

On Translation

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“Learning French is trivial: the
word for horse is *cheval*, and
everything else follows in the
same way.”

(Alan J. Perlis)

1 Background

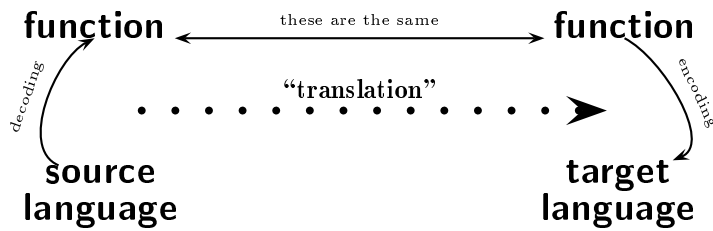
1.1 The Rules of the Game

- (1) Three different ways of looking at the world:
 - (a) Dumb-luck theory
 - (b) God theory
 - (c) Science theory
- (2) Two ways of looking at language:
 - (a) Prescriptive approach
 - (b) Descriptive approach

1.2 Assumptions

- (3) Dead languages are qualitatively the same as living ones.
- (4) The best way to test a method of inquiry is when you already know the answer.

2 Translation



- (5) To translate from a source language to a target language:
 - (a) Look at the source language, figure out what is going on, and do the same thing in the target language.
 - (b) **Do not** just do the same thing in the target language you see in the source language.
- (6) A case in point: word order in Modern Hebrew and Modern Russian.
- (7) Digression: “Are you sure you want to translate that?”

3 Levels of Translation

- (8) Five levels of translation:
 - (a) Sounds
 - (b) Words
 - (c) Sentences
 - (d) Concepts
 - (e) Affect
- (9) Some examples.

4 Meaning

- (10) What would count as a correct answer?

4.1 Methods of Inquiry

Of five methods of inquiry, **etymology**, **morphology**, **cognates**, **language-internal usage patterns** and **language-independent usage patterns**, only the final two are reliable.

4.1.1 Etymology

(11) English

- (a) host/hostile
- (b) stationary/stationery
- (c) office/officer/official
- (d) view/re-view/review
- (e) intern/internal
- (f) glamour/grammar

- (g) arch/architect
- (h) can/canister
- (i) council/counsel
- (j) jubilant/jubilee
- (k) trifle/trivial
- (l) whole/holism

4.1.2 Morphology

(12) English

- (a) office/officer/official
- (b) patent/patently
- (c) ship/shipping
- (d) view/re-view/review

(13) Modern Hebrew

- (a) להתאבד [“to get lost”] = to commit suicide

- (b) מסוכן ["endangered"] = dangerous
- (c) נזכרתי ["I was remembered"] = I remembered
- (d) להקריב ["to move further away"] = to sacrifice

(14) More Modern Hebrew: tools.

- (a) מגוץ = an iron (from ג.ה.צ "to iron")
- (b) מסרק = a comb (from ס.ר.ק "to comb")
- (c) מברג = a screwdriver (from בורג "a screw")
- (d) מחשב = a computer (from ח.ש.ב "to think")
- (e) מקרר = a fridge (from ק.ר.ר "to cool")
- (f) מפתח = ??? (from פ.ת.ח "to open")
- (g) משפך = ??? (from ש.פ.כ "to pour")
- (h) מסמר = ??? (from ס.מ.ר "to shutter/bristle")

4.1.3 Cognate Languages / Borrowing

(15) Cognates.

- (a) English "demand" and French *demander* (=to ask)
- (b) English "medicine" and French *médecin* (=doctor)
- (c) English "he will" and German *er will* (=he wants)
- (d) English "star" and German *Star* (=cataract)

(16) Borrowing.

- (a) English "cowboy" and Hungarian *kowboy* (=blue jeans)
- (b) English "express" bus and Modern Hebrew אקספרס (=local)

4.1.4 Language-internal usage patterns

(17) Lakoff etc.

(18) "Blue" in Modern Hebrew = perversion:

- (a) Blue movie (=X-rated movie)

- (b) Blue head (=pervert)
- (19) “Blue” in English = sorrow:
- (a) Feel/look blue (=sad)
 - (b) The blues (=sorrow)
- (20) Blue in German = skipping school:
- (a) *Blau* machen [to make blue] (=to skip school, “play hookey”)
 - (b) *Blauer* Brief [blue letter] (=warning letter sent to parents of school children)
- (21) “Red” in Russian = beauty
- (22) A fuller paradigm: “Heart” in English.
- (a) Single gunshot to the heart (literal)
 - (b) Heart attack (literal?)
 - (c) Heart of the matter (heart = core)
 - (d) Heart of gold (=kind)
 - (e) Broken-hearted (=distraught)
 - (f) Have a heart (=kind/generous)
 - (g) His heart isn’t in it (=he doesn’t care about it)
 - (h) With heavy heart (=unwillingly)
 - (i) To one’s heart’s content (=as much as one wants)
 - (j) tender/warm/etc. hearted
 - (k) cold hearted
- (23) A case in point: **לבב** and **נפש**.

4.1.5 Language-independent usage patterns

(24) Topic, focus and so forth.

4.2 Meaning is non-concatitive

1. “Burn up” = “burn down” (“up” \neq “down”)
2. “Pick,” “pick up,” (=improve) “pick on,” (=annoy) “pick up on” (=discern) have little to do with “up” or “on.”
3. “By and large” (=usually)
4. “Please be advised”
5. “... at your earliest convenience”
6. “aid and abet” / “jointly and severally” / “will and testament” etc.

5 Beyond Meaning

5.1 Beyond Literal Meaning

(25) Literal meaning is often irrelevant.

- (a) “Sincerely” closing a business letter has nothing to do with sincerity. (Likewise *mit freundlichen Grüßen* ‘with friendly greetings’ in German, **בכבוד רב** ‘with great honor’ in Modern Hebrew, etc.)
- (b) *Мне кажется* ‘It seems to me’ in Russian is the usual way of saying “I think.”
- (c) “How are you?” in English often means “hi.”
- (d) “Thank you” has little to do with thanks.
- (e) **הנני** in Biblical texts?
- (f) **אל משה לאמר וידבר** in Biblical texts? (“God spoke unto Moses saying” isn’t English.)

5.2 Register

(26) Some examples.

5.3 Poetry

(27) Some examples.

6 Summary

Suggested Reading

ECO, U. 1992. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Umberto Eco is both an internationally recognized best-selling author, and among the most well-respected semioticians. In this book, he responds to essays by Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose, debating, as the title suggests when interpretation ceases to be mere interpretation and becomes over-interpretation. Eco's prose is typically dense, but, once understood, quite amusing.

HIRSCH, A. 1967. *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hirsch describes the somewhat common approach (which I and many others reject) that a text can be fully interpreted only with knowledge of who wrote it and what the author intended.

HOFSTADTER, D. 1985. *Metamagical Themas: Questing for the Essence of Mind and Pattern*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

This is Hofstadter's second long, multi-faceted book (following *Gödel, Escher, Bach*), and though not primarily about translation, contains a few excellent thought-provoking examples.

— 1997. *Le Ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language*. New York: Basic Books.

Hofstadter's book (entirely in English, despite the title) is devoted mostly to the translation of a single French poem into English, and contains dozens of possible translations, each stressing different approaches to translation. Though it rambles at times, it presents an extraordinary introduction to the art of translating poetry, and to only a slightly lesser extent, the art of translating in general. Like all of his books, this one is fun and engaging. Highly recommended.

LAKOFF, G. 1987. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff has headed the metaphor-based approach to understanding language, and is the strongest proponent of universality in metaphor. This is an excellent introduction to his

approach. I ultimately reject the usefulness of his theory for decoding language, but his data are interesting and relevant.

LEFEVERE, ANDRÉ. 1975. *Translating Poetry*. The Netherlands: Van Goroum.

Part of a series on approaches to translation, this book is a classic how-to manual for translating poetry. Important for understanding what people in the field of translation are doing and learning, but much less useful than Hofstadter's book for appreciating what's involved..

———. 1992. *Translating Literature*. New York: Modern Language Association of America.

A revised version of his 1977 work (which was part of a series on approaches to translation), this book is a classic how-to manual for translating prose. Important for understanding what people in the field of translation are doing and learning.

PINKER, STEVEN. 1994. *The Language Instinct*. New York: W. Morrow and Co.

Without doubt, this is the best and most accessible introduction to the modern theory of descriptive linguistics. If you read no other book on the subject, read this one. It is informative, accurate, and fun to read. Highly recommended.

PUTNAM, H. 1988. *Representation and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Putnam (incidentally refuting his earlier theories — starting with his earlier books and reading sequentially will prove very frustrating) discusses where the meaning of a word lies, and who determines its meaning. Uneven, but by and large very interesting.

QUINE, W. V. 1978. *Quiddities: an intermittently philosophical dictionary*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Quine's series of short essays, arranged in alphabetical order, make up a fun-filled and highly readable book covering topics ranging from philosophy to mathematics, from etymology to translation, and everything in between. Highly recommended.



A musical staff with a treble clef on the left. The letters "JMH" are written across the staff in a cursive, handwritten style. The "J" is on the first line, the "M" is between the second and third lines, and the "H" is between the third and fourth lines.