Newmark, 1988: 7).

Translation is not merely a transmitter of information and culture, but also of the truth! And it can save lives — a fact recognized during the Falklands

War between Britain and Argentina in 1982. While the conflict raged, two types of leaflet produced by British naval translators were dropped by Harrier jets on Port Stanley: one a letter from the British Task Force commander, Admiral Woodward, to the Argentinian commander, General Méndez, suggesting that he had no chance of winning and should withdraw his troops (not surrender!); the other explaining to the Argentinian soldiers what to do if they wanted to give up fighting and required a safe passage home. The first had to be professional and business-like, the second friendly and practical. Both letters needed to avoid a threatening tone and, above all, steer clear of any kind of patronizing language, which would produce the opposite to the desired effect. In this situation, the translator's rôle might be a crucial contribution to a prompt end to hostilities with the concomitant preservation of human lives (Newmark 1991: 39-40).

Every language has its own subtleties and may make fine distinctions where another language does not. Imagine the effect of translating the English *You're being stupid* into Spanish as *¡Qué estúpido eres!* In English *You're being stupid* is not the same as *You're stupid*. The former expression is merely an appeal for another person to be reasonable and simply implies that at this particular moment they are behaving irrationally, or are not their normal self (Sp. *No seas tonto*).

As we have seen, the accountability of the translator is great, for the consequences of bad translation can be incalculable. Nevertheless, incorrect translation can also be very humorous. The most amusing translations are those produced through translating into the foreign language (Spanish *traducción inversa*) when translators are unaware of precise word usage and insufficiently familiar with the idiomatic expression of the language they are translating into. English translations of foreign menus done by people with a poor grasp of English are notoriously bad, as we all know from such renderings of Spanish cuisine as the following:

rape on the grill (*rape a la plancha*)
 rape on the plank (*rape a la plancha*)
 rape in the Roman fashion (*rape a la romana*)
 rape in the sailor's fashion (*rape a la marinera*)
 ironed hake (*merluza a la plancha*)
 salad lass (*ensalada chica*)
 brains muffled oneself up (*sesos rebozados*)
 battered brains (*sesos rebozados*)
 slab chicken (*pollo a la plancha*)
 squid to the Roman (*calamares a la romana*)

revolting eggs (*huevos revueltos*)
tart of the house (*tarta de la casa*)

On the menu of a Polish hotel restaurant the following was found:

Salad a firm's own make; limpid red beet soup with cheesy dumplings in the form of a finger; roasted duck let loose; beef rashers beaten up in the country people's fashion.

On your travels round the world you may also come across signs like these:

1) In a hotel in Japan:

You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid.

2) In a Rhodes tailor shop:

Order your summers suit. Because is big rush, we will execute customers in strict rotation.

3) On the door of a Moscow hotel room:

If this is your first visit to Moscow, you are welcome to it.

4) In a Vienna hotel:

In case of fire, do your utmost to alarm the hotel porter.

5) On the menu of a Swiss restaurant:

Our wines leave you nothing to hope for.

6) In a laundry in Rome:

Ladies, leave your clothes here and spend the afternoon having a good time.

7) Outside a Hong Kong tailor's:

Ladies may have a fit upstairs.

8) In a hotel in Athens:

Visitors are expected to complain at the office between the hours of 9 and 11 a.m. daily.

9) Outside a church in Salzburg:

No free shoulders!

10) At Barcelona Airport:

Please forgive the inconvenience caused by the building of this cafeteria.

These notices all reveal that, even if the grammatical construction of a translation is more or less correct, inadequate command of word, phrase and sentence meaning in the foreign language and an insufficient knowledge of idiom can lead to gross distortion and have hilarious results.

FURTHER READING

Most of the badly expressed signs in 1.3 are taken from Barnum and Wolniansky 1989.

All the titles listed in the bibliography for Peter Newmark (1981, 1988, 1991, 1993) are useful background reading to the exercise of translation, containing examples from several of the major European languages, in particular, French and German. For materials that are more up-to-date and specially designed for Spanish speakers, see Hervey, Higgins & Haywood 2009, in which translation is presented as a problem-solving discipline.

Bell 1991 focuses on the building and justification of an integrated model of the process of translation. Duff 1981 examines why translation, no matter how competent, so often reads like a “third language”. Duff 1989 is a resource book for teachers and does not set out to teach translation but to explore its use in the English language teaching class.

EXERCISE

Put the 10 badly expressed signs in 1.3 into correct English.