Translation and Meaning

Since translation is, above all, an activity that aims at conveying meaning or meanings of a given-linguistic discourse from one language to another, rather than the words or grammatical structures of the original, we should look briefly at the most significant and recent developments in the field of study of "meaning", or semantics. Our interest here lies in the shift of emphasis from referential or dictionary meaning to contextual and pragmatic meaning. Such a shift represents a significant development, particularly relevant to translation, and to communicative register-based approach to translation.

The first type of meaning, i.e., the meaning of reference, is often referred to as the "referential" meaning, the "lexical" meaning, the "conceptual" meaning, or the "denotative" meaning. It is also sometimes referred to as the "signification" of a lexical item.

There is a distinction between conceptual meaning, on the hand, and connotative, stylistic, affective, reflected, and collocative types of meaning on the other hand. Thus, we classify the last five types of meaning under one general category of associated meaning. There is a clear distinction between the logical meaning or the lexical reference of a particular word, and between the types of associated meaning. Such a distinction in the field of semantics between the lexical and the associated may remind us of the distinction between the semantic and the communicative approach as far as the literature on translation is concerned. The reason why there is a distinction, however, is that the conceptual meaning of a word is the type of meaning which could be mainly deduced in isolation from any other linguistic or even non-linguistic context, whereas the other types of meaning, whether associative or theoretical, are broadly speaking to be derived from the context of the utterance. Hence, this is relevant to translation and translation theories. It is usually easier to find the conceptual or the logical meaning of a given word, but that type of meaning is not always telling in the case of translation. However, it is often difficult to obtain even the lexical equivalent of a given item in translation, when the translation is taking place across two different languages that do not have a culture in common, such as translation from Arabic into English and vice versa. Yet, we should not indulge in a tedious and rather worthless search for the lexical equivalent, since, even if such lexical items are easy to come by, they might not be helpful in translation.

Distinction between the referential or lexical meaning of a word and the meaning it acquires or radiates in a given context

There is a difference between the referential meaning of a word and the contextual meaning of the same word. Let us consider, for example, three lexical items which have the same physical reference in the world of non-linguistic reality, but are not simply used alternatively in free variation on each other. The words 'father', 'daddy' and 'pop' refer to the same physical object, i.e. the male parent. Yet other factors contribute to the choice of one rather than the other two in different situations. These factors may vary in accordance with the personality of the speaker or addressor, the presence or absence of the male parent in question, the feelings the addressor has towards his father as well as the degree of formality or informality between the two. In the case of translation, it is almost needless to point out the significance of such factors.

The same difference is recognized between referential and contextual types of meaning of lexical items, by the use of a different set of labels. Distinction is made between the signification of a given lexical item and its value or meaning when used in a particular context. In translation, consequently, the translator ought to translate the communicative function of the source language text, rather than its signification. A translator must, therefore, look for a target-language utterance that has an equivalent communicative function, regardless of its formal resemblance to original utterance as far as the formal structure is concerned. In other words, translation should operate or take place on the level of language use, more than usage. It has to be carried out in the way the given linguistic system is used for actual communication purposes, not on the level of the referential meaning or the formal sentence structure. Conveying textual effect of the original is the final objective to which a translator aspires, "A text is a whole entity, to be translated as a whole"..