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"Linguistic and Cross-cultural Problems of Translation"

by

Ravi Sheorey

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Bhartrhari's *Sphota* Theory: An Exploration in Semantics

by

Ravi Sheorey*

The theory of meaning, although fundamental to linguistic description, is the youngest branch of modern linguistics. [1] The meaning of "meaning" has been approached in recent times from a variety of viewpoints by philosophers. logicians, psychologists and psycholinguists, anthropologists, rhetoricians and the linguists. In India, the study of meaning, as a subject of philosophical and linguistic enquiry, dates back to the Vedic period (1200-1000 B.C.), the oldest known stage of Sanskrit scholarship. [2] Ancient Indian grammarians and philosophers seem to have debated vigorously such basic issues as the role of the context of situations in understanding meaning, the problem of single word forms having multiple meanings, the secondary and primary meaning of words, and the whole question of the primacy of the word as against that of the sentence in semantic analysis. [3]

One of the most significant contributions of ancient India to the theory of meaning is the doctrine of *sphota* or the theory of linguistic symbols, developed and discussed by a long line of grammarians and philosphers and culminating in an elaborate discussion in Bhartrhari's *Vākyapadiya* (A.D.? 570-651 ?), a semi-philosophical treatise on poetics, grammar and speech. *Vākyapadiya* (henceforth abbreviated *VP*), one of the rare extant Sanskrit works, is specifically devoted to the philosophy of grammar and language and shows extraordinary philosophical and linguistic acumen in grasping the complicated issues involved in the study of meaning. The *sphota* theory is not entirely Bhartrhari's creation. Some of the ideas underlying his discussion can be traced to earlier grammatical and philosophical literature, in particular to the works of the Sanskrit Scholars like Haradatta, Nageshbhatta, Andumbarāyana and Patajali. In fact, in *VP*, Bhartrhari makes no secret of the debt he owes to the linguistic speculation of the earlier philosophers and grammarians. His theory, therefore, may be considered as a culmination of the various earlier approaches to meaning. The aim of this study is to present in some detail Bharthhari's "sphota" theory as outlined in

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* The author is an Instructor in English at Emporia Kansas State College.

[1] Stephen Ullman, *The Principles of Semantics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), p. 1.

[2] R. H. Robins, *A Short History of Linguistics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 13 .

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 139.

VP, with particular reference to his discussion of the *sphota*, sentence and word meaning, and contextual factors affecting meaning.

The Sanskrit term, *sphota*, is derived from the root, *sphut*, meaning "to burst" or "to split open suddenly." The term is of prime importance in Indian linguistic theory and is generally defined in two ways. In its linguistic sense, it refers to "that from which the meaning bursts forth, *i.e.*, shines forth, in other words the word-as-expressing-a-meaning (*vačaka*)"[4] The *sphota* is, thus, considered simply as "the linguistic sign in its aspect of meaning-bearer (Bedeutungsträger)."[5] In its second sense, it is defind as that entity which is manifested in actual situations by letters or sounds.

At the beginning of his discussion of the *sphota* theory, Bhartrhari mentions that words or sentences can be viewed in two ways: as sound-patterns or as meaning-bearing symbols. "In meaningful language, linguists recognize two entities, both of which can be called words: one is the underlying cause of words, the other is attached to the meaning."[6] The former aspect refers to the individual realization or the external sound facet of the language symbol (*dhvani*), while the letter is the internal – unexpressed and permanent – semantic entity (*sphota*), which in turn gives rise to meaning (*artha*). Bhartrhari, thus, envisages "sphota" as that internal aspect, which is a timeless and partless linguistic symbol, to which meaning is attached. The time-sequence in the uuterance of abstract sound-patterns (*i.e.*, the utterance of words) is only a means (*upāya*) for revealing the timeless and indivisible *sphota*. Obviously, *sphota* is viewed here as an essential element of speech, but Bhartrhari does not define the term precisely. It seems reasonable to assume that *sphota* was considered by him as something of a "primitive" abstraction like the phoneme in phonetic theory or the sentence in transformational grammar. He considers *sphota* as a single meaningful symbol which, like the phoneme, cannot be pronounced but which is a useful point of reference for linguistic observations.

In his discussion of the nature of *sphota*, Bhartrhari envisages three aspects of the language situation. First, there is the *vaikrta-dhvani*, the actual realization of an individual's utterance noted in purely phonetic terms. This aspect represents the actual sounds spoken by the speaker and heard by the listener. The speaker's intonation, pitch, tone, etc. are also part of this aspect of language situation. Secondly, an utterance has a phonological structure in a certain sequential pattern which is free of individual speakers' variations. This is the *prakrta-dhvani*. Both the speaker and the listener are quite aware of this basic norm and the time-sequence of an utterance, unaffected by non-linquistic personal variations. Lastly, there is the *sphota*, the unitary,

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[4] J. Brough, "Theories of General Linguistics in the Sanskrit Grammarians," *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 19 (1951), 33-34.

Ibid., p. 34.

[6] *Ibid.*

meaningful, integral, linguistic symbol, which is a means to get at the meaning but which can neither be written nor pronounced.

> This, of course, we do not normally perceive in language-communication, since we receive it as a series of sense-data which the brain is conditioned to elaborate and interpret as a finished "Gestalt." Accordingly, in a given instance it is apparently the *prakrta-dhvani* which is presented to the consciousness of the hearer. Even so, it is not felt by the hearer as something separate from the *sphota*: and normally, in everyday conversation, all that we are immediately conscious of is the meaning. [7]

In the analysis of language situation, Bhartrhari almost anticipates the interlevel status given to phonology in relation to syntax and lexis, on the one hand, and to phonic utterance, on the other, by some modern linguists.

Bhartrhari's concept of *sphota* is somewhat analogous to the linguistic sign mentioned by modern linguists like de Saussure and Hjelmslev. The relationship between the word and its meaning is an essential element for both the sphota concept as well as "sign." It is the meaning-bearing entity of a word that gives to it a sphota and although *sphota* by itself is timeless and partless, it can be revealed only by means of a sequential sound-pattern.

After discussing the nature of the *sphota*, Bhartrhari then gives an elaborate analysis of the way *sphota* is revealed by sounds produced in a certain order. Each sound helps in understanding meaning bit by bit, at first vaguely, the next one a little more clearly, and so on, until the last sound, aided by the preceding impressions, finally reveals the meaning with clarity and distictness. The *sphota* is revealed in stages by each succeeding sound, but by itself it is indivisible and not to be represented as capable of splitting into successive sound segments. It is comprehended in a process which begins with complete ignorance, passes through partial understanding, and ends in complete knowledge (*dnyāna*). This process of the comprehension of the *sphota* has been illustrated by various Indian and non-Indian grammarians by different analogies. Mandanamisra gives the example of a jeweller examining a precious stone to determine its value: at first, the jeweller gets acquainted with the stone; then, each succeding examination helps him in perceiving the real nature and value of the gem; finally, the last one based on his preceeding examinations helps him determine the quality and real value of the object. Bhartrhari points out, again and again, that it is the cognition of the *sphota* in its entirety that is important in understanding meaning. This is not to say that we do not cognize the individual leters or sounds, but that they are insignificant and irrelevant in relation to the *sphota*, which is the real object of cognition.

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 41.

The Sanskrit grammarians, who discussed the *sphota* theory after Bhartrhari, classified the *sphota* into eight different varieties like the letter-*sphota,* word-*sphota,* the sentence-*sphota,* and so on. Bhartrhari, however, held the view that the sentence is the only fundamental linguistic fact and that, therefore, the real *sphota* is the *akhanda-vākyasphota, i.e.,* the sentence alone has the property of conveying meaning. He defines the sentence as "a single, indivisible, integral symbol" (*eko navayavaš šabdah*), which is revealed by the words and the individual letters that comprise the sentence. The meaning of the sentence-*sphota* is an "instantaneous flash of insight or intuition" (*pratibhā*). This meaning, too, according to Bhartrhari, is partless. He also maintains that letters or words in a sentence do not have a reality of their own; they are only the means that help the listener understand meaning. Bhartrhari's argument for considering words as unreal (*asatya*) is quite simple. It is true that letters in certain situations are meaningful, as when they are used in suffixes or as casemarkers; it is also true that the substitution of certain letters can cause a change in meaning. But then, letters are meaningless in themselves because the hearer does not perceive the meaning of each letter separately. The significance of the letters, therefore, lies, like the phoneme in modern phonetic theory, in their differentiation-value. However, even the words are not entirely adequate as a basis for a theory of meaning; after all, in an ordinary speech-situation, words do not occur in isolation as meaningful utterances. Bhartrhari, therefore, admits the reality only of the indivisible sentence-*sphota,* which alone is the primary linguistic fact and which alone is used for the purpose of communication (*vyavahāra*). Just as a root or a suffix by itself has no meaning, so also the meanings of individual words are somewhat like intermediate steps to arrive at the meaning of the sentences. Thus, when Bhartrhari discusses the nature of the *sphota,* the reference is clearly to the sentence-*sphota,* the sentence being a single, integral, language-symbol. The meaning of the sentence is conveyed in "a flash," just as a picture is seen at first as an undivided unity and can be later analyzed into its component parts, colours, etc.

> This extraordinary relegation of words to the realm of fiction is not at all easy to grasp . . . It is important to realize that this theory is not derived from *a priori* speculation, but is the result of a careful examination of what happens when we speak or listen in ordinary conversation. We do not in fact express ourselves or understand what is spoken in a series of meaning-units. After a sentence has been understood we may look back at it, analyze it into words, and maintain that we discern words in it. But if we do so during the course of the utterance itself, we are apt to lose the meaning of the sentence.[8]

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[8] J. Brough, "Some Indian Theories of Meaning," *Transactions of the Philological Society,* 21 (1953), 165-166.

Bhartrhari, however, does mention that at the pragmatic level and for the purpose of carrying out his task of explaining the formation of words, the grammarian has to split the sentence into words and the words into further divisions, even if the analysis thus made has no absolute reality.

> The essence of the matter lies in discriminating clearly between language in operation and language-material considered and described by a grammarian. Bhartrhari's view is simply that words and "word-meanings" belong to the latter sphere. They constitute an apparatus (not necessarily adequate) for the description of language events, but (roughly speaking) do not themselves "exist" in the events described. [9]

Bhartrhari gives an interesting example to clarify his attitude regarding the non-reality of words. A person who has never heard the name of the bird, "cuckoo," is not likely to understand the meaning of the word if he hears a sentence like "Bring me a cuckoo from the woods." Bhartrhari maintains that it is not merely the word, "cuckoo," but the entire sentence that the hearer fails to understand; that is, the hearer cannot attribute a word-meaning to the word in question because to some extent he has not understood the rest of the sentence as such.

Bhartrhari's denial of the reality of the individual words and their meaning does not, however, prevent him, as pointed out above, from accepting them as useful units of grammatical analysis, and he devotes some attention to them. He makes it clear that he is aware of the fact that a word can have multiple meanings and that the grammarian should explain in some way how only one of the meanings is conveyed at a time. In *VP*, Bhartrhari attempts to explain this principle by saying that the particular meaning of a word depends on the intention of the speaker to convey that particular meaning. This situation is explained by an analogy: the human eye has the natural power of seeing many things at a time, but it can see a particular object only when the individual decides and focuses his attention to see that object. The process of understanding the particular meaning of a word has three aspects: first, a word has an intrinsic power to convey one or more meanings (*abhidha*); second, it is the intention of the speaker which determines the particular meaning to be conveyed (*abhisamdhana*); and third, the actual application (*viniyoga*) of the word and its utterance.

Bhartrhari has some interesting things to say about the primary and secondary meanings of polysemic words. The particular meaning of a polysemic word which has the sanction of worldly usage (*prasiddhi*) is considered by Bhartrhari as its primary meaning. Thus, the word *go* in Sanskrit denotes ordinarily an animal (cow) which has the universal property of *gotva, i.e.*, "cow-ness," and this is, therefore, its primary

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 126-167.

(*mukhya*) meaning. But a speaker may apply the word to a human being like *vahika, i.e.,* "someone who lives in a village of that name." Here, the speakers' intention is to attribute *gotva* to a human being. This attribution is deliberate, and the meaning thus derived does not have the sanction of wordly usage. This result is therefore classified as the secondary meaning of the word (*gauna*). It is important to note, here, that in both applications the property of *gotva* is inherent in the meaning, either real or attributed, and that the inherent power of the word to convey two meanings (*abhidha*) remains the same but is seemingly differentiated in a speech situation. Bhartrhari also mentions that the secondary meaning of a word normally requires a context for its understanding, although sometimes the context may clarify only the primary meaning. Usually, the secondary meaning of a word is implied when a word is used for an object other than it normally denotes, as for example, the metaphorical use of the word.

Bhartrhari also speaks about the distinction between the explicit (*mukya*) and implicit (*nantariyaka*) meanings of words. This distinction is also explained by an analogy. When we cannot see an object in the dark, we light a lamp to see it. The lamp illuminates not only the desired object but also the other objects lying nearby. The main object here represents the explicit meaning of a word, and the other objects around or the other details of the object (*e.g.,* its color or engraving, etc.) represent implicit meaning. A word may also bring to one's mind certain associated meanings, which Bhartrhari compares to fuel that, when lighted, gives not only fire but smoke as well. The fact that a word conveys not only its primary meaning but invariably other notions associated with it can also be compared to buying a steak, an act which requires one to buy the unwanted parts that go with it, such as the bone, the package, and so on.

It is, thus, clear Bhartrahari was aware of the possibilities of a word's conveying several meanings and associated notions. He also realized that an adequate theory of meaning must explain how a particular meaning is to be understood in a given situation. To solve this problem, he gives a fairly elaborate list of contextual factors that help determine the exact, intended meaning of a word in a given situation. It is not known whether the list of the contextual factors found in *VP* is Bhartrahari's or not. However, since he mentions it, it is reasonable to assume that he approves of it. The following contextual factors are mentioned:

a) *Samsarga* (contact) or *samyoga* (association), refers to the association), normally known to exist between two objects or ideas. Thus, in the expression "the keys of the typewriter," the word "keys" refers to those of the typewriter and not to the object with which we open a door.

b) *Viprayoga* (dissociation), which is the opposite of (a), indicates the disappearance of a familiar association between two things, *e.g.,*

in the expression *visankhačakro harih* (Hari without his conch and discus), the word *hari* refers to God Vishnu (and not to "monkey," one of the meanings of the word) because the conch and the discus are traditionally associated with Vishnu.

c) *Sahačarya* (companionship) is the mutual association between two or more things. In the expression "Ram and Sita," "Ram" refers to Sita's husband (in *Ramayana*) and not to Balarama or Parsurama.

d) *Virodhita* (opposition) is hostility that is quite well-known. Thus in the expression *čhaya* (and) *prakaš*, (shadow and light), the former word refers to "shadow" and not to "beauty."

e) *Artha* (the purpose served or the "sense" of the word). This refers to the fact that the meaning of a word should be explained in such a way as to serve the purpose for which it is used. Thus when one says, "I eat on the floor," one refers to the fact that the eating is done while sitting on the floor; similarity," I eat in a plate," refers to the fact that the food is placed in a plate at the time of eating.

f) *Prākarna* is the context of situation. The word *saindhava* in the expression *saindhavam anaya* can mean either "salt" or a horse of that name. If the expression is used in the context of eating food which lacks salt, the word refers to "salt," whereas if a man uses it when he is about to go out, it refers to the "horse."

g) *Linga* is the "indication" of meaning arrived at from another place, that is when the meaning of a word is ambiguous in a context but is clear in similar context in another passage, the latter meaning is the one indicated by the word.

h) *Šabdasyanyasya samnidhih* refers to the vicinity of another word. This refers to the logical meaning of a word when it occurs with another word with which it forms a sort of collocation. In the expression *dešasya purārateh* (of god, the enemy of Purās), the meaning "god" (*dev*) is restricted to Lord Siva because of the collocation and not to a King who destroyed cities.

i) *Samarthayam* is the capacity that is known from the result. In the expression *madhumattah kokilah* (the cuckoo is intoxicated by *madhu*), the word *madhu* refers to the spring and not to "honey" because the season in question alone has the power to "intoxicate" the cuckoo.

j) *Aučiti* is propriety or congruity. The word *mukha* can mean "face" or "favor" depending upon the context. In the expression *patu vo dayitāmukham* (may your beloved's *mukha* protect you), the word means "favor," that being the most appropriate meaning in the given context.

k) *Deša* or place. In a sentence like "And now here comes my Lord," the word "Lord" refers to a human being and not to God because of the reference to place by the word "here."

l) *Kāla* or time. For example, in the ambiguous expression *citrabhānur vibhati asau* (Chitrabhanu is "now shining"), the meaning of *citrabhānu* is "sun" if the reference is to daytime; if the reference is to night, the word means "light of fire."

m) *Vyakti* or grammatical gender. The word *mitra* means the "sun" if used in the masculine gender, but "friend" if used in the neuter.

n) *Svara* or accent. The ancient Sanskrit Scholars believed that the efficacy of a religious ceremony depended on the oral rendition of the Vedic texts, accurately reflecting the original pronunciation and accent. Accent, therefore, plays an important part in the interpretation of the meaning of these texts, with which Bhartrhari was quite familiar. The term *indrašatruh* means "Indra's killer" if the accent is on the last syllable but "one whose killer is Indra" if the accent is on the first syllable.

The above list is not exhaustive. There are passing references to such other factors as *abhinaya* (gesture) and *apedeša* (to point out directly), among others. What is important to note, here, is the fact that Bhartrhari was aware of the relevance of contextual factors (grammatical, verbal and situational) in determining meaning.

Bhartrhari was not only a grammarian but also a philosopher. His *sphota* doctrine is part of his monistic and idealistic metaphysical theory in which he proposed that speech-essence (*šabda-tattva*) is the first principle of the universe and that the whole material existence is only an appearance (*vivarta*) of the speech principle. Since he considered the speech principle as indivisible entity, he advocated the view that the sentence is really a psychic entity and an indivisible unit. The *sphota* is the indivisible symbol which carries meaning. In Bhartrhari's opinion, the primary linguistic fact in the understanding of meaning is the sentence-sphota; the letters, sounds, or words are only stepping stones to get at it. This is the one simple fact which, although quite familiar to modern linguists, has not been explored fully in the modern analyses of language. Bhartrhari's observations are considerably sophisticated and offer a valuable analysis of meaning for the modern linguist.

Linguistic and Cross-cultural Problems of Translation*

The highly developed modern systems of communication have made the linquistically divided modern world a small place, in which native language is not the only language in one's life. The moment a person's thoughts are turned to words and phrases used in another language, he is brought face to face with the activity and problems of translation. Perhaps at no time in the history of the world has translation received so much time and effort as today. It has engaged the attention of linguists, anthropologists, language teachers, mathematicians, electronic engineers, besides, of course, the translators themselves. One has only to glance at the annual *Index Translationum* compiled by UNESCO to get an idea of the boom in translation industry. There is, however, comparatively little written on the linguistic processes of transalation as such. Although linguistics has made considerable progress in the study and analysis of languages and has now been regarded as one of the most exact humanistic sciences, it has yet to provide a consistent and adequate theory of translation to account for the process. However, linguists and philologists have became increasingly aware of the fact that the process of translation is amenable to scientific description in terms of the principles and procedures that govern its functioning. One of the problems they have to face is to determine whether or not exact translation from one language into another is possible at all. The aim of this study is to examine and support the thesis that, because of linguistic and cross-cultural problems involved in the process, and *exact* translation from one language into another is impossible; to support, in other words, the view that in a precise, scientific, theoretical sense no two languages share total and absolute translatability. This is not to say that no translation is possible but rather that some translation is possible, but not all or exact. [1]

Translation is as old as original authorship and has as long a history as any other branch of literature. The history of the translation activity indicates that scholars have given considerable attention to overcome the apparent difficulties posed by translation but have failed to find a universally acceptable solution. It appears that early translations were carried out for purely utilitarian purposes with no other thought in the mind of the translator than the fact that his job was to remove the barrier placed by the difference in the languages of the writer and the reader. From this primitive state, more specialized forms of translation were evolved, and translation came to be regarded as an art. The Elizabethan English translator, for instance, entered

*The author is grateful to Dr. John C. Bordie, Director, Foreign Language Education Center, University of Texas at Austin, for his comments on an earlier version of this monograph.

[1] Even the professional translators are aware of this problem as any commentary on the translation of poetry will reveal.

creatively into his work, as an artist not as a scientist, and sometimes turned out a work of intense liveliness and heightened dramatic pitch unsuggested by the original! To him the notion of "exact translation" was quite irrelevant. At best, the dilemma he faced was one of keeping a balance between the letter and the spirit of the original. The artistic nature of translation was also emphasized in the eighteenth century; for example, Alexander Tytler, in his volume on *The Principles of Translation* (1770), declared that a good translation is one "in which the merit of the original work is so completely transfused into another language, as to be distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt, by a native of the country to which that language belongs, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work." [2] Although Tytler's book had a considerable influence, the early nineteenth-century translators viewed translation in a different perspective. With the growth of emphasis on technical accuracy, translators paid more attention to form rather than content. The result was that *The Arabian Nights* were robbed of their exotic eastern atmosphere while Mathew Arnold's Homer in English hexameter slighted the very spirit of the original. The translator did efface himself completely to let Rome speak directly to London but failed to render exact translations.

The twentieth century has witnessed a radical change in the principles and procedures governing translation. This has been primarily the result of the modern developments in linguistic theory which have shed considerable light on the theory and practice of translation. Besides, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and electronic engineers have been increasingly concerned with the problems of language and interlingual communication. Translation is now understood, as pointed out by Nida, as an extremely complicated procedure involving analysis, transfer, and restructuring, not merely a process of matching surface structures. [3]

As a linguistic process, translation is always one-way, from a source language to a target language. It may be broadly defined as the activity of replacing textual material in one language (source language) by equivalent textual material in another language (target language). [4] In effect, translation refers to "the replacement of the source language grammar and lexis by equivalent target language grammar and lexis with consequential replacement of source language phonology/graphology or (non-equivalent) target language phonology/graphology." [5] There are a few mutually dependent aspects of translation that need to be examined here to determine whether or not exact or absolute translation from one language to another is possible. In the discussion that

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[2] Alexander F. Tytler, *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1907), pp. 8-9.

[3] Eugene A. Nida, "Science of Translation," *Language*, 45 (September, 1969), 483.

[4] This is basically the definition given by J. C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). p. 20.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

follows translation is considered as a linguistic process in the sense in which it has been defined above.

The focal point in translation theory and practice is one of finding translation equivalents in the target language. A textual translation equivalent in the target language is one which a competent bilingual informant observes in a particular context to be the equivalent of a given source language text.[6] The translator usually relies on his own knowledge of the two languages to discover the textual equivalents. The question, however, is whether it is possible at all to find exact translation equivalents in different languages.

Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) was perhaps the strongest supporter of the notion that translation equivalents in different languages are almost impossible to find. Whorf contended that the differences between language systems are such that each language both stimulates different thought on the part of the speaker and exists in its own right as a distinct system. The so-called strong form of Whorf's linguistic relativity hypothesis asserts that we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages and that each particular language implies a unique world-view or perception of reality. Whorf, therefore, concluded that there is a loss of nuances and connotations in a translation from one language to another and that, since every language determines the way we see the world, it is impossible to translate *all* the nuances of meaning from one language to another. Indeed, if thought expressed in one language were easily translatable into another without any loss of meaning, we would probably have a quieter United Nations. At the U. N. the lack of total language translatability is so severe a problem that even commonly used words like "democracy" lead to heated and prolonged debates when representatives of different nations, speaking in different languages, attempt to define them.

There are at least two major categories of problems which impose heavy restrictions on the limits of translatability: linguistics and cross-cultural. A translator has to cope with three aspects from the linguistic point of view: grammatical, lexical-semantic and stylistic. Every language has sets of categories which have a long history and which express grammatical relations in certain peculiar ways. There is no such thing as all-inclusive universal categories which all languages share. Some languages are quite unique in their system of categories, and these are untranslatable by grammatical means. Russian, for instance, has the category of the present passive participle unknown to English, *e.g.*, *citaemya kniga* (a book which is being read). The distinctive category remains untransferred when a Russian text is translated into English. Again, English uses only one form of the pronoun, "you," whereas the Romance languages have two: polite and familiar. Japanese uses about a dozen forms for "you" and an equal number for the first person singular pronoun, each reflecting the speaker's concern for different

[6] The term *text* here refers to any stretch of language from a morpheme to a whole book.

degrees of politeness and formality. Telegu, an Indian language, has at least eight lexical items for the English pronoun, "he," each representating either a degree of politeness or proximity (or absence of it) to the speaker. In short, it can be argued that the non-equivalence of grammatical categories in different languages renders exact translation impossible. If the formal features of a particular source language do not have a corresponding feature in the target language, clearly then linguistic untranslatability is bound to result.

An area of even greater frustration for the translator is the lexical-semantic aspect of different languages. The mutual relationship between the denotation and content of a language is totally arbitrary. Moreover, the grammatical system of a language is finite, but the lexical system is open-ended and, theoretically speaking, potentially unlimited. Even so, words of one language may have no translation equivalents in another. In fact, the idea that for every word in any one language there is another word equivalent to it in every other language is not in accordance with the facts. A word, for instance, which is quite familiar in one language may have no equivalent in another. The Hindi word, "namaste" (a form of greeting expressed with palms pressed against each other near the chest), or the Sanskrit word, "Guru" (one's spiritual adviser or teacher), have no English equivalents. These two words derive their meaning from the socio-cultural environment peculiar to India and are, therefore, untranslatable. In such cases, the English translator usually transfers the source language lexical item bodily and embeds it in the target language text. This procedure clearly is not a case of translation but of transference – an implantation of source language meaning into the target language text, if an element relevant to the source language text is absent from the cultural context of the target language. In other words, there is no way in which the above lexical items can have the same meaning in English even if equivalents were found. Such cases of untranslatability are the rule rather than the exception.

The problem of the non-translatability of words and lexical units is closely tied to the connotations and cultural assumptions implied in the use of words in a particular source language. Whorf maintained that the speakers of different languages interpret the reality around them in different ways, the particular way being determined by the language of a particular group. The result is that the concepts expressed in one language may not be directly translatable in another language, which has its own interpretation of culture and reality. The differences in expression in different language are related to differences in cognition as well. In English, for instance, the common, everyday metaphors are very spatial and physical, *e.g.*, "I *grasp* the *thread* of an argument;" "My attention wanders now and then and *loses touch* with the *drift* of an argument;" "We differ *widely* in our views." The abstract ideas in these examples are treated as if they were concrete objects capable of drifting or wandering. But in Hopi, spatial metaphors are totally absent

and, as a consequence, the translatability of the items mentioned above is highly improbable.

Another example in this connection is that of words denoting family relationships. Almost every human society has at least an awareness of blood relationships like father, mother, brother, sister, and so on. One might assume, therefore, that all languages would share exact equivalents expressing each of these relationships, but this is not so. Whereas English, for example, has only one lexical item (uncle) to refer to father's brother and mother's brother as well as father's sister's husband and mother's sister's husband, Hindi has four separate words to indicate each of these family relationships. Any English Hindi translation activity, therefore, can only result in partial correspondence and not exact or total.

Another linguistic difficulty in translation lies in the area of stylistics. The concept of varieties and styles within a language is extremely important in translation. Styles and varieties of a language are distinguished by their socio-situational features, subject matter, and the nature of the participants. All languages may be presumed to have several varieties, although the number and nature of these varieties may be different from one language to another. This fact is particularly relevant to the translation activity. The translatability of a variety depends almost entirely upon the existence of an equivalent variety or style in the target language. More often than not the exact equivalent styles or varieties are difficult to find, especially if the source and target language speakers have little or no cultural simlarity. A few examples will prove the point. A young American boy often addresses has father in a casual, intimate style (*e.g.*, "Hey, Dad!"). This style is almost impossible to be translated into Hindi because the Hindi-speaker's son uses an honorific form implying respect and affection, and the form he uses is a stylistically relevant feature in Hindi. The non-equivalence of styles sometimes results in a person's shifting from one language to another – a practice common among Hindi speakers who frequently shift to English when they try to explain complex scientific or technical concepts. In some cases, two languages may have roughly corresponding styles, but these are not by their very nature exactly equivalent; cockney slang is cockney slang; it cannot be translated into American slang without a complete loss of its effect. Above all, a writer's style is a reflection of his personality; when it is translated, the translator may feel it very strongly, but he can never be sure that he has it right and is transferring it correctly.

The linguistic problems of translation, however, pale into insignificance when compared to the almost insurmountable cross-cultural problems confronted by the translator. The relation between language and culture has engaged the attention of scholars for centuries. The speculation is that a person's native language exerts a powerful influence on his behavior, thinking, and interpretation of reality and that it provides a medium with which to analyze his experience into significant categories unique to his speech community. Even informal observations suggest

that languages tend to recognize certain ideas or objects and ignore others. American English, for example, abounds in words related to automobiles and their parts and uses because of the relative importance of the automobile in American life. But American English does not have over a dozen words for "snow" as Eskimo does because of the unusually important role played by the snow in the life of Eskimos. Moreover, languages tend to map territories covered by individual words and word combinations. Words and objects have certain frames of reference in which their meanings are deeply embedded, and these frames differ from one culture to another. The connotation of a word frequently depends on the particular culture's historical relation to the object described. Mere dictionary definitions are not enough; several connotative cultural associations are carried by each word, and they are quite clear to the person brought up in the cultural context in which the word is used. The word, "cow," for instance, brings to the pious Hindu's heart a feeling of sacredness and worship; to a Texan, the cow is simply a useful farm animal which gives milk or meat. In short, people speaking languages and living in different cultures do not share the same semantic framework.

Several other examples can be given to illustrate how culture-bound meanings of words or expression are almost impossible to be translated from one language to another.[7] An American, for example, would normally consider his coffee as being "bad" if it were very dark and very bitter. The Frenchman, however, would be totally surprised by the American's description because, to him, dark and bitter coffee is *bon*, meaning "good." An American customer in a French restaurant will probably get dark and bitter coffee if he uses the word *bon* when he orders his coffee. The meaning of *bon*, then, is culture-bound at least in the area of coffee and resides in the French and American societies, respectively, not in the English-French dictionaries.

The loss of meaning in translation is clearly demonstrated by machine translation done by electronic computers, which have so far failed to translate the subtle nuances inherent in languages. Malmstrom[8] reports that the English sentence, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," when fed into a machine to be translated into Russian and then translated back into English, resulted in "The liquor is good, but the meat is rotten." The same process was repeated for "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," with Japanese as the other language instead of Russian. The sentence was retranslated by the machine as "License to commit lustful pleasure!!"

The fine arts speak a universal language and are easily transmissible. Language, however, does not have the same ease of transmission. The Japanese wear white in mourning. This color stands for purity in the West. When an English translator comes across a sentence like

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[7] Examples cited in this next paragraph are borrowed from Jean Malmstrom, *Language in Society* (New York: Hayden Book Company, 1965), pp. 131-134.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 134.

"She was dressed in white" (in Japanese) and decides to render it literally, he will in no way convey the funeral impression which the author may have been trying to achieve. "Fair as the moon" is a great compliment in Urdu poetry; a Western woman would hardly appreciate it if it were applied to her. The famous English writer, Anthony Burgess, has had considerable difficulties in translating T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in Malay. The very first line caused a problem, because in the tropics, April is no more or no less cruel than any other month! Burgess' own novel, *A Clockwork Orange*, has been translated into Italian. Linguistically speaking, Burgess was trying to create an unusual slang by coining English words from Russian elements. The Italian translator, however, in an attempt to give his translation a local realism, turned it into a kind of Milanese slang. The result, of course, was a total loss of the special linguistic effect which the original English version had aimed to achieve.

It is not just a few individual words which have no translation equivalents but rather the ideas, experiences, and full ramifications of meanings that accompany words beyond their dictionary defintions which remain untranslated into another language.

> The real problem is the connotations, assumptions and attitudes that words, especially jargon words, encapsulate . . . much goes unspecified, opaque to the uninitiated but clear to one who knows the code."[9]

It may be reasonable to assume, then, that a word or a sentence in a language is not the exact equivalent of a corresponding word or sentence in another language; they inevitably imply different semantic frames. After all, how can the Rhine be the same thing to a German poet and a French soldier, what with the long history resting on the banks of this river?

The conclusion is obvious and inevitable: to attempt an exact translation represents the heroic striving to achieve the impossible. Italians point this fact out rather succinctly by saying, "Traduttore, tradittore," that is, "the translator betrays." The thing that "shows through" can only be extraneous, a foreign element not intended by the original author who wrote originally for the people whose language he knew and whose culture was a part of his own life. All of the associations and the little, perceived and unperceived details that cluster round a language in the course of its evolution can hardly ever be replaced by another language which has its own associations. And yet the very process of translation assumes a process of finding equivalent substitutes in another language. "Since no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which

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[9] Paul A. Kolers, "It Loses Something in Translation," *Psychology Today*, 2 May, 1969), 34.

symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages. Hence there can be no fully exact translations." [10]

Translation is like a debt: one cannot discharge it with the same money but only the same sum. There could be fairly close approximations; that is, course language texts are more or less translatable, but not exactly or absolutely. The discoveries of linguistics and anthropology do not condemn translation as such but point that, on a prioriy grounds, exact translation from one language to another is a theoretical impossibility.

[10] Eugene A. Nida, *Towards a Science of Translating* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), p. 156.