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On the Linguistic Definition of Translation

Yaroslav V. Sokolovsky*

Siberian Federal University

82a Svobodny, Krasnoyarsk, 660041 Russia¹

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This paper sheds some light upon the problem of linguistic definition of interlanguage translation. The author analyzes several famous definitions of translation, uses them as a theoretic base to single out constitutive traits of translation activity (CTTA) and makes an attempt to propose a general linguistic definition of translation. Separate attention is paid to the relationship between the definition of translation and the translation category of correspondence (TCC). In addition to that, the article contains general comparison of translation and other types of interlingual mediation.

Keywords: linguistic definition of translation, translation, equivalence, adequacy, isomorphism, adaptive transcoding, interpretation, constitutive traits of translation activity (CTTA), translation category of correspondence (TCC).

Ambiguity of Definitions

It is well known that the relations between the original text and translation text are quite complex. Ch. Nord points out «the deplorable fact that the eternal discussions about faithfulness or liberty in translation have got us absolutely nowhere» [22: 25]. I. Levy also considers the problem of translation fidelity to be «one of the cornerstones of translation theory and practice...» [11: 8]. In a certain way this situation is determined by the fact that the taxonomic traits of translation have not been fully described yet, which can be proved by dozens of translation definitions. Once some fundamental framework of constitutive traits of translation activity has been worked out the researcher can proceed with the problem of identity between translation and original. The term «problem of identity between translation and original» refers to objective

impossibility of translation to convey all amount of information, which is contained in the original text. In different terms this problem is analyzed in various recent works [1; 5; 6; 9].

Before thorough examination of some well-known linguistic definitions of translation, it is worth remembering the types of translation suggested by R. Jakobson in his famous article «On Linguistic Aspects of Translation» [20: 114]. He classifies translation into three categories: «1) intralingual translation or rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language; 2) interlingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language; 3) intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.» In this article we use the term «translation» in its second meaning,

* Corresponding author E-mail address: sokol_rus@hotmail.com

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used by R. Jakobson, i.e. interlingual translation. Bearing this in mind, we can try to propose our own classification of the following definitions of translation:

1) translation is a process:

- A. Lilova: «Translation is a specific oral or written *activity* aimed at the recreation of an oral or written text (utterance) existing in one language into a text in another language, accompanied by keeping the invariance of content, qualities of the original and author's authenticity» [12: 33];
- R. K. Minyar-Beloruhev: «Translation is a type of speech *activity*, aimed at transmitting a message, doubling the components of communication in those cases, when there is a discrepancy between codes used by the sender and the receiver of the message» [13: 226];
- A. Popovic: «Translation is *recoding* of a linguistic text, accompanied by the creation of its new linguistic appearance and stylistic shape» [14: 186];
- J. Catford: «Translation may be defined as follows: the *replacement* of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)» [8: 43];
- Y. P. Solodub: «Translation is a creative intellectual *activity*, denoting the transmitting of information from a source language into a target language» [17: 7];
- V. N. Komissarov: «...linguistic translation can be defined as *a specific type of languages correlative functioning*» [9: 37];
- A. V. Fedorov: «To translate means to precisely and completely *express* by means of one language the things that had been expressed earlier by the means of another language» [18: 15].

2) translation is a process and a result of this process:

- I. A. Alekseeva: «Translation is an *activity*, which consists of variable re-expression, converting of the text in one language into the text in a different language, which is carried out by a translator, who creatively chooses variants depending on language variability resources, text type, translation tasks, and under the influence of his (her) own personal individuality; translation is also a *result* of this activity» [1: 7];
- V. S. Vinogradov: «Translation is a *process* (and its *result*) caused by social necessity of information (content) transmitting, expressed in a written or oral text in one language by the means of an equivalent (adequate) text in another language» [4: 11];
- A. L. Semenov: «First of all, translation is the translator's *activity* of transforming a message in one language into a message with the same meaning in another language; secondly, translation is a *result* of the translator's activity, i.e. an oral or written language utterance» [16: 25].

3) translation is a communication:

- V.V. Sdobnikov and O.V. Petrova: «Translation can be defined as *a way to provide interlingual communication* by the means of creation of a text in TL (target language), intended to fully replace the original text» [15: 87];
- N.K. Garbovsky: «Translation is a *social function of communicative mediation* between people, who use different language systems. This function is carried out as a psychophysical activity of a bilingual person aimed at the reflection of reality on the basis of his (her) individual abilities as an interpreter, accomplishing

transition from one semiotic system to another with the purpose of equivalent, i.e. maximally complete, but always partial transmission of a system of meanings, contained in a source message, from one communicant to another» [6: 214];

- L.K. Latishev: «Translation is *a type of language mediation*, socially serving to approximate a mediated bilingual communication by fullness, effectiveness and naturalness to a common monolingual communication» [10: 9].

4) translation is a skill:

- P. Newmark: «Translation is *a craft* consisting of the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language» [21: 7].

The suggested classification is not a final version and does not include all possible criteria for definition taxonomy. Putting some of the definitions under careful scrutiny may show that most of the definitions fall into more than one category. According to the classification given here, translation is a process and a result of this process, a type of communication and a skill. This division of definitions can be made more complex by such criteria as: *the social status of translation* (definitions by V. S. Vinogradov, N.K. Garbovsky, L.K. Latishev), *requirements for the relationship between original and translation* (definitions by V. S. Vinogradov, A. Lilova, N.K. Garbovsky, J. Catford, A. V. Fedorov, L.K. Latishev, P. Newmark), *teleological explanation*¹ (definitions by R. K. Minyar-Beloruhev, N.K. Garbovsky, L.K. Latishev), etc. Critical examination of these definitions singles out several important translation dichotomies: «source text – target

text», «process – result», «invariant – variant», «direct – mediated», etc. Furthermore, on the basis of the criteria given here there may arise a system of traits, which can be defined as *constitutive traits of translation activity (CTTA)*:

- 1) translation is a process and a result of this process;
- 2) translation is a socially oriented interlingual communication;
- 3) translation is an interlingual communication with a mediator (a complex communication act);
- 4) Translation is approximation (tendency to be identical) of a multilingual communication to a monolingual one².

The special relationship between the original and translation (i.e. existence of semiotic interconnections) is determined by the ability of translation to approximate a multilingual communication to a monolingual one. This trait is based on gnoseological status of translation, which, in its turn, is determined by the «tendency to find universal features is all human languages and cultures; differences – as I. Kant would say – begin with the establishment of identity» [5: 28].

The General Linguistic Definition of Translation

The 4th CTTA has a direct relation to the notion of *translation category of correspondence (TCC)*³. *Different TCC became a compulsory component for definitions of translation, which partially resulted in a multitude of linguistic frameworks for the notion of translation. More than ten years ago A. Pym pointed out that few attempts had been made to define translation without the category of equivalence* [23: 77].

¹ Teleology (Greek: telos: end, purpose) is the philosophical study of design and purpose. A teleological school of thought is one that holds all things to be designed for or directed toward a final result, that there is an inherent purpose or final cause for all that exists [3].

² This list can be continued, but the traits given here are considered to be the most significant ones.

³ In this work the term «translation category of correspondence» denotes a notion, implying the existence of translation interconnections between original and translation.

Vagueness and blurriness in definitions of translation is mentioned by U. Eco [19: 9]. V.V. Sdobnikov and O.V. Petrova assume that the formulation of the notion of translation though TCC does not give any comprehensive linguistic definition for translation, «does not give a universal linguistic definition «in general», but gives a definition of good, high quality translation [15: 87]. A similar point of view is shared by V.V. Bibikhin, pointing out that there is a universal human language behind translation and its original, therefore «the principal basis for translation should not rest on any particular translation technique, but on the ability to extract the universal human language from the bondage of a particular language» [2: 14]. V.A. Zvegintsev believes that «when a researcher does not have any formulated general theory and focuses all attention on a method, the method starts to play the role of theory...» [7: 77].

It is apparent that any TCC (equivalence, adequacy, isomorphism¹, etc.) determines the most essential element of translation – the vector of semiotic transformations, carried out by the translator. Basically, different TCC refer to different solutions to the problem of identity between translation and original. Describing translation through them we create «a closed circle»: equivalence (adequacy, etc.) cannot be defined without the definition of translation; the definition of translation in its turn cannot be defined without the definition of equivalence, adequacy, etc. Consequently, the definition of translation should contain the most general indications for translation and original to be identical, but should not contain any particular descriptors, since we should be free to develop new TCC, which can provide new (possibly more efficient) solutions to the problem of identity between translation and original .

The CTTA given here can provide more accurate insights into the linguistic definition of translation, which can be done as follows: *translation is a type of language mediation, socially serving to approximate a mediated bilingual communication to a common monolingual communication.* In methodological respect this definition allows us to separate the problem of translation and original identity itself and methods which can be applied for its solving.

Translation vs. Other Types of Interlingual Mediation

One of the axioms in translation theory is the fact that a translator always misses something, that translation lacks some part of original. N.K. Garbovsky points out that «translation is always partial transmission of meanings of a source message, which can be approximated to the full transmission, but always partial<...>absolutely complete transmission of meanings is the ultimate priority for the translator, but it is a task which cannot be accomplished» [6: 212]. The similar point of view is shared by V.V. Sdobnikov and O.V. Petrova [15: 89]. The range of opinions on this matter is certainly wide, but most scientists hold this prevailing point of view. Historically, the problem of identity between translation and original has been discussed in terms of «translatability» and «untranslatability» [23: 273]. Despite the fact that information loss during translation is inevitable, there is always a certain threshold of information loss, above which translation is able to accomplish its mission. We support the opinion of E. Nida, that there will always be several answers to the question «Is this translation good?», each of them will be right in a way [28].

Most scientists consider abstracting, annotation and textualization of intentions to be examples of lingual mediation, which can be

¹ We have recently published two articles devoted to the translation category of isomorphism [24; 25].

contrasted with translation [15: 105]. We agree that all these types of lingual mediation are different kinds of «adaptive transcoding», i.e. all of these procedures have a specified volume of information, which the original message should turn into in the end. Using the general linguistic definition of translation given here as a theoretic foundation, we can draw our attention to the fact that the process of translation is determined mostly by objective circumstances of communication¹ (original text difficulty, translator's knowledge and skills, etc.), whereas the process of adaptive transcoding is determined by both: objective circumstances and subjective (a set of parameters determined by the client). Thus, we can conclude that vectors of semiotic transformations for translation and for adaptive transcoding are differently directed.

There is another type of interlingual mediation, which is often described separately, notably interpretation. In Russian theoretic works on translation theory special attention to this notion was paid in an article by V.N. Komissarov [29]. There is a widely known belief that a translator is not a full member of a communicative act between communicants, since the translator has no right to pass own opinions and his (her) work is entirely guided by the original text. However, V.N. Komissarov admits that any type of translation is also guided by surrounding reality: «any usage of linguistic signs implies interpretation of the signs with reference to each other and with reference to reality» and «the process of translation is impossible without any reference to reality, notably it is impossible to understand the original and provide equivalence in translation without taking the situation of translation into account» [29: 6-7]. Consequently, the translator cannot but use the mechanism of

interpretation. V.N. Komissarov points out several types of interpretation in translation [29: 11]:

- Contextual interpretation of language units comprising an utterance with reference to each other and to reality. This type of interpretation provides understanding of the utterance;
- the first type of translation interpretation, which is used to seek for correspondences and translation techniques before the process of translation starts (using dictionaries, glossaries, text books, and the like), involves tackling the problem of suitability of correspondences known to the translator; used to choose a particular translation strategy, a particular translation variant, etc.;
- the second type of translation interpretation, which is used to seek for new (unknown to the translator) correspondences or contextual (ad hoc) translation techniques; the translator performs a self sufficient creative act, taking context details, described reality, other relevant circumstances into consideration.

V.N. Komissarov points out that these interpretation types should not be separated from the process of translation, since they perform certain semiotic functions within a translation act itself. For instance, K. Smith writes that different interpretations of biblical texts in translation are often determined by differences in traditions and cultures [30: 148]. It is clear that this unity of translation and interpretation has tight connections to the problem of understanding as a component of translation process. R.I. Pavilenis points out that understanding is always interpretation, or to be more exact the process of understanding is «interpretation using a conceptual system consisting of interconnected concepts and forming principal cognitive

¹ For example, one of such crucial factors is linguacultural identity of a person involved in the process of translation. The phenomenon of linguacultural identity is described in a recent work by N. Ph. German [26].

subsystems of beliefs and knowledge» [31: 184]. He believes that any text is being interpreted by the recipient with reference to information, which the recipient has about the outer world, i.e. with reference to a system of concepts [31: 11]. A.V. Nemirovskaya considers translation activity to be a restoration process carried out on the basis of the translator's conceptual system. The principal purpose of such an activity is to restore the dominant meaning of original. «The understanding of a text means interpreting or decoding incoming information, i.e. creating a structure of the dominant meaning, changing author's meaning for the translator's variant, highlighting emotional dominants of the original text [32: 128]. So, interpretation is an inseparable part of the process of translation.

However, V.N. Komissarov points out that there is a type of interpretation going beyond the scope of translation, interpretation that should be contrasted with it [29: 12]. For example, a translator takes part in certain negotiations between trade partners. One side makes a price offer, whereas the other side replies in the following way: «we have many other partners, with whom we can conduct more successful negotiations», «such products have more reasonable prices on the market» and so on. The evident purpose of such utterances is the refusal to accept the price offered by the first side. The translator here can confine himself to the phrase «they do not agree», but this utterance of the translator cannot be equated with translation, since there is «a fundamental difference between what a person has actually said and what he may mean by saying these

words» [29: 18]. Y.V. Vannikov mentions that the antinomy «translation – interpretation» became a fully-fledged opposition at the end of 1950s, later it was reconsidered in terms of macro- and microlinguistic approaches to translation [33: 12].

Resume

Hence, constitutive traits of translation activity can serve as guidelines in further research on the subject, so that we could resolve the problem of ambiguity in translation definitions. More attention is needed to the dilemma of relationship between the definition of translation and translation category of correspondence. We know that the definition of translation should contain the most general indications for translation and original to be identical, but should not contain any particular categories (except for identity).

«The eternal question of translation theory is what the translator actually translates and how he does that. Despite long and torturous arguing of scholars over these issues, practitioners of translation are quite successful at accomplishing their tasks. A vast amount of translated literary texts take active part in cultural exchange and interaction and can provide evidence for that» [27: 55].

The notion of translation still remains a matter of great controversy in the scientific community; this article demonstrates that the question of linguistic definition for translation awaits further investigation. There is still a need for a general definition of translation which could be accepted by most researchers.

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Лингвистическое определение перевода (к постановке вопроса)

Я.В. Соколовский

*Сибирский федеральный университет
Россия 660041, г. Красноярск, пр. Свободный, 82а*

В данной статье рассматривается проблема лингвистического определения межъязыкового перевода. Обзор и анализ нескольких известных определений перевода используется для построения теоретической базы, обосновывающей понятие конститутивных черт переводческой деятельности (КЧПД). В работе предпринимается попытка предложить общее лингвистическое определение перевода. Отдельное внимание уделяется взаимосвязи между определением перевода и переводческой категорией соответствия (ПКС). Кроме этого, в статье перевод сравнивается с некоторыми другими наиболее известными видами межъязыкового посредничества.

Ключевые слова: лингвистическое определение перевода; перевод; эквивалентность; адекватность; изоморфизм; адаптивное транскодирование; интерпретация; конститутивные черты переводческой деятельности (КЧПД); переводческая категория соответствия (ПКС).
