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The Textual Metafunction as a Didactic Problem in Applied Translation Studies

[English version of a paper presented in French at the 13th Euro-International Systemic Functional Linguistics Workshop, Université de Bretagne Occidentale, Brest, France, 16–19.07.2001.]

Françaises, Français! Prenez garde, je vais parler français!

The stoicism of the French in the face of aesthetic and moral dilemmas is legendary. And there can certainly be no dilemma more excruciating than that of having to choose between, on the one hand, submitting to the phonetic and grammatical assaults of a well-meaning Anglo-Saxon, and, on the other, having to switch to English and thus abandon the myth that it is French which continues to be the language of first choice for solving problems of intercultural communication. I remember vividly a scene from a television documentary in which Queen Elizabeth II was introducing the late President Mitterrand to the other guests at an official reception; she was speaking that strange form of French that the British royals typically use on such occasions — I take it to be a creole, possibly with a Normanic substrate. Not once did President Mitterrand give the slightest indication of the great linguistic anguish he was suffering.

To those of you for whom the anguish of the current aesthetic and moral dilemma becomes too great to bear, I recommend the use of earplugs or a walkman; the slides accompanying my talk will be in English, which will permit you to follow the content without having to subject yourselves to the imperfections of the form.

Now, contrasting 'content' with 'form' in this way may seem innocuous; but it in fact leads in to one of the central challenges that the textual metafunction poses. If we confine our attention to the other metafunctions — the interpersonal, and, above all, the ideational —, then it is perhaps possible to maintain the naive illusion that content and form are essentially two separate things; they may of course be intimately related, and may turn out to mutually affect each other in almost all cases, such that, in the production of a text, a change in the intended content will induce the text producer to alter the form, and in the reception of a text, the form will be taken by the text receiver as an important piece of evidence for reconstructing the intended content; but they can nevertheless still be perceived as being, conceptually, quite distinct from one another: on the one hand, content, on the other, form.

Maintaining this illusion, in its classic form, also requires that one confine oneself to studying, essentially, 'planned' discourses — either written texts, or 'self-conscious' spoken texts such as those produced in debating clubs and parliamentary assemblies —, rather than the spontaneous, 'unreflected' spoken texts of everyday life — the texts that play such a major role in maintaining and transmitting the unconscious ideologies upon which 'the everyday', itself, is based. Even an old-fashioned armchair linguist, of the kind whose major research tool is introspection, would be forced to admit that, often, when speaking spontaneously, she only knows what it was she initially intended to say after she has actually said it — or in other words, the only way she can identify the 'content' of her discourse, independently of its 'form', is by 'receiving' her own discourse, and 'extracting' its content from its form.

The old-fashioned armchair linguist is, in any case, likely to be chiefly concerned with content of an 'ideational' kind; she may also concern herself with aspects of the interpersonal content of her discourse — for example, she will be aware of, and will want to model, grammatical mood, as well as epistemic and deontic modality — but she is likely to feel somewhat more uneasy when confronted with the task of describing the 'content' of modal particles, for example, or of those

prosodic phonological features that serve to express the 'stance' or 'attitude' of a speaker. The old-fashioned armchair linguist will probably want to banish such things from the realm of 'content' altogether, claiming that they relate merely to the way linguistic signs are 'used', and not to anything that is inherent in the linguistic signs themselves.

In a sense, such a linguist is confined (— just as Descartes was once confined for a whole winter to a small heated room with nothing better to do than watch a fly crawling on the ceiling —) within a restrictive concept of linguistic 'structure'; 'structure' means 'constituency' plus 'interdependency' — in other words, precisely those types of structure that are the preferred forms of expression of the ideational.

But as Halliday and other linguists have pointed out, there are also other types of structure in language — there are, for example, the prosodic types of structure that are typically associated with the interpersonal metafunction, and the culminative types of structure that are typically associated with the textual metafunction.

It is tempting, here, to draw an analogy with Heisenbergian physics, but the analogy is not quite perfect; and it will probably take at least another generation of linguists — they will necessarily be corpus linguists, by the way — before we arrive at an adequate model of these phenomena. In the meantime, I would like to suggest that we might like to consider the possibility of expanding our particle-based models of linguistic structure by distinguishing between "fermions" and "bosons".

There we have the first and perhaps the most important of the kinds of challenges that are raised by the textual metafunction: the conceptual challenges. At the epistemological level, these challenges are, I believe, at least partly reducible to questions of linguistic representation; and at the didactic level, of course, they are often related primarily to the choice of the most appropriate visual metaphors.

But there are also two other kinds of challenges that are raised by the textual metafunction — challenges that become most urgent when the textual metafunction is considered within the context of applied translation studies. The first of these are of a terminological, the second are of a procedural nature.

The terminological challenges arise at two levels — the 'object language' level and the 'metalanguage' level; at each of these two levels, the terminological challenges are a function of what may be termed the 'Eurasian language typology continuum'. Here it is necessary to point out that the university at which I work, the University of the Saarland, is situated essentially right on one of the major 'watersheds' of this continuum; to the west of the watershed, there are two languages that are fairly similar in broad typological terms — the students' native language, French, and their second foreign language, English. Both of these languages lack case-marking, and are therefore characterized by relatively fixed word order. From the point of view of the textual metafunction (more specifically, with regard to the system of personal pronominal reference used in participant-tracking), they differ from each other typologically only in that one of them, French, has an overt, phenotypic system of noun-classification based on two morphological genders, whereas in the other, English, the system of noun-classification on the basis of gender is covert or cryptotypic, with the primary distinction being between non-conscious and conscious entities, the latter being secondarily classifiable as masculine or feminine; there are also some fairly insignificant differences concerning the degree of 'markedness' associated with certain relative orderings of adjuncts and complements within the clause, as well as certain differences concerning the choice of the primary reference point for temporal deixis — these differences are related to the genre of the text —, and certain differences at the borderline between pronominalisation and theme — differences that are essentially related to the tenor that is associated with the text. But the students' first foreign language is German — a case-marking language with relatively free word-order, three overt genders, a marked dislike of interpolation at the rank of the group, and a weak association between Theme

and grammatical Subject — in contrast to the strong association between Theme and grammatical Subject in English. In terms of language typology, then, it is clear that German is situated to the east of the watershed.

The typological differences between the object languages have, as one might expect, led to significant differences at the 'meta-linguistic' level. Thus, for example, the notion of a 'psychological Subject' has played a greater role in the development of the French concept of '*thème*' or in the English notion of 'Theme' than it has in the development of the German notion of '*Thema*'. This can lead to some interesting terminological problems in classroom situations; typically, the metalanguage used for describing both of the object languages involved in a translation task is based on the target language — a language which is, itself, half the time, one of the students' "foreign" languages. In one particularly perverse didactic experiment, for which I am partly to blame, students are expected to translate the same French text into *both* of their foreign languages — and when the going gets really tough (as it not infrequently does ...), the discussion of the French-to-English translation is conducted in German ("in order to save time")!

But these challenges pale into insignificance when compared with the challenges of a procedural nature; these, the third kind of challenges, arise out of the deep-rooted differences between the various forms that didactic discourse typically takes within the intellectual cultures of German, French, and English universities.

At a German university, the preferred form is the *methodische Einführung*; one begins by setting up an all-encompassing system, which is usually more complicated than it needs to be and which often, to an outsider, seems to underemphasise the things that are really important at the expense of things that are really less important; one then proceeds to apply the method systematically in practice, starting with simple examples and working up to more complex ones. And one sticks to the method, whatever the consequences, because having a method means being able to avoid chaos and create order.

At a French university, the preferred form is the *initiation raisonnée*. This is somewhat similar to the German *methodische Einführung*, from which it differs essentially in being Cartesian rather than Hegelian in its inspiration, in making a somewhat stronger claim to universal validity, and in being more concerned with the pure joy of helping the students to rediscover their innate competence than in ensuring adequate performance in practice.

At a British or American university, the preferred form is without doubt the "practical introduction". Following this method, one proceeds inductively rather than deductively; the aim is to get the students actually 'doing something', as quickly as possible, and there is much less emphasis on giving names to abstract categories and arranging these categories in logical, self-consistent systems.

Now, characterising these three methods in this way, as "didactic" methods, does not, in fact, allow us to penetrate right to the heart of the problem — because these three methods are, in fact, not merely "didactic", in the sense of being concerned with imparting knowledge, but are, more essentially, in practice, "pedagogic" discourses, in the sense in which Bernstein uses this term. They are pedagogic discourses because they are about normativisation and social control, and have the function of ensuring that not all students, but only some of them, will later have access to power and privilege.

The process of selecting the future 'bearers of power', of course, begins much earlier; the university is merely its final stage. The pedagogic discourses of the university are thus able to build upon previous pedagogic discourses — those of the family, of the kindergarten, of the primary and secondary school —, which have 'prepared the ground', so to speak. All of these pedagogic discourses are based around a central ritual of control: the production or reproduction, on command, of a piece of text, which is then censured by the teacher. In the case I am concerned with here, the text to be censured is a translation of a text from the students' native language, French, into their second foreign language, English.

By the time they get to university, students are of course well aware of the

basic rules that govern the performance of this ritual. They are used to the constraints of time and place involved — two or three hours spent in a large room, writing, in silence, with someone watching them. They are used to the special physical form that their finished text must have — handwritten (legibly), with extra spacing between the lines and extra-wide margins so that the teacher can perform his part of the ritual by writing 'corrections', 'comments', 'grades', etc.

Inspired by the Princeton University edition of the 'Marginalia' of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, edited by H.J. Jackson and G. Whalley, I have been collecting — for many years now — examples of the sorts of things that teachers write in the margins of students' translations, in the hope of one day being able to understand the various alternative 'systems' underlying this part of the ritual.

As a student, or as a novice teacher, one has to be able to 'learn' the relevant system, somehow. If one asks the students (here I am thinking in particular of Erasmus exchange students) to explain the system they are used to, one receives an interesting variety of responses. German students are used to a fairly explicit system, and are often, in fact, even able to teach it to their new teacher — this is, by the way, an important link in the chain of pedagogic transmission, which ensures that the system of control functions to control the teacher, too, and that the students can be the agents of the enforcement of that control. French students, however, when confronted with the question 'How do your teachers correct and grade your translations?', are somewhat more wary. Perhaps they expect that it is really one of those rhetorical, pedagogical questions and the teacher's assessment of their answer to it will constitute part of their grade. But, if one presses them to give an answer, they usually admit to remembering that there are things such as *faux sens*, and possibly even that a *faux sens* is worth 'minus 3 points' (or whatever). It isn't long before the students succeed in remembering that there is a basic difference between errors of *fond* and errors of *forme*, a rather 'Cartesian' kind of distinction which they seem to somehow find philosophically and emotionally reassuring. When one puts the question

to British or Irish students, their initial reaction is reminiscent of that of the monk Salvatore, a character in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, when he is hauled before the Inquisition: "Señor, me no savvy nothing!"

Are the British and Irish students simply reluctant to give an answer that might meet with their new teacher's disapproval and lead to a further round of torture and public humiliation? Or is it possible that, in fact, the didactic world these students are used to is one which lacks a system — or at least, one which lacks an **explicit** system?

This apparent lack of an explicit system for categorising and grading errors may perhaps be a sign that the students from the other side of the Channel have previously been exposed to an 'invisible pedagogy', or to one of the modes of the 'competence' model of pedagogic practice that Bernstein has described. Or it may be simply yet another expression of that type of inductivist empiricism which seems to be as characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon world as deductive rationalism is of the French-speaking world.

In order to investigate such transcultural phenomena, one needs to engage in some difficult and dangerous 'undercover' work. At times, when one is working undercover closer to home, one feels like a *Nestbeschmutzer*; at other times, working undercover further afield, one feels as overwhelmed as *Candide au pays des Leibniziens*, but at the same time as determined to succeed as *Tintin au pays des bolchéviques*, or perhaps like an Adam Smith or a Napoleon or a Pavel Morosov preparing to characterise, or ridicule, or denounce a 'nation of shopkeepers'.

In the handout, I have briefly characterized three systems that are or have been used to assess the quality of translations in a didactic context — a German, a French, and an English system. You will notice the typical philosophical and cultural bias of each of these systems: the German system is the most explicit and, in a sense, the best organized; the French system, with its dualism of *fond* and *forme* is thoroughly Cartesian; and the English system is not a system at all, but merely a collection of things which, in the common-sense opinion of

various people, seem to work in practice. You will also notice that, in all three of these systems, the textual metafunction is largely invisible.

From the point of view of the French system of assessment, this need not surprise us. The textual metafunction is invisible because, of all the metafunctions, it is the one for which it is most difficult to recognise and describe the 'content' that is hidden behind the form.

In the English system of assessment, there are a few vague hints that the correctors are at least aware of the **existence** of 'the textual' in a text — there are terms like 'word order', 'reference', and even 'text'; but the English system as a whole suffers greatly from the lack of any explicit 'dimensions' — not only are there no metafunctions (which one might perhaps have expected in a culture that is so concerned with practicality, usability and use), there is also no explicit rank scale, and there are no explicit levels of abstraction. In other words, there is little to indicate the existence of a coherent linguistic system behind the text at all.

If the French system of assessment fails to capture the textual metafunction because the 'signs' of that metafunction are not easily identifiable as being signs at all, in that they seem to consist only of a *signifiant* without a *signifié*, the English system of assessment displays at least a certain amount of ambiguity in this regard. On the one hand, if Barthes is correct, a nation of shopkeepers can be expected to have problems with the very notion of a sign, since a sign is something which is not self-contained and self-justifying, but something which has its value beyond itself, in the domain of *l'altérité*. On the other hand, a *signifiant* that has no *signifié*, an external mark which does not seem to correspond to anything at the level of *fond*, can perhaps, by default, be considered to be *un signe autoréférentiel*, thus not only avoiding the ideological difficulty of the sign concept itself, but also replacing the notion of sense by the much easier notion of reference.

The English insistence that the signs of the metalanguage are to be treated as self-contextualising or self-defining, and thus as things that need no didactic

explanation because they are self-evident ('word order is word order'), may perhaps be an indication that both Napoleon and Barthes were right.

Now, according to my calculations, after this much text I will probably have run out of time. So for the rest, I shall refer you to the handout.

Thank you, you may now remove your earplugs or switch off your walkman. I have ceased to speak French.