

ASPECTS OF FALSE FRIENDSHIP

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"False friends" have long been recognized as a problem besetting the translator as well as the foreign language learner. In *Toward a Science of Translating*, Eugene A. Nida discusses

"the serious dangers... of so-called 'false friends', i.e., borrowed or cognate words which seem to be equivalent but are not always so, e.g. English *demand* and French *demande*, English *virtue* and Latin *virtus* and English *deacon* and Greek *diakonos*." ¹⁾

It can no doubt be argued that such false friends would prove a real problem only to a translator having an inadequate or insufficient command of either the source language or the target language or both of them. And this indeed had seemed to us to be an adequate argument until some time recently, when we had to reconsider our views after reading Anthony Wilden's translation of Jacques Lacan's *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*²⁾. In his notes and comments Wilden often points out the difficulty of translating Lacan for various reasons: the complexity of Lacan's thoughts, the difficulty of his subject matter,

"It seems to be the essence of great works to reflect in their ambiguities the very center of the problem they are seeking to solve." (Wilden, p. 197)

the *préciosité* (excessive refinement, affectendness) and characteristic ambiguity of his style,

"... Lacan's style is perhaps symptomatic not just of the man, but also of his time and *préciosité* is a recurrent phenomenon in French literature, especially during periods of intellectual reorganization. With this in mind, we can perhaps better understand why Lacan has chosen to express ambiguous ideas and unresolved difficulties in an ambiguous and perhaps ultimately impenetrable style." (Wilden, P. 263)

and then the great difficulty in choosing an adequate English term to render the French original.

1) Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, p. 160, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1964.

2) Jacques Lacan, (1968) 1981, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, translated with notes and commentary by Anthony Wilden, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

The original French title of the translated text is "Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse." It was originally published in *La Psychanalyse* vol. 1 (Paris, 1956) and later in Jacques Lacan's *Écrits* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1966).

Indeed, the translation of psychoanalytic texts has its own particular problems. Some of these problems stem from the absence of an established conceptual and terminological apparatus before Freud's time. Freud, as the founder of psychoanalysis, found himself in the particular position of having to refer to certain concepts and ideas for the first time. In this aspect, among others, Lacan has seemed to share Freud's tendency, as Wilden notes, to exploit all the resources available in the language (French in the case of the former and German in the latter), thus employing ordinary words in special senses, rather than resorting to the coinage of neologisms (Wilden, p. 199). Nevertheless, Freud has been criticized for his careless and ambiguous use of terms. A typical instance cited by Wilden is

"the ubiquitous German term *Vorstellung*, whose primary meaning is simply 'placed before' (presentation) but which appears as 'ideas', 'presentation', 'representation', 'image', and even 'thought' in English translation." (Wilden, p. 197)

Last year, *Meta*, a translators' journal published by the School of Translation of the University of Montreal, Canada, dedicated a special issue (Vol. 27, No. 1 — March 1982) to the topic of translation and psychoanalysis. The articles collected in this number represent, of course, various aspects and approaches to the relationship between psychoanalysis and translation. Of particular interest to us was the article "Gonnaître Freud avant de le traduire" by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis³, well-known psychoanalysts and authors of the classical *Vocabulaire de psychanalyse*.

Laplanche and Pontalis discuss, among other problems, the translation of doublets from German into French, that is, two lexical items in German, (one of germanic origin, the other of latin origin) functioning as near-synonyms. These doublets often correspond to a single lexical item in French. How should the translator handle this problem ?

"Faut-il aller chercher un second terme insolite, ou même forger une locution ou un vocable nouveau afin de respecter une correspondance terme à terme ? C'est là un problème qui n'admet pas de solution *a priori*. Ses données dépendent, bien sûr, des résonances, des implications de chacun des termes dans l'histoire et la civilisation allemandes. Mais sa solution est avant tout fonction de la façon dont l'auteur s'est ou non glissé dans le plan de clivage qui lui offrait la langue, pour l'élargir éventuellement en opposition. Ainsi les mots *Realität* et *Wirklichkeit* : en français : réalité. Jean Hyppolite dans son admirable traduction de la *Phénoménologie de l'esprit* de Hegel, opte, à juste titre, pour deux traductions différentes : "réalité" et "réalité effectivité" (ou "effectivité"). Chez Freud, une enquête soigneuse révèle à l'inverse que les deux mots sont pratiquement interchangeables. Nous traduirons donc ici par un seul terme en français : réalité. Sans pour autant être fiers de notre exploit : nous savons combien *Realität* et *Wirklichkeit* résonnent différemment à l'oreille germanique. Entre deux maux (réduire à rien une nuance de la langue — imposer au lecteur français une fausse opposition conceptuelle) on choisit le moindre."

(Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 33)

3) This article by Laplanche and Pontalis originally appeared in *Le Monde* 6884, March 1st, 1967.

The opposite situation can be just as difficult. That is, when a single German term corresponds to more than one in French. Laplanche and Pontalis refer to the example of the German term *Angst*, which in French corresponds to *angoisse* and *peur*.

“Faut-il alors, comme on le propose de façon irréfléchie, traduire “selon le contexte” (et par là ouvrir la porte à l'arbitraire du traducteur), ou bien admettre que Freud vise une unité notionnelle qui mérite d'être repérée dans la traduction soit par l'adoption d'un équivalent (angoisse) qui prend une valeur conventionnelle, soit par la mention, entre crochets, du terme allemand.” (Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 36)

Laplanche and Pontalis feel that rigorously speaking, a text cannot be really translated. However, recognizing that in spite of its “impossibility”, the translation of Freud's writings is nevertheless necessary, they advocate the formation of translation teams composed of psychoanalysts, germanists, philosophers, native speakers of German (standard German and the Viennese dialect as well) and French language experts :

“Tâche importante si elle doit aboutir à un document qui fasse foi, tâche écrasante pour un seul individu, la traduction de Freud peut, au premier chef bénéficiaire d'un travail d'équipe où se rejoignent psychanalystes, germanistes, philosophes, ceux qui de naissance connaissent l'allemand (et le “viennois”) et ceux qui manient de façon experte, toutes les ressources du français. Ces équipes visent non seulement à l'élaboration de traductions mais à la formation de conceptions scientifiques communes et à l'apprentissage de la rigueur ce qui doit leur permettre, le moment venu, d'essaimer en de nouveaux groupes. C'est de cette façon qu'il faut tenter de faire face à cette tâche “impossible” mais urgente.”

(Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 36)

Cases of polysemy similar to the example mentioned earlier of the German term *Vorstellung* in Freud's writings are often encountered in Lacan too and are frequent sources of mistranslations. Stuart Schneidermann in his article “La jouissance, version anglaise”,⁴⁾ discusses the insufficiency of the English verb “to enjoy” to cover the semantic field of the French verb “jouir” :

“En 1966, lors d'un séjour à Baltimore, le Docteur Lacan a vu une publicité qui commandait *Enjoy Coca-Cola*. De là, il tint que *to enjoy* ne suffit pas à traduire ‘jouir’. Aussi, dans les traductions en anglais de Lacan et des lacaniens, la jouissance reste-t-elle la *jouissance*.... Or, pour définir *jouissance*, ce dictionnaire [L'Oxford] renvoie à *enjoyment*, qui oriente vers ses synonymes - *gratification, intense pleasure, etc.* Pour parler de jouissance en utilisant un de ces termes insuffisants, il faut le prononcer avec un soupir.

Bien qu'aucun de ces mots ne rende effectivement le sens de jouissance, chacun s'utilise dans des contextes où manifestement c'est d'elle qu'il s'agit. En manque de mot qui spécifie la jouissance, la langue fait appel à ses proches, produisant des glissements qui couvrent cette béance. Autrement dit, par Lacan : ‘il n'y a pas de langue existante pour laquelle se pose la question de son insuffisance à couvrir le champ

4) Stuart Schneidermann, “La jouissance, version anglaise”, *L'Ane* (Magazine freudien), No.4, février-mars 1982, p. 50, Paris : Analyse Nouvelle Expérience.

du signifié, étant un effet de son existence de langue qu'elle y réponde à tous les besoins.' (*Ecrits*, p. 498)"
(*L'Âne*, p. 50)

The translation of Freud, Lacan and other psychoanalytic texts is not of course the only instance where even the best and most able translator faces great difficulties. Problems of false friendship, homonymy and polysemy (to mention but the ones that occupy us in this paper) are commonplace in the field of medical and pharmaceutical translation. We refer to the article "À propos de la traduction médicale et pharmaceutique" by Dr. Anatole Sliosberg⁵⁾, dealing with the difficulties encountered by medical and pharmaceutical translators.

The examples of false friendship mentioned by Dr. Sliosberg, Wilden's comments to his translation of Lacan, and the numerous encounters we have had with mistranslations resulting from cases of false friendship across various languages, led us into considering the question of false friendship much more seriously. We now see false friendship as a real problem not only for the translator lacking a good command of the languages he/she works with, but for the translator having an excellent command of the source and target languages as well.

Thus, in this paper we would like to present a series of observations we arrived at concerning the nature and occurrence of false cognates, as well as the related question of distinguishing between cases of polysemy and homonymy. In the examples presented below we will not include those occurring in psychoanalytic texts. The reason for this is simply that not being psychoanalysts we feel quite disqualified to evaluate or make judgements on the usage and terminology in psychoanalytic discourse. Thus, we have limited our study to the examples cited by Dr. Sliosberg, other examples come from tourist brochures, language textbooks, Raimo Anttila's *An Introduction to Historical and Comparative Linguistics* which provided us also with some data and many valuable insights into various language processes and principles, and last but surely not least, our own blunders as students and teachers of foreign languages have furthered our observations and thinking on the matter.

I.—*Although the great majority of cases of false friendship have a borrowed/ cognate status, this status is not a prerequisite for false friendship.*

This seems to us to be the case, given the fact that a translator or a foreign lan

5) Anatole Sliosberg, "À propos de la traduction médicale et pharmaceutique", *Babel* (Revue internationale de la traduction) No. 3, 1977, pp. 107-115, Hungary : Akadémiai Kiadó.

Dr. Sliosberg's study does not distinguish instances of polysemy from those of homonymy, but we believe this is an important distinction to be made. We understand the concepts of polysemy and homonymy as follows : *polysemy* — a form with many related meanings. According to Larousse's *Dictionnaire de Linguistique* : "la propriété d'un signe linguistique qui a plusieurs sens." *Homonymy* — two unrelated meanings having the same form. According to Larousse's *Dictionnaire de Linguistique* ; "l'homonymie est l'identité phonique (homophonie) ou l'identité graphique (homographie) de deux morphèmes qui n'ont pas, par ailleurs, le même sens."

guage learner cannot be expected to know the etymology of the source language. We therefore suggest that the conditions for false friendship are not provided by the borrowed/cognate status itself, but rather by what one could call surface similarity between source and target language terms. This implies that apparently similar but etymologically unrelated terms might be candidates for false friendship. We believe this is indeed so. A good example of false friends which are historically unrelated (as far as we know), but are nonetheless perceived as similar, are the Germanic and Romance verbs of possession: English *have* vs. Italian *avere*.

(1) Italian: Avere qualcuno per inimico →

English: *To have someone for an enemy

instead of the acceptable: To consider someone hostile.

In this example, we are dealing with two cases of false friendship: *avere* vs. *have*, perceived as similar but etymologically unrelated and *inimico* vs. *enemy* which do have cognate status.

We can then say that while borrowed/cognate status is not a prerequisite for false friendship, perceived similarity is.

It is true that the specific forms *have* and *avere* are phonetically and orthographically similar. However, that is not always the case for all the forms of the *have* and *avere* paradigms. Compare English (I) *have* [hæv] with Italian *ho* [o], and (I) *had* vs. *avevo* (imperfect tense) or *ebbi* (preterite tense). Yet,

(2) Italian: Avevo Luigi per inimico

has no less chances than our first example of being mistranslated as *I had Luigi for an enemy, instead of the acceptable I considered Luigi hostile.

The reason for this, we believe, is that the crucial similarity between the paradigms of English *to have* and Italian *avere* are syntactic and semantic, rather than purely phonetic.

The primary condition for the occurrence of false friendship here is caused by the great many syntactic and semantic circumstances in which the paradigms of English *have* and Italian *avere* are translational equivalents. Therefore, whereas in this case syntactic and semantic similarities are the primary condition for false friendship, phonetic similarity acts as a reinforcement or secondary condition.

Another example, taken from Anttila (1972), concerns the use by Finnish-Americans of the Finnish word *pensseli* to refer to the object known in English as 'pencil'. In Finnish, *pensseli* means 'brush' and *lyijykynä* is the usual word for 'pencil'. Here we believe phonetic and orthographic similarities are the primary conditions at play in this instance of false friendship.

We can thus state our second observation:

II.—*The perceived similarity leading to false friendship may be syntactic or semantic in addition to or instead of phonetic or orthographic.*

And yet, in spite of the fact that perceived similarity is a necessary prerequisite for false friendship, it is probably not a sufficient factor in itself. An additional factor affecting the occurrence of false friendship is the frequency with which the similarities occur.

We believe this factor to be at work in the following mistranslation:

(3) English: Brazil, the matchless county —————→

Spanish: *Brasil, el país sin cerillas ('Brazil, the country without matches')

instead of the acceptable: Brasil, el país inigualable.

In this case, the frequent correspondence of the English construction N+less meaning 'without N' to the Spanish 'sin N' has apparently led here to the wrong connection, yielding quite a bizarre statement.

Another illustration of this difficulty is the example pointed out by Anatole Sliosberg concerning the appropriate rendering into French of the English word *control*. According to Dr. Sliosberg, the English word *control*, of very high frequency in medical and pharmaceutical texts, often leads into mistranslations. There is an overtendency to use the term *contrôle* as the French translational equivalent, yielding absurd statements such as the following:

(4) English: The patient's vomiting was controlled. —————→

French: *Les vomissements du malade one été contrôlés.

'The patient's vomiting was supervised/checked.'

Dr. Sliosberg suggests that a more acceptable rendition would be achieved using *venir à bout*, i. e. 'control' in the sense of mastering something, of achieving control of a situation.

Here is a list cited by Dr. Sliosberg of a number of possible French translations of the English polyseme *control*: 'asservissement, autorité, commande, contention, contrainte, contrôle, gouverne, maîtrise, surveillance, vérification.'

Thus, our third observation is:

III. — *The correspondence between a polyseme in the source language and a certain lexeme in the target language must be frequent enough to induce false friendship. That is, cases of inappropriate renditions of the intended meaning in the source language.*

To Dr. Sliosberg's comments we would like to add that a case such as that of the English polyseme *control* is particularly conducive to false friendship. The reason for this is related to our first, second and third observations, and will thus constitute our fourth observation. The French term *contrôler* satisfies observation #3 in that it is the most frequent equivalent to the English term *control*. In addition to that, it satisfies our second observation: it is syntactically and semantically similar to some senses of the English *control*. Furthermore, it is phonetically and orthographically similar as well. Thus, our fourth observation is:

IV.— *A polyseme in the source language can be particularly conducive to false friendship if one of its equivalents in the target language is syntactically, semantically, phonetically or even orthographically similar.*

To sum up, we have tried in this paper to analyze the nature and a number of conditions affecting the occurrence of false friends. In closing, we would like to point out that an area which we have not touched upon here, but which is of great interest and awaits further study, is that of false friendship resulting from pure homophony. This is

a serious problem affecting interpreters and language learners. The French language and English as well, though to a lesser extent, are very rich in homophones. Many of these homophones are disambiguated in writing, but this is of no help, of course, to the simultaneous or consecutive interpreter at work nor to the language learner developing his listening comprehension in the target language. We believe an in-depth study of false friendship between homophones in various languages would be most valuable and highly welcomed.

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