Language Theory and Translation Practice

M.A.K. Halliday
University of Sydney, Australia

I would like to talk about some aspects of linguistics which relate closely to the theory and practice of translation. Let me first of all make a terminological point. In English we use the term "translation" to refer to the total process and relationship of equivalence between two languages; we then distinguish, within translation, between "translating" (written text) and "interpreting" (spoken text). So I will use the term "translation" to cover both written and spoken equivalence; and whether this equivalence is conceived of as process or as relationship. If I want to refer to translation as an activity (i.e. as process) in one particular medium, I will talk about "translating" or "interpreting". But in general what I have to say will relate to both.

The reason I chose the title Language theory and translation practice was to suggest, not that there is no theory of translation, but that the concept of translation theory is problematic: it means a different thing to a translator from what it means to us who work in linguistics. If you are a translator, a theory of translation relates to how you should translate — how best to achieve a good and effective translation. It tends to be normative and evaluative; whereas what is referred to in linguistics as "theory of translation" is not about how you should translate but about what happens when you do translate. In other words, it is explanatory and descriptive, and not concerned with guiding principles for those who are translating or interpreting. It is our understanding, as linguists, of the relationships that are set up between languages in translation, and of the processes that are involved when those relationships come to be established.

It is obviously a key feature of translation as a process that it is concerned with meaning. Translation (translating/interpreting) is meaning-making activity, and we would not consider any activity to be translation if it did not result in the creation of meaning. You might say that this is the same for discourse of any kind; and by and large it is — the end product of any discursive activity is meaningful text. What is distinct about translation is that it is not just creation of meaning; it is guided creation of meaning. And this tends to determine where linguistics comes into the picture.

Linguistic theory, as I understand it, is an explanation of potentiality. A linguistic interpretation of a language — for example a description of its grammar, or its phonology, or its semantics — is a statement of what is possible. I would imagine that the kind of linguistics that most of you would have had in high school was not of that kind: it was not about what is possible, but rather about what is not possible — or what some people think ought not to be possible. This is a dull, trivializing kind of linguistics, forgettable and soon forgotten. Real linguistics is not about what is not possible; it is about what is possible, and this is the kind of linguistics that is relevant here today. Specifically, what will interest us is the question of choice; and choice involves (i) what is possible, and (ii) within what is possible, what is more and less likely. And the notion of choice has its own further implications.

A theory of language, to be relevant to translation, must be in the broadest sense a theory of meaning as choice; which means that it must embody a functional semantics. In using the term "functional", I am not just referring to function in the rather vague sense of "use", but rather to what I have called more specifically "metafunction" — function as the fundamental organizing concept around which all human language has evolved. The forms of language are not arbitrary: the grammar of a natural language is a natural grammar. Of course, the relationship of grammatical form to the functions (uses) to which we put language in our daily lives is extremely indirect and complex; language has after all been evolving for some millions of years, and it obviously does not look at all like what it was when the human species first appeared. Nevertheless, it is possible clearly to trace its functional beginnings — the
naturalness, and often even the iconicity, of grammatical structures in their relationship to the different kinds of meaning that we engage in, ideational, interpersonal and textual. So in saying that a linguistics for translation must be concerned with functional semantics, I do not mean that we are not interested in formal patterns, syntactic or phonological; of course we are, but these gain relevance only through the functional semantics. We become interested in the formal patterns only once we can assume that the semantic relations are in place. This is not to enter into traditional debates regarding translation that go back to the time of Quintilian in Ancient Rome and have been raging ever since, debates between formal equivalence and functional equivalence; these are essentially arguments about value. Whatever value you place on formal equivalence — and in certain contexts it is likely to be very highly valued — this will always be within the limits set by the functional semantic relationship. To give a small-scale example: if you are translating a nursery rhyme from French or Italian into English you might well change a wolf into a fox, if you wanted it to rhyme with box. But whereas you would change it into a fox, which is still within the same semantic domain, you would not change it into rocks or into socks. So the constraint within which we are operating will always be a functional semantic one.

Let me stay with this notion of “functional” one step further. If we just talk about “semantic equivalence” between languages, and between texts, such equivalences can never be absolute. They can only be contingent, or “with respect”: with respect to the function of the given item within some context or other. If meaning is function in context, as Firth used to put it, then equivalence of meaning is equivalence of function in context. What the translator is doing when translating or interpreting is taking decisions all the time about what is the relevant context within which this functional equivalence is being established. Let me model this process in the abstract by saying that there are three steps which the translator/interpreter is taking.

First, you are aware that an item X in the source language has a potential equivalence of items A, B, C, D, E, F in the target language. Note that “item” is a general term: it might be a morpheme, or a word, or a phrase, or any other piece of wording in the language. The translator is aware that a given item in the source has a set of possible equivalents in the target language. Secondly, you are aware that these are not free variants, but they are contextually conditioned. By “contextually conditioned” I do not mean that in a given context you must choose A and cannot choose B or C, but that if you choose A or B or C, then the meaning of that choice will differ according to what the context is. Sometimes, of course, certain choices will be ruled out altogether; but usually you will still be left with a range of choices, and what the context does is to determine what difference it will make if you choose A rather than B or C at this point.

So, thirdly, then, being aware of the range of equivalents, and being aware of the conditioning effects of the context, you then have to decide what is the relevant context within which you are making the choice. Let me make it clear that this is not a protocol — it is not a procedure which you consciously go through; we are setting up an analytical model of the process in linguistic terms. Again, of course, I have oversimplified, by saying “what is the context?” contexts cannot be enumerated one by one — we cannot set them out in a list. Rather, we should say what are the relevant contextual parameters or features which together, as a cluster, determine or condition the choice in this particular case.

The simplest, limiting case of an equivalence context would be a word, as entered in a dictionary. If you look up the English word free in an English/Italian bilingual dictionary, it will give you two possible equivalents: libero and gratuito. Suppose I think of free just as a morpheme: what is the smallest, most immediate context in which I can locate it? This would be its context within a word: is it a word on its own, or is it part of some larger word? Suppose it is the morpheme free as part of the word freedom: now I know that the equivalent has to be libero. Of course, I might still make a joke in English and use the word freedom to mean “getting something for nothing”; but that would be a highly marked choice, an instance of word play. Now a good dictionary, of course, does not limit itself to the word; it will generally give you some indications of relevant higher order contexts. It may give you a citation, for example; or even a little label, like “musical” or “medicinal", which gives you a hint as to what the relevant context is for choosing one word equivalent rather than another. But there is no way a dictionary can hope to exhaust all the factors that would be relevant to choosing a most appropriate translation.

Linguistics cannot offer any theory of translation equivalence. There can be no such general theory. What it can offer, on the other hand, is a theory of context. Let me try and sketch what I mean by this, using just the notion of “rank” in grammar — that is, a functional interpretation of grammatical constituent
structure — to construct an analytical model of the translation process, with some examples from texts in translation. The theory on which the grammar is based is part of the mainstream twentieth-century European tradition in linguistics: the ideas derive from the London School, the Prague School, the glossematics, other European functional linguists, and also from the anthropological linguists in America — but not from the American structuralist and transformational-generative tradition, which is formal in orientation and operates with autonomous grammars rather than natural ones.

A simple model of the context, then, can be derived from the functional notion of constituency. Constituency is the elementary part-whole relationship in grammar; it simply means that larger units are built up out of smaller ones. Functionally, grammatical structures are organized in a hierarchy of constituents such that each one is an organic configuration of those below it. Typically in European languages, and many others besides, we find a "clause" which is a configuration of "groups" and/or "phrases" (the difference between these two need not concern us here), which are in turn configurations of "words", while a word is, finally, a configuration of "morphemes". This gives us a hierarchy of constituents, or "rank scale". If we use this to model the context, then the context of any morpheme will be the word in which that morpheme occurs; for example, the morpheme free, which might occur in the context of the "word" free (i.e. as a word on its own), or in the context of the word freedom. To see how the equivalence between morphemes may be affected by the context of the word, consider the Italian morpheme -mente and the English morpheme -ly. We all know that the most probable equivalent of the morpheme -ly at the end of an English word is -mente. How do we decide whether this equivalence holds? Once you put this -ly in the context of a word in English, then you know if -mente is right or not. For instance, in likely the -ly at the end of the word is not rendered by -mente: likely is probabilmente not probabilmente. So the most immediate context, that of the next rank in the grammar, has given us the information we need to make another choice — a choice that was less likely in isolation but is preferred in the larger context. Taking this context into account has reset the probabilities. It will also enable us to make a grammatical generalization: if we know that the word in which -ly occurs is an adjective, such as likely, burly, surly, then the principle "-ly -mente" no longer applies.

Consider as another small example the English morpheme -er as in driver or writer. A driver or writer may be someone who writes or drives as a profession; -er then corresponds to the simple present tense, "one who drives", "one who writes". But it may also mean someone who is driving or writing at a particular moment; -er then corresponds to the present in the present tense "one who is driving", as when we ask who was the driver of the car at the time of the accident. The morpheme -er thus relates to two different tenses of the verb. When translating into another language it is often necessary to find different equivalents. In English we have the word diner, meaning someone who "is dining" on a particular occasion; since people are not professional diners, it does not mean "people who dine", though it could take on this meaning under pressure. In Italian we have scrittore and conduttore, because these are regular occupations; but as far as I know there is no word pranzatore.

You can see from these examples that the simplest notion of a context is to move just one level up in the scale of rank; to put the morpheme in its context in a word, or likewise to put the word in its context in a group. This provides an environment within which (i) you realign the probabilities, and (ii) you interpret the difference in meaning between one possible equivalent and another. Let me illustrate this now using the examples on Figure 1, "Analytical model of the translation process", taken from an article I wrote many years ago, when working on machine translation in its early days. The example is a sentence in Chinese, together with its Russian translation; I have modelled the rendering of each of these into English, starting with morpheme equivalents (the most probable, taking each morpheme in isolation) and then revising these step by step as I took into account the context of each rank in the grammar — word, then group, then clause. Let me make it clear once again that I am not suggesting this is how people go about the process of translating; I was setting it up as a possible model for a computer.

What I have tried to do is to establish, at each of these ranks, what is the most probable equivalent in English up to that point. Take, for example, the second word in the Russian version, the word длина. Note the words of all lexical classes in Russian are highly inflected; I have tried not to find an equivalent for the inflexional morphemes, but have simply inserted an X as place-holder to signify inflexion. The most likely equivalent for the root morpheme длина is длина; taken by itself, it is more likely to be an adjective. However, when combined with the particular nominative singular inflexion -a, although it could still be an adjective functioning as Predicator, it is now more likely to be a
The overall length of the railways of China is over 23,000 kilometres.

The greater part of them is in the Northeast Provinces.
The railways of China are altogether more than 23,000 kilometres in length. The railways of China are altogether more than 23,000 kilometres in length, of which the greater part is in the Northeast Provinces.

more than 23,000 kilometres

the greater part thereof is in the northeast

Grammatical and lexical features of the English sentence.

I (a): Linear statement of sentence, clause and group structure

I (b): Sequence of grammatical items

the ( ) are ( ) more than (numerical) ( ) in ( ) of which the ( ) is in the ( ) ( )

II: Sequence of lexical items

railway China altogether 23,000 kilometre length great part northeast province

One

noun; so the translation changes from long to length. When we move up from word to group, it remains as length; meanwhile the preceding word, an adjective to which we gave the most probable equivalent general, has now combined with it to give the expression general length. But taken together, these are more likely to be rendered as overall length, since the opposition is not that of 'general' to 'particular' but that of 'taken all together' versus 'taken separately'. Since it is now a nominal group, however, English requires some form of deixis. Inserting the definite article is a complicated matter; here it depends on recognizing that the rest of the group of railways of China is functioning as Qualifier, so that the the is needed to signal that it is defining length. It is obviously very difficult to specify when and on what criteria to insert the definite article when translating from a language such as Russian or Chinese which has no equivalent item in the grammar.

To look very briefly at the second line: here we begin with the morpheme ravn which means equal. Again it combines with the short form of the nominative singular inflexion; but this is not a noun (there is a different word for equality) so it must be an adjective functioning as Predicator, which in English requires some form of the verb be. Because the adjective is in the singular we put the verb in the singular form is — present tense, since if it had been any other tense the Russian would have had to include a form of the verb be, such as byla 'was'.

The Chinese begins with the morpheme zhong, which was in fact marked in the text as a place name; otherwise we should have given it the translation equivalent middle. It is followed by the morpheme guo, whose most likely equivalent is country; but when zhong and guo come together as a word, the only possible translation equivalent is China or Chinese. Going one rank up, we find it followed by -di, which requires either Chinese or of China; in many instances either would fit equally well, but the form with di is somewhat less restricted in English. The morphemes iron and way, when combined into a word, become railway; and when this combines with of China to form a nominal group we again need the definite article in English to signal that of China is a defining Qualifier.

It would take too long to work through any more of the details. But you will see that I am using the principle of an expanding scale of grammatical context in order to establish what are the possible equivalents, and what is the most likely equivalent, out of those that are possible, at each successive step. In a text such as this, most of the information necessary for choosing the equivalents is contained within the text; and most of that, it seems, has already been provided by the time we come to the clause — very little had to be changed when the clauses were put together to form a sentence. That would not always be the case, of course, even with closely related languages; and as you go further afield you will find many instances where the logical relationships between the clauses in a sentence come out very differently from what is typical of European languages. To show the sort of thing I mean: suppose you have a sentence in English like They didn't surrender until all the citizens had got away, you would have to reconstruct it in Chinese as something like The citizens had all got away, they only then surrendered. The marking of the relationship has been reversed. This kind of example shows that you do have to go to the upper limit of grammatical structure to get all the information out of the grammatical context.

Obviously, this modelling of context as simply the extending of the grammatical environment is not the whole story. There are other aspects of context that we have to take into account. Even remaining within the level of lexicogrammar we have to build in the metafunctional variation. A piece of discourse is not a single grammatical structure, but a mapping of three or four simultaneous structures one on to another, and therefore to get at the total grammatical context it is necessary to bring in all these components of the meaning. In the example we have just been looking at, I considered only one of the metafunctions, the ideational, taking the others for granted; but in dealing with a text as a whole, interpersonal and textual meanings would also have to be taken into account. We could not ignore the speaker or writer's construction of his or her own subjectivity and that of the audience, of attitude to and distance from the subject-matter and so on — we would not translate a personal diary as if it were a scientific article. Nor could we ignore the textual meaning; the way each component is constructed into the text as relevant information — relevant, that is, in its thematic structure, its balance of backgrounding and foregrounding, its forms of cohesion and so on.

This in turn takes us up and out of the grammar, into another component of the context which is the discourse semantics. We are using a grammar that is functional and semantic in its orientation; so in working within the grammar we have already come to grips very firmly with questions of meaning. Nevertheless the domain of the grammar is restricted. It can only construe unities up to the level of a sentence; it cannot go above that (that is in fact the meaning of the concept of a sentence: the upper bound of the grammar). Even
within the sentence, there is the potential for a great deal of metaphorical variation which we can only bring in to the context through semantic analysis. I mean not only lexical metaphor — that is, metaphor in the usual sense — but even more the phenomenon of grammatical metaphor, where we construe the taken-for-granted relationship between the grammar and the semantics.

And thirdly, we have to move outside the text altogether to engage with the context of situation. At this point I would like to take another piece of text and work through some examples, in order to look at the kinds of context which it would be necessary to consider in order to interpret and evaluate the translations of the passages in question. These are taken from my book Learning How to Mean, which was published in Italian translation with the title Lo sviluppo del significato nel bambino. Below are two passages from different pages of the book: passage A, from p. 111 in the English edition, and passage B from ten pages later, p. 121. We will look at passage B first of all.

**Passage B**

Consider the following examples, all taken from Nigel at 2;11 (two years eleven months) in verbal exchanges with his mother:

1. **MOTHER** [having fetched Nigel home from school]: How on earth did you get all that sand in your hair? **NIGEL**: I was just standing up and I threw the sand to it (= 'at it'; referent unspecified) and it got in my hair. **MOTHER**: And what did the teacher say? **NIGEL**: No...because it was time to go home and have your [= 'my'] pieces of meat.

2. **NIGEL** [from playroom]: Mummy where are the ones with green in? **MOTHER**: The what? **NIGEL**: The all green ones. **MOTHER**: But I don't know what it is you're talking about. **NIGEL** [patiently]: The ones I had in Nairobi. [Mother gives up].

3. **NIGEL** (at teatime): What day is it today? **MOTHER**: It's Thursday. **MOTHER**: There's no school on Thursday. **MOTHER**: There is—you've already been to school. **NIGEL**: I mean ... what comes after Thursday? **MOTHER**: Friday. There's school on Friday too. **NIGEL**: But you can't (= 'I can't') go to school on Friday yet. **MOTHER**: No, it hasn't started being Friday yet.

**Italian Translation**

Si considerino gli esempi che seguono, tutti presi da uno scambio verbale di Nigel con la madre a due anni e undici mesi:

1. LA MADRE: (che ha riportato a casa Nigel da scuola) “Come fai ad avere tutta questa sabbia nei capelli?”
   **NIGEL**: ‘I was just standing up and I threw the sand to it (= ‘at it’: referente non specificato) and it got in my hair’ (Ero in piedi e gli ho tirato la sabbia e mi è andata nei capelli).
   **MADRE**: ‘Cosa ha detto il maestro?’
   **NIGEL**: No...because it was time to go home and have your (= my) pieces of meat’ (No ... perché era ora di andare a casa a mangiare i miei pezzi di carne).

2. **NIGEL** (dalla camera da gioco): ‘Mummy where are the ones with green in?’ (Mamma, dove sono quelli con il verde?)
   **MADRE**: ‘Ma non so di cosa parlari! Quali?’
   **NIGEL**: ‘The all green ones’ (Quelli tutti verdi).
   **MADRE**: ‘Ma non so di cosa parlari’.
   **NIGEL** (pazientemente): ‘The ones I had in Nairobi’ (quelli che avevo a Nairobi) [la madre rinuncia].

3. **NIGEL** (all'ora del tè): ‘What day is it today?’ (Che giorno è oggi?)
   **MADRE**: ‘E’ giovedì’.
   **NIGEL**: ‘There's no school on Thursday’ (Non c’è scuola il giovedì).
   **MADRE**: ‘Cè, sei già stato a scuola’.
   **NIGEL**: ‘I mean ... what comes after Thursday?’ (Voglio dire ... cosa viene dopo giovedì?).
   **MADRE**: ‘Venerdì, c’è scuola anche il venerdì’.
   **NIGEL**: ‘But you can't (= I can’t) go to school on Friday yet’ (Ma non puoi (= non posso) ancora andare a scuola venerdì).
   **MADRE**: ‘No, non è ancora venerdì’.

These are actual examples from conversations between mother and child, and I want you to notice how the translator handled the problem of presenting them in another language, given the nature of the context in which they are functioning. The main features of the context of situation are made explicit in the text. You know that these are snatches of family dialogue, you know who the participants are and what their relationship is to each other, and, something that is of critical importance, you know the age of the child. That is the interpersonal aspect — the tenor, in a "field, tenor, mode" model of the situation. Secondly, you know
the mode: that it is spoken, and that it is dialogic, dialogue between the child and the mother working towards some kind of understanding through the text. What the translator has done is to take the mother’s part in the dialogue and interpret that as the context for the discourse of the child; so she translates the mother’s part into Italian and does not give you the English original.

For example, the mother says, “How on earth did you get all that sand in your hair?” The translator treats this as the context for the child’s response; so she gives it in Italian, “Come hai ad avere tutta questa sabbia nei capelli?” then, since the book is a book about child language she gives the child’s answer “I was just standing up and I threw the sand to it and it got in my hair” in English, but with the comments in Italian (“referente non specificato”), and followed by the Italian translation in parenthesis, (“Ero in piedi e gli ho tirato la sabbia e mi è andata nei capelli”). This is a peculiarly difficult passage because the text is doing a lot of jobs at once; it is a very complex situation, in the sense that the original discourse is a direct transcript of natural interaction between mother and child, but the immediate context in which this is being cited is a scientific work in linguistics, a study of how children learn language. Whatever local decision the translator may take has to be consonant with her view of the task as a whole.

Remember that the question we are asking is, what is the nature of the context that we need to consider if we are examining and interpreting possible translation equivalences. So we should say something about the context of the book as a whole. It is a scientific work, written in a fairly colloquial style; partly because I tend to write that way anyway, and partly because some of it was first given as lectures. So you have to find an overall Italian equivalent for that kind of discourse. Now in English, the title of the book gives a strong hint of the type of discourse it is; the title is Learning How to Mean, and this suggests that it is not going to be of the more solemn kind of scientific writing because it is a piece of linguistic play, switching the word mean from a relational process to a material process. I’m playing a grammatical game in the main title, and then following this up with a more serious subtitle Explorations in the Development of Language. The translator gave up at that point; she did not translate the main title at all. I’d like to ask you how she might have turned mean in Italian into an action, using a verb that expresses, or could express, a material process. The problem is, of course, that the concepts themselves are highly abstract and complex ones, but they are being presented more like commonsense knowledge than like scientific knowledge. And since I didn’t succeed completely in doing this, I sympathize with the translator and appreciate how well she did the job.

Now let us take a look at passage A (from M.A.K. Halliday, Learning How to Mean: Explorations in the Development of Language London: Edward Arnold, 1975), beginning with the heading “Texture”.

**Passage A**

4. TEXTURE

Meanwhile, in the course of Phase II, and as part of the same general process, Nigel has introduced texture into the system. In terms of the adult language, this represents the third, ‘text-forming’ component of meaning: it is the potential the system has for being operational in a context, and therefore it is an enabling condition on the other two components — without texture, ‘meaning’ is a meaningless activity. Texture implies genre, a mode of organization of meaning that relates to function in the other sense of the term that we have now separated off from function interpreted as ‘metafunction’ — that is, it relates to function in the sense of use: to social context, or situation type. The texture of discourse depends not only on structuring the parts in an appropriate way and joining them together, but on doing so in a way that relates to the context — as narrative, as dialogue, or whatever generic mode is selected.


4. L’ORDITO TESTUALE

Nel frattempo, nel corso della Fase II, inserendolo nello stesso processo generale, Nigel ha introdotto nel sistema l’ordito testuale. Nei termini del linguaggio dell’adulto, questo rappresenta la terza componente del significato, quella che forma il testo, e costituisce il potenziale di cui il sistema dispone per essere operativo in un dato contesto e, pertanto, esso è una condizione determinante per le altre due componenti. Senza ordito testuale infatti l’organizzazione del significato è un’attività senza senso. L’ordito testuale implica il genere, un modo di organizzazione del significato che si ricollega alla funzione nell’altro senso del termine che abbiamo ora disgiunto dalla funzione intesa come “metafunzione” — cioè esso si ricollega alla funzione nel senso di uso, al contesto sociale e al
tipo di situazione. L’ordito testuale del discorso dipende non solo dall’organizzazione appropriata e dall’unione delle parti tale da ricongliarsi al contesto — come la narrativa, il dialogo, o qualunque forma generica venga scelta.

Here the translator had a problem because of the use of the term *texture*. This looks fairly innocent, although it is familiar as a technical term in literary studies; I am in fact using it as a technical term, but recontextualizing it in everyday language, to bring it into the discourse of common sense. I didn’t want anything very formal here. I didn’t call the section “the textual metafunction”, as I might have done; I wanted an echo of the term *texture* as the word is used in literary criticism, since my sense here is related to it, but with textual (as in “textual metafunction”) as the dominant motif. To decide what is the most appropriate equivalent here, you have to go up to the context of situation and the context of culture; you won’t get it out of the semantics of the word itself, even taking account of its place in the surroundings of the discourse.

The first line of passage A says *Meanwhile, in the course of Phase II*, followed by and as part of the same general process, *Nigel has introduced texture into the system*. The translation has *inserendolo nello stesso processo generale*, with the -lo cataphoric to *l’ordito generale* at the end of the sentence. I’m not sure how clear the cataphoric reference is; but the rendering of as part of the...process by *inserendolo nello...processo* is not quite right. The development of texture is “part of” the same general process, not in the sense of being a ‘segment’ of it but in the sense of being an ‘aspect’ of it. It is not something that is slotted in in the middle; it is a natural concomitant of it. It is very hard to know what is the relevant context here. On the one hand, there is the immediate grammatical context of the nominal group, where the fact that the English has as part of, not as a part of, is perhaps significant. But on the other hand you have to go up to the discourse semantic level to understand that “as part of” the transition to a metafunctional system (which is what “Phase II” refers to) it is inevitable that the clause is organized textually (i.e. as Theme + Rheme and Given + New) at the same time as it comes to be organized for mood and for transitivity.

Now we come back to the meaning of the word *texture*. The English has ... *Nigel has introduced texture into the system. In terms of the adult language, this represents the third, ‘text-forming’ component of meaning: it is the potential the system has for being operational in a context...* The Italian translation is ...

... *Nigel ha introdotto nel sistema l’ordito testuale. Nei termini del linguaggio dell’adulto, questo rappresenta la terza componente del significato, quella che forma il testo, e costituisce il potenziale di cui il sistema dispone per essere operativo in un dato contesto...* I think there may be a problem here. It seems to me that in translating *represents* as *rappresenta* the translator has suggested that this is part of the *definition of l’ordito testuale*; but that is not what is meant in English, where *represents* means simply ‘is’ — it is an identification, not a definition. In other words, the English sentence has two distinct parts to it: one says ‘texture is (= is identified as) the third component of the system’, identifying but not defining it, and then the second part says ‘texture is (= is defined as) the potential the system has for being operational in a context’. Here, perhaps, the most immediate context for testing the translation equivalence is the grammatical relationship between the two clauses; the English has a colon between them, which suggests ‘that is to say’, showing in what sense the texture functions as a third component, while the Italian has *questo rappresenta ... e costituisce ...* which suggests that the two have the same status and thus are both parts of a compound definition. But in order to explore this further we would have to go into the semantics of relational processes, especially those of identification and definition, in English and Italian, and the interpretation of verbs such as *represent, be, rappresentare* and *costituir* in clauses of these kinds.

The fourth example is one that is extremely difficult to translate. In the middle of the paragraph it says ‘... it is the potential the system has for being operational in the context, and therefore it (= texture) is an enabling condition on the other two components — without texture, ‘meaning’ is a meaningless activity”. Again this is rather informal and playful. The collocation *meaning ... activity reflects the title Learning How to Mean*; there is an intratextual rapport set up here. In the Italian there was no such title, so the discourse context for this expression had not been established. But the whole book is, in effect, deconstructing the concept of “meaning” and reconstruing it as a form of activity; so you have to do the same thing with “significare”. The translator says “l’organizzazione del significato è un’attività...”, which does make this sense of “meaning” more accessible because you have the collocation with *organizzare*, which is an activity verb, realizing a material process. But couldn’t she have said “significare è un’attività”? Notice furthermore that in English you
have the same word twice over: meaning is a meaningless activity — the relevant grammatical context for the choice of these words is that of the clause, which is a relational attributive clause. The translator wrote "l'organizzazione del significato è un'attività senza senso", with a switch from significato to senso. I don't think this should happen; the context of the clause tells you that meaning is a kind of activity and that under these conditions it would be meaningless, using the same word. Why couldn't the Italian have "significare è un'attività senza significato"? In order to investigate this particular problem of equivalence, we have had to take account of three distinct aspects of the context: the immediate grammatical environment of the words meaning, senso and significato; the discourse semantics of "meaning" and its construction by the text as a form of activity; and the situational and cultural context of the book as a whole, which set out to challenge the current innatism/environmentalism framework within which theories of language development had come to be entrenched.

As a footnote to that last example, when Nigel says (in passage B) "I mean ... what comes after Thursday?", it is not irrelevant that he is here using the same verb mean, which is the usual form of this expression in English. The Italian has volglio dire, which of course contains no echo of the Learning How to Mean of the title. At an unconscious level, Nigel knows that he is learning how to mean; mean was, in fact, one of the earliest verbs in his vocabulary. This sets up yet another dimension of the context, one which seems rather hard to reconstruct in the Italian.

My final example from this passage is something that I think is simply a mistake — either a mistake on the translator's part of perhaps even an error in the typesetting. Of course, the concept of a "mistake" is not clearly defined; there is no sharp line between what is right and what is wrong in translation. But we recognize instances where the "equivalence" that is set up seems to be an equivalence with something other than the original; and here too it is important to be able to explain our impression by reference to explicit features of the context. The passage in question is the final sentence of the paragraph, where the English has "The texture of discourse depends not only on the appropriate organization and on the union of the parts is such a way as to relate them to the context ..."; the "not only ... but", i.e. 'not only doing something but doing it in a particular way', has been lost, and the non solo is left hanging in the air. The grammatical context of the sentence as a whole suggests to me that something has gone wrong at this point.

I hope it will not appear to you, after this close critical reading of a small portion of the text, that I am dissatisfied with the Italian translation. On the contrary: I think the translator did a highly competent professional job, with a text that was not at all easy. Just to point to one example, the middle sentence of the paragraph in passage A, beginning "L'ordito testuale implica il genere, ...", seems to me to render this very difficult sentence in a fashion that is maximally effective at every level. I have chosen this text because it is, obviously, one with which I am closely familiar! — but using it to illustrate a linguistic approach to problems of equivalence in translation. If it had not been an accurate and effective translation in the first place, it would have been impossible to use it in this way.

It was Malinowski who first pointed out — and note that he said it in the context of his own work on principles of translation — that in order to understand a text, it was necessary to extend the notion of "context" beyond the words and sentences on either side, and to include in it features of the non-linguistic environment — what he called the "context of situation" and the "context of culture". At first he reached this conclusion in the study of texts from exotic cultures, gathered in the course of his anthropological research in Melanesia; but later he came to the view that the same consideration applied to all texts. Every text has its context of situation: the "field", what is going on, the nature of the activity of which the text forms a part; the "tenor", who are taking part, the statuses and role relationships of the interactants; and the "mode", what part the language is playing, the medium and rhetorical functions of the discourse itself.

Here, in passage B, there is a child exploring the experience of time and the relationship of time to cyclical events like sleeping and going to school (rather complicated for a child who still has a nap in the afternoon!). This is the field. The tenor is that of child and mother, and the close supportive interaction that takes place between them. The mode is spoken language, dialogic, and exploratory; with structured and highly functional patterns of turn-taking. On the basis of a metafunctional analysis, we can relate the grammar of
these exchanges explicitly to the three components. For example, the fact that we have identifying clauses of time and material process clauses expressing concrete happenings clearly relates to the field. The interrogatives of content ("WH—" type), and certain information-seeking declaratives, construe the particular tenor of the discourse; while the mode is manifested in the adjacency pairs, the types of cohesion, and the thematic and informational structure of the clauses. But all this, in turn, is merely the "first order" context of situation. The discourse exchanged between child and mother has now been transformed and recontextualized as part of another discourse, a book about how children develop language. The dialogue has been transformed into the written mode, and presented as dramatic dialogue with accompanying "stage directions". The translator, of course, has to take both the first order context and the second order context into account.

I said at the beginning that translation is the guided creation of meaning. So how is the translator guided, in a typical instance of written translating such as this? She was not there when the text was written, let alone when the dialogic interaction was taking place. What she does is to construct the context of situation out of the text — both first and second order context, in this case; and then use this as the background against which to be guided by the text — the English text — as she herself creates a new text in Italian. What we do with our linguistic theory is simply to suggest a model of how all this is achieved. Sometimes we do not have to go beyond the immediate grammatical environment — the local context of wording — to interpret the concept of equivalence, given a functional grammar with which to do it. But at other times we have to go beyond the grammar, up into the discourse semantics and then outside the text altogether, to engage with the context of situation and ultimately with the context of culture. In each case, we are putting some particular item in the text under focus of attention, asking why it is as it is, how it might have been different, and what effect such other choices might have made.

General Bibliography
NEWMARK Peter Approaches to Translation Oxford: Pergamon (Pergamon Institute of English), 1982.
SMITH A.H. (ed.) Aspects of Translation London: Secker & Warburg (for Communication Research)
URE N. Jean 'Types of Translation and Translatability' Babel 10, 1964.