Vladimir Ivir

Social Aspects of Translation

Social aspects of translation can be discussed from two different viewpoints. If 'social' is taken to mean 'in the service of society', 'in relation to society', or something to that effect, then one can talk about the translator's place in society, the importance of translation for society, the organization of translation services for various social functions, the training of translators and interpreters, the contribution of translators to the removal of linguistic barriers and to a better understanding among the people of this world. In general, one will be talking about the role of translation in the modern world (cf. Cary, 1956). Thus, translation can be, and in fact is, discussed as an occupation which is most directly connected with the life of every human society and which is therefore regarded as a very important form of social activity.

However, social aspects are involved in translation in one more way: they figure prominently in the translation process itself and to a certain extent determine the nature of that process. This is easily understood if one remembers that translation consists in the transposition of certain messages expressed in one linguistic code into equivalent messages expressed in another linguistic code (cf. Nida, 1969) and that each linguistic code is both a product and an instrument of a given linguistic community. The social nature of language may be temporarily neglected in a "pure" linguistic description, since it is only by raising the phenomena under observation to a certain level of abstraction that systematic regularities can be first noticed and then also explained. However, the concrete realization of language, which is speech, always occurs in a specific communicative situation in which the speaker, relying on the socially given linguistic code, formulates his message

not only in accordance with the rules according to which that code functions but also in accordance with the characteristics of the situation in which the communication takes place. Thus, while staying within the bounds of the linguistic code which he shares with those to whom his message is addressed, the speaker adjusts the form of his message and its expression to the intellectual and emotional composition of his receivers, to the historical, social, economic and other determinants of the world in which he himself and the receivers of his message live, to the aims that he has set himself to achieve with this message, etc.

It is clear from this that social considerations are present in every communicative situation in more ways than one: first, they are present in the linguistic code chosen for communication; second, they are present in the actual realization of that code in speech. Finally, social considerations are present in communication in one more way — in the extralinguistic content of the message. People communicate about various facets of the world around them, all of which have to do with an individual in a social setup or with the characteristic features and needs of the social community. An awareness and discrimination of the three ways in which social elements are involved in the process of communication is important for sociolinguistic analysis; it becomes indispensable if we wish to understand and explain the nature of the process of translation and lay the foundations for a realistic theory of translation.

Both the original author and the translator find themselves in a communicative situation of the kind described here, and they both have the task to communicate as effectively as possible, that is, to convey the message as faithfully and as fully as possible. Whether they are conscious of this fact or not, their effort to communicate will be influenced by certain social facts represented in the language itself, in the communicative situation, and in the content of the message to be transmitted. The difference between the original author and the translator lies in the fact that the social considerations that one must reckon with in his work differ to a larger or smaller extent from those that confront the other. The contexts of situation in which the communication takes place are not the same for the original author and the translator. At the same time, and quite obviously, the contexts of situation differ for the receivers of the original message and for the receivers of the translated message.

Viewing the translator's task in this light, it becomes evident that he encounters the social aspects of translation in

his role as the receiver of the original message (at the level of the linguistic code which he must decode, at the level of the concrete realization of that code which he must know how to interpret, and at the level of the extralinguistic content of the message which he must understand) and in his role as the transmitter of the translated message to other receivers (at the level of the linguistic code used for transmission, at the level of the communicative situation in which the transmission is made, and at the level of the extralinguistic content of the message which he is trying to bring to his receivers). Everything said here about the nature of the translator's task follows naturally from the fact that the translator appears in a dual role — both as a receiver of the message and as its transmitter. The requirement derived from this fact is usually formulated as the need for the translator to have a command of the linguistic code in which he receives the message and of the code in which he transmits it (or, more simply, to know one and the other language in the sense of the transformational-generative competence). On this premise it may be possible to establish a linguistic theory of translation. However, the difficulty with such a theory is that, being linguistic in nature, it can take into account only one of the three social aspects of the translation process (the one represented at the level of the linguistic code), while the other two (one involved in the act of communication itself — which transformational generative linguistics has merely swept under the carpet labelled 'performance' — and one involved in the extralinguistic content of the message) cannot be caught in its methodological net. An added difficulty with the linguistic theory of translation is that it is necessarily defeatist, because its first postulate must be that translation is impossible. This claim is true if one accepts the definition of translation as a search for equivalent linguistic structures (cf. Katičić, 1972). Translation is thus viewed as a transformation of a text, which is a linguistically defined whole, into another text, also a linguistically defined whole, which will have all and only the properties of the first text. This is, of course, impossible. Even if the first text is repeated verbatim, or directly copied, it can never be identical in all its different occurrences, since it is impossible to repeat the situation in which it first appeared. But regardless of the theoretical impossibility of translation defined in this way, it can be shown that the definition is inadequate also for the reason stated earlier — namely, because it fails to provide for the nonlinguistic aspects of translation whose presence in the process of communication (and the translation process is such a process) is undoubted. Even if translation as

a linguistic exercise were possible, and even if equivalent units did exist in any two languages, translation would still not be achieved in the sense in which it is normally practised and understood.

Fully aware of this fact, practitioners of translation pose one more requirement and say that the translator must know the subject matter (that is, the extralinguistic content of the message) which he is translating. This requirement can be stated more generally as a need for the translator to know the culture from which the message originally came as well as the culture for which it is being translated. Some authors give this requirement even more weight by viewing language as part of culture and defining translation as a procedure for the transformation of the expression of one culture into the expression of another culture (cf. Casagrande, 1954). Regardless of wheter one interprets culture in the former, more narrow, sense (excluding language, so that the translator is required to have a knowledge of both languages and both cultures) or in the latter, broader, sense (including language and seeing translation as a *transposition of cultures*), it is clear that we are dealing here with the social aspect of translation having to do with the extralinguistic content of the message. The need to preserve elements of culture in translation results in certain translational procedures, such as the translator's footnotes to explain those elements which the target culture does not possess, paraphrase of the less well-known elements of the source culture, adoption of foreign terms in the target language for cultural concepts introduced through translation, formation of loan translations *(calques)*, invention of new terms, replacement of expressions characteristic of the conceptual universe of one culture by those that fit into the conceptual scheme of the other culture, etc.

In addition to the requirements concerning the translator's knowledge of the two languages and two cultures, there is one more procedural requirement that he should meet: he should try to establish the state of social interaction in which the original message was expressed and then, adjusting his own expression of the message in translation to the characteristics of the social interaction in which he is involved with his audience, he should try to replicate with his audience the process of communication that the original author had gone through with his audience. The fact that this requirement is seldom explicitly formulated so as to invoke social interaction in the process of communication — which would mean invoking factors that involve not only linguistic competence but also performance — is an interesting one and it shows that the

whole area has remained insufficiently explored. More intensive research began only recently with the appearance of sociolinguistics and sociology of language. Another possible reason for such a state of affairs might be the fact that this aspect of translation is easily confused with one discussed earlier. An author's expression of his original message is always adapted to the characteristics of the culture in which he himself and the receivers of his message operate. The translator will have to take this into account and adjust his expression of the message to reflect this knowledge and to meet the requirements of the culture which he shares with his audience. But even when this aspect of the translation process has been analysed, there still remains one further fact to be explained: the translator's expression of the message (that is, his translation) is affected also by the nature of his interaction with those for whom the translation is intended. This is not a fact of culture in that broader sense in which one talks about the transfer of messages between cultures (i. e., about intercultural translation); rather, this is an intracultural fact which is an element of the communicative situation in which the extralingustic content is linguistically realized. This is a factor with which one must reckon equally when the message is transmitted within one culture: its expression will vary according to the nature of the relationship between the sender of the message and its receivers. It is quite conceivable, therefore, that the sender may choose to express a given message in several different ways in different communicative situations. An identical expression of a certain message in two different communicative situations is hard to imagine. Strictly speaking, this means that the message itself must change also and that a new message gets realized with each speech act. Thus, we again reach the conclusion that translation is impossible — not, this time, because of the absence of equivalent linguistic forms but because of the absence of equivalent communicative situations.

Though such a strict view may seem scientifically justified, it rests upon an assumption which our practical experience in linguistic communication does not confirm: the assumption is that every message is communicatively unique and that a clear one-to-one relationship exists between it and the communicative situation in which it is linguistically realzed. The truth is, however, somewhat different and communication a little less perfect: the sender's original expression of the message is a mere approximation, not a precise and direct reaction, to the communicative situation in which he finds himself. He is intuitively aware of this and is therefore

prepared — except in a limited number of strictly defined situations in which one obligatorily reacts with ready-made linguistic formulas — to change the expression of his message without at all intending to change the message itself. It is this approximative nature of the expression of the message, coupled with an equally approximative interpretation of the received message (since both the sender and the receiver proceed to operate on the tacit understanding that the expression of the message is no more than an approximation to the unattainable one-to-one correspondence between the situation and its linguistic expression) which justifies the claim that translation is possible. If the original expression of the message is seen as just one out of a large (perhaps infinite) set of possible expressions of that message in an equally large number of communicative situations, and if the theoretically conceivable but practically unreachable unique expression is but the sum total of all the expressions of the message, then the translation can be accepted as just another expression of that message in a new communicative situation. In addition to providing for an analysis of the translation phenomena resulting from the fact that we are dealing with two languages and two cultures, the theory of translation must be formulated in such a way that it can explain also those translation phenomena which result from the fact that we are faced by two communicative situations and two speech acts, and consequently by two expressions — both of which, each in its own communicative situation, in the context of its culture, and within the limits of its linguistic code, represent attempts to come as close as possible to the unreachable ideal expression of the message in question. It is this concept of "equivalence in difference" (Jakobson, 1959 : 233) which makes translation possible in the first place and which also makes it possible for a given message to appear in two, three, or more translated expressions in different communicative situations. In assessing the degree of equivalence for each of these expressions (that is, its closeness to the 'ideal' expression), we must first of all ask what was the message that the original author was trying to convey with his expression in the original communicative situation and whether the translated expression in the communicative situation involving translation can be accepted as an approximate expression of the same message.

The view of the process of translation presented here has certain repercussions for the theory of translation as well. It is quite clear that the theory of translation cannot be a purely linguistic theory. It must, instead, be a broader communicative theory with components which will enable us to account for

what the original author was trying to convey, for the communicative situation in which he gave expression to his message, and for the way in which the content of the message and the characteristics of the communicative situation affected his choice of the linguistic structures to express his message (choosing from the full repertory of structures offered by his language). This is where the translator comes in: having grasped the message — or that part of it which he could in view of the fact that its expression by the original author was merely an approximation, that some of it was lost in transmission owing to the 'noise in the channel', and that his interpretation of the received message was again only approximate — the translator proceeds to reconstruct it in the target language, and the nature of his job is then identical with the job performed by the original author. The only difference is that the translator does not choose the content of the message, this being given in the original message as he managed to receive it. But like the original author, he must consider his communicative situation and examine the ways in which the content of the message and the elements of the communicative situation will affect his choice of linguistic structures in the target language (again, of course, choosing from the structural repertory of that language).

This model of the translation process, which does not seek to establish equivalences between two linguistic units but between two messages, agrees very well with everything that we know about the nature of the translator's work. Obviously, the translator must know the subject matter which he is translating, for otherwise he will fail to understand the content of the message that he is supposed to convey. His understanding of the message will be easier and better, the more familiar he is with its content; furthermore, the better he understands the message, the more successful he will be in expressing it in the other language — remembering that there is no such thing as a 'perfect' expression or perfect reception. It is obvious also that the translator must know both languages, so as to know from among which linguistic structures the original author has selected his particular expression in a particular communicative situation and from among which structures he himself can choose the linguistic expression of the same message in his communicative situation. The model, finally, allows for the possibility of translation — not only between any two languages but also within a single language.

The question that the model raises, and leaves open, is the question of the degreee of approximation to the content of the original message. We have already noted that the original

author, having decided on the extralinguistic content of the message which he wants to convey, chooses those linguistic structures in his language which will best express his message in a given communicative situation. However, since there is no expression that would uniquely correspond to his message and thus be *the* right one, he is prepared to change, modify and revise his expression to come as close to the intended message as possible. However, the message itself is not an unanalyzable entity but a complex whole composed of a number of elements, and the linguistic formulation he selects will be optimal to convey some of these elements while necessarliy suppressing others. The author is also aware that the various elements of the message are hierarchically ordered, so that some are more and others less important: his decision on the choice of linguistic structures is influenced by his desire to respect this hierarchy, sacrificing some elements of the message if necessary to express those which he regards as more important. On the other hand, his language itself (and every language) is constructed in such a way that it facilitates the expression of certain elements of the message and impedes the expression of others, which is not without effect upon the author's expression of the original message. This leaves a rather bleak impression of the imperfection of human communication: the author knows only approximately what he wishes to convey, and the means of expression at his disposal allow him to express it only approximately. The translator, first as a receiver, receives and interprets the message as it reaches him trough the communication channel. Subsequently, as a sender, he is concerned to preserve the elements of the original message in the new linguistic expression and to reproduce the hierarchical relations among them. But he too faces the problem of selection of linguistic structures and of the consequent shift of emphasis among the elements of the message. Like the original author, he is also forced to sacrifice some elements in order to express others, or to express those elements for which the target language offers easily available structural patterns. The measure of his success is relative: one does not ask whether he has managed to convey all the elements of a message (because the original author has not managed to convey all of them either), but rather how many of these elements and, more importantly, which of them he has managed to convey. An evaluation of the quality of translation, or translation criticism, is possible only in this non-absolute sense: one can ask whether the translator has transmitted all the major elements of the message, whether he has managed to preserve their hierarchical relations, whe-

ther he has avoided omitting elements which are vital for the content of the message, adding those that distort that content, or including those that do not fit into the message. One cannot ask whether all and only the elements of the original message are present in the translated message. An analysis of translation is possible precisely from the point of view of the elements of the message and the extent to which these elements can be varied without turning the translation into a paraphrase, free variation, summary, or personal interpretation of the original message.

References

Cary, Edmond (1956), *La traduction dans le monde moderne,* Georg & Cie S.A., Genève, p. 165 ff.

Casagrande, Joseph B. (1954), "The Ends of Translation", *International Journal of American Linguistics,* vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 335—340.

Jakobson, Roman (1959), "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation", *On Translation,* ed. by R. A. Brower, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., pp. 232—239.

Katičić, Radoslav (1972), "Jezikoslovni zapisi o prevođenju" (Linguistic Notes on Translation), *Književna smotra,* Zagreb, IV, 12, pp. 3—9.

Nida, Eugene E. (1969), "Science of Translation", *Language,* vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 483—498.