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The Problem of Translation and Knowledge Transfer
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Some years ago I got a package of pain relieving patches from my American relative. They were produced in China and then sold in the United States. On the packaging there were instructions for use, but they were not printed directly on the box. Instead, you could find instructions printed on a sticker covering some information underneath. The instructions were not informative, just advising to put a patch on a painful spot.

Being curious and somewhat destructive by nature I started to peel off the sticker just to find another set of instructions hidden beneath it. Although written in English, they were incomprehensible to me. The instructions referred to basic elements, such as water and fire, balance of yin and yang, and advising the user to calculate the position of the patch in accordance with the state of these elements in his body, or something very similar (please bear in mind that this happened years ago and I had not understood a thing).

This was puzzling, interesting, and thought provoking. I started thinking about the differences of Eastern and Western medicine, about the usefulness of patches if used in accordance with the westernised instructions, about different categories and concepts used in these two cultures, but furthermore, this occurrence made me think about the translation practice, and I tried to judge which one of these translations was actually better, or more successful, if we can think about the "sticker instructions" as a case of translation at all. If we were to judge them by accuracy, it looks that the hidden one is the one to pick, but if we judge by usefulness then the chosen one, the one on the sticker, is the winner. On the other hand, are any of them really successful? Have any of them conveyed the right information to the reader? In the end what do we do in this, or similar cases, as translators? What we are witnessing here is the process of decision making in the practice of translation. It was decided that there is just too many assumptions in the original text that are not familiar to the intended reader, that they should be eliminated altogether, and that the theoretical frame known to the reader should be used instead. This process of decision-making, which occurs in translation practice, leads us directly to the question of how we understand knowledge, and how knowledge is transferred across cultures.

The problem of translation in the given case arose from the fact that two texts spoke to different audiences belonging to different cultures, having different knowledge backgrounds, and the information they conveyed assumed different medical theories common in these two cultures. Even if it seems that the particular terms could have been accurately translated, as it was attempted in the original translation, the meaning of sentences depended on the broader context not known by both audiences. But it is misleading to think that there is an accurate translation, even of the particular terms, like the one provided beneath the sticker, and then that there is an extra theory belonging to a particular culture which explains it, rather the theory is already presupposed in the language itself. "Water" and "fire" have different meanings in these two languages, and proper understanding escapes us the minute we try to use them in the other language. So, the problem of translation arises from the fact that languages themselves differ, just like cultures do, in the end languages are a kind of cultural artifacts. They conceptualise

natural phenomena in disparate ways, they create their own categories, and code various different information using particular grammars that exclude one to one correspondence of meanings. And the process of translation brings these differences to the fore.

Of course, the given example is an extreme one, and rarely we come across such vast differences in cross-cultural meanings, and decisions that the original text should be abandoned and replaced with the one with the same aim but separate meaning. But, on the other hand it points out clearly that mapping of terms by their meanings model of translation cannot be universally applicable. In literature this phenomenon is known as the paradox of translation. If we take as an assumption that the translation rests on the principle of equivalence, equivalence of meaning expressed in two or more languages, and that nothing should be lost in the translation if done properly, it seems that any project of translation is an impossible feat, because there are unequivalent or untranslatable parts of one language into another. Transitivity and symmetry of meaning between languages easily breaks when we start to translate, and the original meaning can quickly get lost. This is why translation is always also an interpretation led by other criteria than equivalence, and our goal is to examine its implicit goals.

The problem of translation, or its paradox, brings many questions that are worthy of theoretical pursuit. How and do languages alter our cognitive abilities? What are meanings and how are they constituted? Can languages be reduced to a language which is not theory laden? Can we ever properly understand things said in another language? What is the role of charity and rationality in translation, or the role of community and culture in language use?— and many more. There are also various attempts to answer these questions in cognitive science, philosophy, anthropology, and linguistics, and additional projects trying to resolve these issues. Language was reconceived as a part of extended cognitive processes involving material linguistic symbols as their constituents, holistic theories of meaning were elaborated, positivists attempted to reconstruct a universal language of science, we were introduced to Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, and so forth. But what is of our immediate interest now is how these insights bear on social dimensions of knowledge, and how decision making in translation practice influences cross-cultural transfer of knowledge.

There are at least two broad areas to be explored: 1) In what ways do particular languages influence knowledge formation, or is there language specific knowledge?; and 2) How do we make decisions about what to translate and what to ignore? Both areas branch in many directions as soon as we start to tackle them. If we accept that there is no overall cross-linguistic meaning equivalence, and that "residue" which is "untranslatable" carries epistemic value, then we have to define knowledge in not strictly propositional way. This claim certainly deserves more than a brief remark, but here we can only treat it in a laconic fashion.

Propositions are often envisioned as mind and language independent entities, which can be expressed in different languages. This presupposes that if think about propositions as, for instance, Russelian propositions, there are entities that are independent of particular language categorisation. This pushes us further to postulate something like Russell did, that we can properly refer only to what we are acquainted with, in other words, to endorse

some kind of foundationalism about knowledge and some idea about the reduction of natural language into a language of what is immediately present to us, which again presupposes a theory about what is basic or fundamental. But our project is not a project of reduction and re-translation, we want to see what happens in actual cases of translations and actual knowledge transfers, where we deal with natural languages which postulate complex entities and specific frames of reference, and where we do not have anything like language independent propositions.

Real, every day cases of translations do not translate texts into ideal languages, but to other natural languages. We want to think of knowledge, information, and the ways that we think about reality as language dependent, and deeply influenced by it. When we encounter terms like "bella figura" in Italian (meaning something like making a good impression), or "promaja" in Serbian (the infamous draft that causes headaches, colds, and can even kill a person), there are no clear contenders even for descriptions of these entities in English language that would retain the equivalence of meaning. But, furthermore, languages often regularly grammatically code different pieces of information, which occur in almost every of its sentence, and use different frames of reference, like the ones for spatial relations or for color spaces. Turkish codes evidentiality using suffixes; namely, the form of the verb in Turkish suggests if information communicated is attained directly or indirectly, Estonian has fourteen noun cases most of them being a form of locative, and then there are languages that have different space frames of reference. It is interesting to ponder how these language constraints influenced construction of theories and what is considered as knowledge. Would Leibniz have ever thought of the thesis of space relativity, or of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles if he had used a language with an absolute frame of reference.

Absolute frame of reference is postulated in languages like Mayan Tzeltal, where location of an object is determined in a system with fixed directions, like North, South, East and West, and the location expressed as a location relative to a perceiver, through terms like "left" and "right" might be inexpressible. To speakers of such languages differences between differently oriented objects are obvious and they are perceived as different objects instantly. Can we translate Leibniz's ideas into Tzeltal and could they be ever endorsed; can we share such information cross-culturally, or we are stuck with our own perspective unable to enjoy insights expressed in those languages that are dissimilar from ours.

What we find as a new piece of knowledge, or as a worthy piece of information, may be heavily influenced by the language we use. This brings us to the question of decision making, which can become a question which part of community decides, or has been deciding, on what is going to be translated and with what criteria in mind, and at last, how do we decide in the process of translating what parts of information are meaningful and valuable to us.

These are the starting points of the project exploring how did the problem of translation, cross-cultural linguistic differences, and normal practice of translation influenced transfer

of knowledge throughout history, with an aim to elucidate implicit assumptions used in this process and possibilities of shared cross-cultural knowledge.

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