

## SEVEN

### *Meaning Is No Simple Thing*

Whether done by a speaker of L1 or L2, an adequate translation reproduces the meaning of an utterance made in a foreign language.

That sounds straightforward enough. It corresponds entirely to the service that contemporary translators and interpreters claim to provide. But it doesn't provide an adequate understanding of what translation is, because the meaning of an utterance is not a single thing. Whatever we say or write means in many ways at once. The fact is, utterances have all sorts of "meanings" of different kinds. The meaning of meaning is a daunting topic, but you can't really study translation if you leave it aside. It may be a philosophical can of worms—but it's an issue that every translation actually solves.

There is obviously more to meaning than the meaning of words, and here's a simple story to show why. Jim is out hiking with friends. He wanders away from the group and finds himself in thick woods. He's lost his bearings entirely. Then the smell of coffee reaches his nose. What does that mean? It means that camp is not far away. It's a real and important meaning to Jim—but it has nothing to do with words.

The kind of meaning that things have just by themselves is called **symptomatic meaning**. Smells, noises, physical sensations,

the presence of this or that natural or manufactured object, have symptomatic meanings all the time. In daily life, we pick up a thousand clues of that kind every day but retain only those that endow our world with the meanings we need. In like manner, anything said also has symptomatic meaning from the simple fact of it having been said. If I go into a coffee shop and order an espresso, what does that mean? As a symptom, it means I speak English, that the barista does, too, and so forth. That's obvious. Most of the time, the symptomatic meaning of an utterance is just too obvious to be noticed. But not always.

*The Great Escape*, a film made by John Sturges in 1964, tells the almost-true story of a mass breakout from a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. The leader of the plot, Squadron Leader Bartlett, has good language skills in French and German and teams up with Flight Lieutenant MacDonald, who has only English, to get from the tunnel exit to the Channel coast. Camouflaged as a pair of French businessmen, they are in line to board a bus that will take them farther on. There's a security check. Bartlett bluffs his way through in very plausible French and German. He has already begun to get inside the bus when the canny policeman wishes the pair of them "Good luck"—*in English*. MacDonald, still on the step, instinctively turns around, smiles, and blurts out, "Thank you"—and that's the end of his great escape. It's not the linguistic meanings of the policeman's expression or MacDonald's response that catch the fugitives out but the symptomatic meaning of the language used.

It is not possible to reproduce the symptomatic meaning of the use of a given language in a language other than the one being used. You can't use Finnish, for example, to re-create the force of "speaking in English when escaping from a German prison camp." In the French-language version of the film, "good luck" and "thank you" stay in English—French audiences are expected to recognize the sounds of English and to know the

symptomatic meaning of using English in wartime Germany. But in versions intended for audiences for whom spoken English, French, and German just have the sound of "Average West European," the overall meaning of the sequence can't be saved by not translating the spoken sentences (as in French) or by translating them, since the use of any language other than English would miss the point. Some other layer or channel of communication has to be added, such as a subtitle or a surtitle. The supplementary stream would give a metalinguistic description of the utterance, such as "The German policeman is speaking English," or "The authorities use the native language of the fugitive, who foolishly replies in like manner." Would that count as translation? It surely must, since its purpose and real effect is to provide rapid access to the meaning of a work in a foreign language. But it doesn't fit the simple definition of translation given at the start of this chapter. The subtitle doesn't reproduce the meaning of the utterance made in another tongue. It just gives you the information you need to grasp not so much what is actually said but what is going on in the saying of it.

Understanding anything always involves relating what is said (MacDonald's "Thank you") to the meaning of its having been said. That's the basic framework of all acts of communication. The trouble is that the relationship of what's been said to what the saying of it means is unstable, and often extremely murky. After all, the English fugitive would have been caught out in exactly the same way whatever he had said in reply to the German policeman's "Good luck!" if he had said it in English. In that specific context, "Thank you," "Get lost!" and "You're a real gentleman" could be said to have the same meaning, and you could prove that outrageous assertion by showing that they would have to have identical subtitles in Chinese.

To return to the parable of Jim lost in the woods with his partner Jane, one of the pair might say on smelling the welcome

aroma of coffee brewing nearby, “Aha! I smell coffee!” or else “Can you smell what I smell?” or “Can *you* smell coffee, too?” These are different sentences having what linguists would call different sentence meanings, but in that context they all have the same force—namely, that the camp is near at hand, that they are not lost, that they should rejoice, and so on. In translation the differences between these sentence meanings hardly matter. What matters here is to preserve the force of the utterance, and knowing how to do that in another language is the translator’s main skill. Levels of formality in conversation, as well as customs and rules about how men and women may relate to each other when lost in the woods, vary quite widely between languages and the cultures that they serve. For the story of Jim and Jane, the translator’s job is to express the force of the utterance in those particular circumstances in forms appropriate to the target language and culture. Whether or not the chosen form of words corresponds to the sentence meaning of the sentence that Jim uttered is beside the point.

Of course, Jim could have communicated the meaning he attached to his having smelled a particular smell not in words but with a smile, a twitching of his nostrils, a wave of his hand. In many circumstances such as these, nonverbal communication can have pretty much the same force as an utterance. It’s an awkward fact for translation studies, but the truth is that meaning does not inhere solely to words. When it comes to knowing what something means and what meaning has been received, there is no clear line to be drawn between language and nonlinguistic forms of communication—in the story of Jim and Jane, between smiling, twitching, waving, and speaking. There’s no clear cutoff point but only a shifting and ragged edge between language use and all the rest.

**Symptoms and nonverbal complements to verbal expression lie on or just over the edge of the field of translation, which cov-**

ers only utterances that have linguistic form—but there’s always more to an utterance than just its linguistic form. That’s why there’s no unequivocal way of saying where one mode or type or level of meaning ends and another begins. If you turn off the soundtrack of the bus-trap sequence in *The Great Escape*, you see a man in a leather coat saying farewell to two guys in mufti, one of whom returns his good wishes and then, inexplicably, tries to run away. You would have understood nothing. But if you just listen to the soundtrack, without seeing the context in which someone says “Good luck” with a slight German accent, you would probably have understood even less. The context alone doesn’t tell you what the utterance means unless you can hear the utterance as well; conversely, the utterance alone doesn’t contain nearly enough information to allow you to reconstruct the context. You have to have both.

Film is a useful tool for exploring the myriad ways in which meaning happens. What we understand from a shot or sequence is formed by different kinds of information made available by various technical means. The angle of the camera and the depth of field; the decor; the characters’ clothing, facial gestures, and body movements; the accessories displayed; the sound effects and background music that have been superimposed all affect the meanings we extract from a sequence or shot. In the most accomplished films, no single stream can be separated from all the others. They work in concert, and their timing is integral to the meaning that they build. Each stream of meaning is one part of the context that gives all other streams their power to mean and necessarily affects the specific meanings that they have.

What is reasonably clear from film is also applicable to human communication in general, including the blandest and simplest of sentences uttered. For translation, and for us all, meaning *is* context.

The expression “One double macchiato to go”—an expres-

sion I utter most days, around 8 a.m.—means what it means when uttered in a coffee shop by a customer to a barista. The situation (the coffee shop) and the participants (customer and barista) are indispensable, inseparable parts of the meaning of the utterance. Imagine saying the same thing at 2 a.m., in bed, to your partner. Or imagine it said by a trans-Saharan cycling fanatic on arrival at a Tuareg tent camp. The words would be the same, but the meaning of their being said would be entirely different. Symptomatically, it might be that you were having a nightmare, or that dehydration had driven the cyclist out of his mind. Any piece of language behavior, even a simple request for coffee, acquires a different meaning when its context of utterance is changed.

The point is worth repeating: what an utterance means to its utterer and to the addressee of the utterance does not depend exclusively on the meaning of the words uttered. Two of the key determinants of how an utterance conveys meaning (and of the meaning that it effectively conveys) are these: the situation in which it is uttered (the time, the place, and knowledge of the practices that are conventionally performed by people present in such a time and place); and the identities of the participants, together with the relationship between them. The linguistic meaning of the words uttered is not irrelevant (a double macchiato is not the same drink as a skinny wet capp), but it's only a fragment of all that's going on when something is uttered. It may be the only fragment that can be seen to be translated, but it falls far short of constituting the entirety of what has been said.

In a classic contribution to the study of language, the philosopher J. L. Austin pointed out that there are some types of English verbs that don't describe an action but *are* actions just by the fact of being uttered. "I warn you to stay away from the edge of the cliff" is a warning because the speaker has said "I warn you." There are quite a number of these performative verbs in

English, though they do not all function in exactly the same way. But many difficulties arise in trying to treat *promising, warning, advising, threatening, marrying, christening, naming, judging*, and so forth as a special class of verb. For one thing, few of them constitute the act that they name unless various nonlinguistic conditions are met. "I name this vessel *The Royal Daffodil*" has its proper force (that is to say, really does grant that name to some real vessel) only if the person authorized to launch the ship utters it at the actual launching while the rituals associated with the launching of ships are performed at the same time—the champagne bottle cracking open against the bow, the chocks being removed, and so forth. Said in some other circumstance, by a man strolling on the beach at Ocean Grove, New Jersey, for example, it doesn't constitute the action of naming a ship at all. Austin calls these necessary concomitants to the successful performance of the action of a performative verb its "conditions of felicity." Of course, there are many ways a "performance" can be undermined or abused by tampering with the conditions of felicity it requires. But that doesn't alter Austin's vital point that the force of an utterance isn't exclusively a function of the meaning of the words of which it seems to be composed. The nonlinguistic props and surroundings of a linguistic expression—this person speaking in the presence of that other, at this time and in that place, and so on—are what really allow language users to do things with words.

Many actions can be carried out with words without using any of the verbs that allegedly "perform" the action. I can promise to marry someone by saying "Sure I will" in response to a plea, and that's just as binding as saying "I promise." I can warn somebody with an imperative—"Stay away from the cliff!"—just as I can threaten someone by asking them to step outside in a particular tone of voice. The force of an utterance is not related solely to the meanings of the words used in the utterance. In

many instances, it is hard to show on linguistic evidence alone that they are related at all.

Intentional alteration of one or more of the basic contextual features of an utterance usually turns a meaningful expression into some kind of nonsense. But the reverse can also be achieved: nonsense can be made to make sense by supposing some alternative context for it. At the start of his revolutionary work *Syntactic Structures* (1957), Noam Chomsky cooked up a nonsense sentence in order to explain what he saw as the fundamental difference between a meaningful sentence and a grammatical one. "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" was proposed as a fully grammatical sentence that had no possible meaning at all. Within a few months, witty students devised ways of proving Chomsky wrong, and at Stanford they were soon running competitions for texts in which "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" would be not just a grammatical sentence but a meaningful expression as well.

Here's one of the prizewinning entries:

It can only be the thought of verdure to come, which prompts us in the autumn to buy these dormant white lumps of vegetable matter covered by a brown papery skin, and lovingly to plant them and care for them. It is a marvel to me that under this cover they are labouring unseen at such a rate within to give us the sudden awesome beauty of spring flowering bulbs. While winter reigns the earth reposes but these colourless green ideas sleep furiously.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays the expression "colorless green ideas" could perhaps refer to the topics of negotiation at the Copenhagen Climate Summit of December 2009; to say that they "slept furiously" may be no more than to name the paltry outcome of the conference. The point of this is not just to say that people play with language and



often make mincemeat of authoritative generalizations about it. It is this: no grammatical sentence in any language can be constructed such that it can never have a context of utterance in which it is meaningful. That also means that everything that can be said or written—even nonsense—can (at some time or another) be translated. *Verdi idee senza colore dormono furiosamente.*

To translate utterances that perform a conventional action by the fact of being uttered—greeting, ordering, commanding, and so on—requires the target language to possess parallel conventions about things you can do with words. But there are significant differences between cultures and languages in how people do things with words. A promise may be a promise the world over, but the conditions of felicity, as well as the forms of language that are appropriate to the making of a promise, may vary greatly between, for example, Japan and the United States. It's not the linguistic meaning of "I promise, cross my heart and hope to die" that needs to be translated if the aim is to make a similar commitment in the target language. Once again, the expression uttered (in speech or writing) is not the sole or even the primary object of translation when the force of an utterance is what matters, as it always does.

These considerations don't affect just the set of verbs that Austin called performatives. The range of things you can do with words goes far beyond the promising, warning, knighting, naming, and so on that attracted the philosopher's attention, and it would be better to see those not-so-special verbs of English as only one way of grasping a more general aspect of language use. When I say "How are you?" to an acquaintance I run across, I am performing the social convention of greeting with an utterance that is conventionally attached to it. Whether I use a performative verb (as in "Salaam, your highness, I greet you most humbly") or not (as in "Hi!"), the expression that constitutes the action of greeting has a meaning only by virtue of the kind of action I am performing with it. "Greeting" could be

thought of as a kind or register or genre of language use. It's not hard to see that translating "How are you?" into any other language is to translate the convention of greeting, not to translate the individual items *how*, *are*, and *you*. But what is widely understood as appropriate for the kind of language use that tourist phrase books always include is no less appropriate in many other translation contexts. A knitting pattern that does not follow target-language conventions for knitting patterns is completely useless, just as a translated threat of retribution that does not conform to the conventions of threatening in the target culture is not a threat, or a translation.

In the summer of 2008, *The Wall Street Journal* ran a hot story under the headline **GOP VEEP PICK ROILS DEMS**. To make sense of this you need a lot of knowledge of American political events in the run-up to the presidential election, including the conventional nicknames of the two main parties, as well as familiarity with the alphabetical games played by editors on night desks in Manhattan. Should we pity the poor translators the world over who needed to reproduce the bare bones of the story in double-quick time? Not really. The meanings of the words in that headline are not important. What's important is that it works as a headline. Like any headline in the English-language press, **GOP VEEP PICK ROILS DEMS** is explained by the story that follows it in less compressed language. The task of the translator—if indeed it is the translator, not the editor, who performs this function—is to understand the story first and only then invent an appropriate headline within the language of headlines holding sway in the target culture. "*Le choix de Madame Palin comme candidate républicaine à la vice-présidence des États-Unis choque le parti démocrate*" conforms quite well to French headline-writing style, for example, and is a plausible counterpart to *The Wall Street Journal's* nutshell quip. The original and its translation must conform to the general conventions of headline writing in their respective cultures, because headline writing

is just as much a genre—a particular kind of language use restricted to particular contexts—as promising, christening, threatening, and so forth.

How many genres are there? Uncountably many. How do you know what genre a given written sentence is in? Well, you don't, and that's the point. No sentence contains all the information you need to translate it. One of the key levels of information that is always missing from a sentence taken simply as a grammatically well-formed string of lexically acceptable words is knowledge of its genre. You can get that only from the context of utterance. Of course, you know what that is in the case of a spoken sentence—you have to be there, in the context, to hear it spoken. You usually know quite a lot in the case of written texts, too. Translators do not usually agree to work on a text without being told first of all whether it is a railway timetable or a poem, a speech at the UN or a fragment of a novel (and few people read such things in their original languages either without being told by the cover sheet, dust jacket, or other peritextual material what kind of thing they are reading). To do their jobs, translators have to know what job they are doing.

Translating something “from cold,” “unseen,” “out of the blue,” or, as some literary scholars would put it, “translating a text in and for itself” isn't technically impossible. After all, students at some universities are asked to do just that in their final examinations. But it is not an honest job. It can be done only by guessing what the context and genre of the utterance are. Even if you guess right, and even granted that guessing right may well be the sign of wide knowledge and a smart mind, you are still only playing a game.

Many genres have recognizable forms in the majority of languages and cultures: kitchen recipes, fairground hype, greeting people, expressing condolences, pronouncing marriage, court proceedings, the rules of soccer, and haggling can be found almost anywhere on the planet. The linguistic forms through which

these genres are conducted vary somewhat, and in some cases vary a great deal, but as long as the translator knows what genre he is translating and is familiar with its forms in the target language, their translation is not a special problem. Problems arise more typically when the users of translation raise objections to the shifts in verbal form that an appropriate translation involves. Translators do not translate Chinese kitchen recipes "into English." If they are translators, they translate them into kitchen recipes. Similarly, when a film title needs translating, it needs translating into a film title, not an examination answer.

*It's Complicated* is a romantic comedy starring Alec Baldwin and Meryl Streep, playing characters who have a romantic fling in sun-drenched Santa Barbara despite having been divorced for some years. The complications alluded to in the title include Baldwin's slinky and suspicious young wife, her five-year-old son with uncannily acute ears, as well as the three children of the reformed lovers' original marriage, now aged between eighteen and twenty-five. Can the two parents really get back together again? As Baldwin says in his closing lines, in a sentimental scene on the swing seat in the front garden: "It's complicated." As a sentence abstracted from any context of utterance, "It's complicated" can be adequately represented in French by *C'est compliqué*. That would get full marks in a school quiz.

In the context of utterance as it occurs in the film, Baldwin's resigned, evasive, and inconclusive "It's complicated" can also be plausibly rendered in French by the same sentence: *C'est compliqué*. But the French release of the movie itself is not titled *C'est compliqué*. The distributors preferred to call it *Pas si simple!* ("Not so simple!").

It's not that the meaning is very different. Nor is it because the context of utterance alone changes the meaning: film titles, by virtue of being titles, have, in a sense, no context at all. Titles of new works announce and constitute the context in which the

work's meaning is to be construed. Title making, in other words, is a particular use of language—a genre. As in any other genre, a translated title counts as a translation only if it performs its proper function—that is to say, if it works as a title in the conventions of title making that hold sway in the target language. That's no different from saying that the most important thing about the translation of a compliment is that it fulfills the function of the kind of language behavior that we call a compliment.

In languages and societies as close as French and English, it's often the case that sentences having much the same shape and similar verbal content in the two languages fulfill the same genre functions as well. But not always. The task of the translator is to know when to step outside.

In contemporary spoken French, *compliqué* has connotations that the English *complicated* does not. Its sense in some contexts may verge on "oversophisticated" and "perverse." A more likely way of suspending a decision, of getting off a hook, of lamenting the unstraightforwardness of life, is to say: It's not so simple. Of course, you could say that in English, too, in the right context. But could it be a film title? "Not so simple!" doesn't work nearly as well, and that's no doubt why the original producers of the movie didn't use it. In French it works just fine and avoids the unwanted additional suggestions of perversity that cloud *C'est compliqué*. Judgments like these don't only call for "native-speaker competence" in the translator. They rely on profound familiarity with the genre.

What it comes down to is this: written and spoken expressions in any language don't have a meaning just like that, on their own, in themselves. Translation represents the meaning that an utterance has, and in that sense translation is a pretty good way of finding out what the expression used in it may mean. In fact, the only way of being sure whether an utterance has any meaning at all is to get someone to translate it for you.