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LINGUISTIC THEORIES AND BIBLE TRANSLATING¹

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Anyone involved in translation, whether of the Bible or of any piece of literature, must inevitably be concerned with theories about language, since these influence so greatly people's views about the legitimacy of certain translation principles and procedures. But linguistic theories, especially as these have to do with the relations between words and their meanings, are no new invention. In fact, one of Plato's more important dialogues, the *Cratylus*, deals with this important issue. In this dialogue, Hermogenes insists that language is pure convention and that words have no direct relation to the things which they signify, while Cratylus takes the opposing view, that there is a natural and fundamental link between words and things. In the end both of these positions are rejected in favor of a middle ground, in which words are represented as dim reflections of reality and not as perfect models of it.

Plato's arguments may seem quite different from modern treatments of language and thought, but in many respects modern theories have not advanced much beyond what Plato proposed. Certainly Plato was far more sophisticated about language than many more recent academicians who have propagated numerous and often weird views of language. Some have contended, for example, that Hebrew must have been the first language (even the language of heaven) and that all other languages have been derived from it. One self-made linguist in Mexico insisted that all languages were derived from the sequence *miao*, which in some unexplained way he traced back to Ancient Maya.

For the most part, principles and procedures of translation have not been influenced so much by specific theories about language as they have by general attitudes toward words and the prestige of ancient tongues. Until quite recent times, both laymen and scholars tended to be "word-oriented";

¹ This paper is based upon a lecture given at a Translators' Seminar, held in Halle, DDR, in the summer of 1971.

that is to say, they conceived of words as being the principal and crucial carriers of the meaning. They did not realize that what is distinctive about any communication is not the words which are employed but the ways in which they are put together. When the focus was upon words, it is understandable that translations, and especially those of sacred texts, tended to be primarily word-for-word renderings. The high prestige given to ancient languages also influenced in large measure the translations of Greek and Latin classics, and even more so the translations of the Bible in which various theories of inspiration tended to make translators hesitant to depart from anything but completely literal renderings.²

At the present time, however, different theories about language structure are having a more specific effect upon attitudes toward language and upon the development of techniques of translation. It is therefore important that translators have at least some brief introduction to these theories and some indication of their implications for the translation principles and procedures. It is, of course, quite impossible to do justice to all the aspects and implications of such theories within the scope of this type of article, but from the bibliography one may obtain further information which can be helpful in providing additional insight and guidance.

In general, there are three principal theories about language structure which at the present time are influencing Bible translation work. These include tagmemics, developed by Kenneth L. Pike and his colleagues of the Wycliffe Bible Translators;³ stratificational grammar, developed by Sydney Lamb and his colleagues at Yale University and by H. A. Gleason, formerly at Hartford Seminary Foundation and now at the University of Toronto;⁴ and generative-transformational grammar, for which Noam Chomsky of M.I.T. has been the principal initiator, but which is now being further developed and refined by a great number of linguists, of whom the following have been making particularly important contributions to the field: Emmon Bach, Wallace L. Chafe, Charles J. Fillmore, Ray S. Jackendoff, George Lakoff, Robin Lakoff, D. Terence Langendoen, Robert B. Lees, James D. McCawley, and John R. Ross.⁵

Tagmemic Grammar

Tagmemics is essentially an outgrowth of more traditional views of language structure which focused upon the positions in the grammar and those words or units which could fill those positions. For example, in analyzing a sentence such as *the old man went home yesterday*, the positions of definite article (*the*), qualifying adjective (*old*), noun (*man*), verb (*went*), locative attributive (*home*), and temporal attributive (*yesterday*) are all carefully noted and all the words

² For a treatment of the history of Bible translation in relation to varying attitudes toward language, see Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), pp. 11-29.

³ See Bibliography under Pike (1957, 1962), Elson and Pickett (1962), Longacre (1968, 1970), and Ballard, Conrad, and Longacre (1971).

⁴ See Bibliography under Lamb (1966, 1969) and Reich (1968).

⁵ See Bibliography for certain principal books and articles written by these representative generative-transformationalists.

or expressions which might possibly fill such positions are described. For example, the article position can be filled by *a*, *this*, *that*, *one*, and for the plural, *some*, *few*, *many*, etc. Furthermore, the unit *the old man* constitutes a subject position, and a pronoun such as *he* can occupy this entire slot. Likewise, the predicate slot can be occupied by a single verb, e.g. *died*. The size of the slots and fillers and their hierarchical ordering are also important. Furthermore, one must constantly note the restrictions upon occurrence: *a* occurs only with singular nouns, *many* with plural nouns, while *the* may occur with either singular or plural. Likewise, a past tense has a valence relation with an expression such as *yesterday*, while other tenses are related to other kinds of time words.

The importance which tagmemics ascribes to slots and fillers of slots and the priority which it assigns to the analysis of texts make this system especially useful for initial field work and valuable in treating what linguists call a "fixed corpus"—specific texts. This system also proves useful to beginning linguists, since it employs a relatively simple notational system (despite a rather extensive technical vocabulary), which does not depend too heavily upon mathematical concepts.

Since tagmemics has been the principal linguistic theory taught in the various programs of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, it has inevitably had considerable influence on members of that organization who are now working in some 500 different languages. Inevitably, their translations have tended to reflect this linguistic orientation. However, there is a growing diversity of linguistic models being used by members of the Wycliffe Bible Translators.⁶

Stratificational Grammar

As one may deduce from the name, stratificational grammar focuses upon the levels of language and for the most part deals with five different levels: semantic, lexical, syntactic, morphological, and phonological. One may begin, for example, with the semantic level of potentiality, and trace this through the lexical level, where it is commonly expressed either by a modal *can* or the verb phrase *be able* and the suffix *-able*. These same elements can then be described on the syntactic level: *can* as an auxiliary and *be able* as a verb phrase. On the morphological level, one must describe the morpheme alternates of *can* and the ways in which the suffix *-able* combines with certain stems. Finally, on the phonological level, one focuses upon the different ways in which *can*, *be able*, and *-able* are phonologically actualized. One could, of course, begin with the phonological level and trace developments up through any and all other strata. In order to describe precisely the relations of elements on all levels and how they relate to one another, there is an elaborate system of networks and grids to define interdependencies.

The principal contribution of stratificational grammar to translation has been in the interest which some stratificationalists, especially Gleason and his graduate students, have had in discourse structure. The work by Sennes (1969) and Taber (1966) has been particularly valuable. But the elaborate system of

⁶ The name Summer Institute of Linguistics identifies the academic aspects of this organization, and the name Wycliffe Bible Translators is used to focus upon the missionary work. There are two different incorporations with essentially identical membership.

notation and network analysis developed by Lamb and his colleagues has proved too cumbersome for the kind of practical application needed by those working with larger units.

Generative-transformational Grammar

The fundamental concept of generative transformational grammar is that what people actually say (the surface structure) can be best explained in terms of a base (the deep structure), from which it is derived by transformational processes. Originally the base structure was described in terms of “kernels”—for example, simple positive declarative statements from which negative and interrogative expressions could be derived. Hence, underlying *Did John work?* would be a kernel *John worked*, and underlying *John did not work* would be the same kernel *John worked*. The transformation would explain the change of a statement to a question and a positive expression to a negative one. In later developments of the theory, it seemed much better to place the question and negative component in the deep structure, and thus remove any semantic content from the transformations. Any complex sentence (for example, *when he arrived, we left*, or *I knew that he was coming*) would be made up of two base sentences combined by means of various transformations.

Generative-transformational grammar makes a very important distinction between language performance and language competence. These two aspects of language are somewhat similar to the distinction which linguists formerly made between *parole* (speech) and *langue* (language). But in generative-transformational grammar, performance involves not only the encoding but also the decoding process, while competence involves the internalized set of rules which make it possible for a speaker/hearer to construct well-formed sentences and to interpret them. Furthermore, this also implies an ability to detect poorly formed or nonsense sentences and to disambiguate expressions which may have two or more meanings.

Some of the resistance to generative-transformational grammar has resulted from the rather heavy use of Boolean algebraic notations, which often seem rather cumbersome and more appropriate for giving instructions to a computer than for describing what happens in human encoding and decoding of language. Nevertheless, because of the precision of description and the insights which are derived from this model of language, the generative-transformational theory of grammar has almost swept the field. At present, at least, it is by far the most popular theory, not only with linguists in the United States where it originated, but with an increasing number of linguists in other parts of the world.

One complaint about generative-transformational grammar is that it is changing so rapidly. That is true, but change is also a dominant fact of any important and viable scientific theory. Any useful scientific theory always contains potentialities for expansion and adaptation, and it inevitably becomes subject to rapid modification. One significant development in generative-transformational grammar is the concept of “case grammar”, which helps to explain the arrangements of elements within the clause. Formerly, special emphasis was placed upon the subject, the verb, and the

object as the fundamental elements in the clause. But Fillmore and others have shown that what is important about the structure of a clause is the relations of agent, goal, instrument, location, benefaction, time, etc. to the verb nucleus. For example, in the following sentences:

The man can open the door with a key,
The key can open the door,
The door can be opened with a key,
The door can be opened by the man,
The door opened,

man remains agent throughout. Similarly, *key* is always the instrument, and *door* is always the object of the action. These relations are far more basic than the distinction between subject and predicate. The various satellites of the verb move to various positions and occur in a number of different combinations, depending largely upon the nature of the verb in question. These transformational possibilities are what really counts in the development of the surface structures.

In the early form of generative-transformational grammar, syntax was regarded as the primary structural component of language, with nonlinguistic reality being touched only in the areas of semantics and phonology. This resulted in positing in the deep structure a great deal of the meaning of sentences and even the restrictions as to what words could occur together. For example, *bright* could go with *boy, light, day, thought, color,* and *reflection*, but not with *osmosis, humidity,* and *sorrow*. These nonoccurrences were regarded as being blocked by certain secondary restrictions. Finally, so many of the meaningful relations were assigned to the deep structure that linguists eventually recognized that the deep structure was essentially the semantic structure itself.

As more persons have employed the generative-transformational model of linguistic analysis, they have seen many additional applications for it. In the first place, it has been extensively used to explain many of the complex phonological phenomena, in which the focus is no longer upon the phoneme but upon those features which make up the morphophonemes. In analyzing the componential features of lexical units, the arrangements have likewise suggested some of the same relations as exist between components of clauses. Hence, generative semantics has developed. But the principal appeal of this model of grammar has been its focus upon the dynamic aspects of language and the manipulative techniques by which the native speaker can explore the range of possibilities which his language possesses.

Though the generative-transformational model of grammar provides techniques to describe relations from base to surface structure and from the surface structure to the base (theoretically, one is only the converse of the other), Chafe, in an adaptation of generative-transformational grammar, has insisted upon setting up semantic structure as an autonomous structure and describing the processes involved as a series of mappings. Hence, the semantic structure is lexicalized and mapped onto the syntactic structure, and this in turn is mapped onto the phonological structure. Semantics is thus no longer merely a collection of labels for syntactic structures or a convenient device for indexing lexical units. Chafe has shown, for example, how certain semantic

contrasts (for example, definite-indefinite, generic-specific, singular-plural, distributive-collective, and part-totality) are realized in English noun expressions in a variety of ways, with no one-to-one correspondence between semantic structure and syntactic formulation. This type of semantic analysis points the way to a far more satisfactory universal semantic structuring than has been previously thought possible.

Generative-transformational grammar has been an important element in the theory of translation developed by Nida (1964) and by Nida and Taber (1969) and is used extensively in the seminars and institutes on translation being conducted by the United Bible Societies. Several of the distinct advantages of the generative-transformational model are (1) the emphasis upon the dynamic relations between similar structures, (2) the techniques for forward and backward transformations as procedures for analysis and restructuring, (3) the usefulness of transferring the content of a message from the source to the receptor language at the kernel or deep-structure levels (where the relations between terms are less ambiguous), and (4) the applicability of the same model to all levels of the language. It is for this reason that increasingly generative-transformational grammar is being employed in various phases of research on translations.

It would be quite wrong to imply that these three models of grammar are the only systems being actively promoted or potentially useful to translators. At present there is great interest among Russian linguists in various linguistic theories,⁷ and one, entitled meaning-text-model (MTM), is very close to Chafe's approach, in that it begins with meaning and moves through syntax and morphology to phonology. An applicative-generative model (AGM) generates deep structures and sets up linearization (mapping the semantic elements onto words and placing the words in a linear order) as another procedure.

For the translator, there are also important implications in Hjelmslev's system based on content and expression, but this system reflects a difference in nomenclature more than in orientation. Halliday has made particularly important observations about syntactic systems and structures, with special emphasis upon features of sentence focus and registers.

For the layman one of the disconcerting facts about linguistics has been the enormous productivity of theoretical linguistics, especially during the last ten years which have seen more rapid advances than any other previous thirty years. Furthermore, during the next ten years progress will probably accelerate even more rapidly, especially now that linguists are seriously interested in semantics and discourse analysis, with particularly creative work being done in the supplementary field of sociolinguistics. All major theories will be subject to important modifications, and constant cross-fertilization will help in obtaining more valid perspectives as to the nature of language. The translator who is interested in understanding not only how to do his work but why he should do it in a particular manner will be able to profit greatly from these important developments in the science of language. Perhaps this brief

⁷ V. Rozentsveig, 1971. Models in Soviet Linguistics. Social Sciences (USSR Academy of Sciences) 3.82-94

and all-too-limited introduction to some of the theories and to certain bibliographical information may help to facilitate the translator's study of certain of these useful developments.

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INGREDIENTS OF GOOD CLEAR STYLE

Some printing errors in Dr. Wilson's article in the January issue were missed. They are as follows:

Page 135, para. 3, line 3: insert "that" after "clear".

Page 135, para. 4, line 5: for "whose" read "whom".

Page 138, line 3. The sentence should read: In addition there is a difference of focus, in that (a) rather stresses the disciples' action over its reason, and (b) stresses the reason for the prohibition over the prohibition itself.

Page 138, line 28, and page 144, line 13: for "ablative absolute" read "genitive absolute".

We apologize to Dr. Wilson and to readers for the inconvenience caused.