“Lost in Translation”: Language, Meaning, Disruption

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Abstract
In this paper the problematic nature of use and appropriation of the language used for one set of purposes by those who have other purposes in mind will be discussed. The popular notions of paradigm and entropy are explored as one discipline seeks to borrow words, terms, and signs from other (frequently more mature and concrete disciplines. At times the original intention is salvaged, but frequently other meaning is substituted—deliberately or not—in the process of appropriation. There are examples of a discipline adopting terms originating in another one, and the challenges that ensue.

Keywords: language; paradigm; information theory; translation


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1 Introduction

Is language a tool? A more pertinent question for our purposes is: Is language merely a tool? If one answers in the affirmative, then it is possible to derive meaning explicitly and universally from a vocabulary that have specific semantic values. However, misunderstanding exists; for example, any vocabulary is likely to be polysemous. That is, a word or sign may have more than one distinct meaning (a “mole” may be a burrowing animal or an information gatherer in an organization). Because of this, there is reason to believe that language is something more than a tool, more than a device that can be employed for certain uses, and only those uses. That second viewpoint introduces cultural elements, including habits, beliefs, values, and background knowledge. It is extremely difficult for a limited conception of “information” to capture the variability that inheres in such complex human thought and action. As Daniel Everett (2012) suggests, “misunderstandings abound among people because their feelings and thought are so often inadequately communicated, even in principle, by the languages they speak” (p. 50). Information, it is recognized, is not limited to language, but language does have informative power that must for any examination of human meaning and communication to be undertaken.

[N.B.: In addition to “word,” “term,” and “language” being spoken of here, there will be references to signs and sign systems. Semiotics applies here. Without adding a technical element here, signs are directly involved in making meaning by incorporating referents into the interpretive process. Of note here, the originating discipline (the field that coins a term) works from a set of existing and newly formed referents that can enable the interpretation of the sign within a context. Presented here are instances wherein referents are either partial or absent. Because of the absence, interpretation is made much more difficult. Space prevents more explication of semiotics here.]

The literal operation of language provides a beginning for the phenomena that will be investigated in this presentation. In particular, the limitations and possibilities of translation will be offered as informative human action. Peter Fikins (2012), himself a translator of literature into English, says, “Whether we realize it or not, translation is the hidden lens through which almost all of human knowledge is processed” (p. B14). The translation of a work from, say, French into English can provide an obvious example of Fikins’ point. What will be explored here, though, is the appropriation of words and terms from one domain by another also carries semantic import. The appropriation can, sometimes, enhance understanding in the second domain, or it can lead to misunderstanding. One thing cannot be assumed—the appropriation is by no means necessarily informative. Rather than giving shape to our understanding, the appropriation may misshape appropriation.

2 Examples

About five decades ago Thomas Kuhn (1962) suggested a model intended to describe the work actually undertaken by scientists. (N.B.: he did state that this model is not the same as describing the objectives
of science.) To emphasize one point, he introduced the word “paradigm;” unfortunately, as Masterman (1970) demonstrated, he included multiple usages of the word in the 1962 version of his book; in fact, she counted more than twenty definitions of the word and concluded that “paradigm had limited meaning within Kuhn's own conceptual construct. Kuhn endeavored to clarify his intention in the 1970 edition of his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; the meaning was narrowed to (a) the constellation of beliefs held by scientists comprising a community, and (b) the problem-solving work emanating from that community. In his clarification Kuhn (1970) stated that aspiring scientists employ accepted paradigms as mechanisms according to which knowledge of “how the world behaves” can be attained (p. 170). The implication here is that there is a discernible “way” that the world behaves. A corollary that he introduced at the same time is that paradigms signal sets of beliefs scientists share and problems upon which scientists act. Kuhn’s conception of paradigm has been somewhat controversial, but, to a considerable extent, it has been adopted by disciplines outside the natural sciences. When his advice is heeded inside the social sciences the implication may be that a paradigm can lead the way to an understanding of the manner in which human action unfolds. As a side remark here it must be noted that the original edition of *Structure* was published as a volume in the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, established by members of the Vienna Circle.

The appropriation of paradigm within the social sciences has a substantial tradition. Wray (2011) attempts to summarize Kuhn’s own development of the concept; he speaks unreservedly about “science,” implicitly including the social sciences under that umbrella. Wray refers to paradigm as a “concrete exemplar that functions as a guide to future research” (p. 394). First, that definition would omit revolutions, and second, it is an open question whether the social sciences can employ such a concrete exemplar (paradigm) at all. Ashcroft (2010) explicitly cites Kuhn in describing “discursive paradigms” that shape thought in social work practice. Moreover, she asserts that there are structural determinants that define those discursive paradigms. An inferred result may be that there is a circular dynamic wherein what is said shapes what is. Sayer (1992) presents what may be the most cogent evaluation of a relativist employment outside the sciences:

> Perhaps the most basic deficiency of [gestalt shifts and similar] views is the drastic underestimation of the number of schemata and concepts we use of the implication that they are all tightly welded together by relations of logical entailment into a monolithic block. It then appears that there can be no shades of meaning, only either total conformity (within paradigms) or total incompatibility (between paradigms) (p. 73).

The appropriation of “paradigm” is not limited to the social sciences; humanities scholars have also incorporated it into their work. Vouyouca (2010) makes explicit use of the concepts of paradigm and incommensurability (another of Kuhn’s ideas) in an examination of Nikos Kazantzakis’s *Odyssey*. As it happens Vuoyouca concludes that Odysseus does not follow a model, or exemplary, path as a leader; then intentional employment of Kuhn’s concepts can be called into question here.

At times there are stances that admit to paradigms, or a legitimacy to paradigmatic disciplinary work, but simultaneously assert that there is a decidedly preferred exemplar. Hendry (2010) maintains that a paradigm of narrativity can overcome (triumphantly) a potential incommensurability between quantitative and non-quantitative methods of inquiry. Hendry does not admit that Kuhn saw incommensurability as a natural stage of paradigm transform, so the disruptive adoption of Kuhn's terminology can lead to confusion both of intention and of outcome in disciplinary work. At an extreme, Houser and Schrader (1978), in information science, equate paradigm with science and claim that information science cannot be a science if there is no paradigmatic structure in the discipline. They presume that Kuhn’s idea (actually, their interpretation of Kuhn’s idea) of the structure of science is universally agreed to and that it universally obtains. It may be safe to say that there is not a single constellation of beliefs or set of commonly accepted problems, but that would signal that information science does not typify Kuhnian *normal* science, as he defines the work of scientific fields. The solution, according to Houser and Schrader (1978) is that information science should become paradigmatic, even if that limits the possibilities for beliefs and problems. The appropriation of language in this instances leads to a singular definition of science and of what it means to be scientific.

Another term in Kuhn’s text has also been appropriated, but less frequently, and with less problematic effect, than paradigm. The term is “incommensurability.” According to Kuhn, the adherents to a revolution
speak in a sign system that cannot readily be understood by the practitioners of normal science. The language of the revolutionary science is incommensurable to those scientists in the normal framework. Kuhn’s claim is controversial; it may be that practitioners of normal science comprehend the language of revolutions, but they may reject that language and what it stands for. This term is sometimes appropriated in information studies, as Garrett (2007) does: “Bibliographic records regularly combine two incommensurable types of description: one that captures the physical and textual facts of a works, the other that seeks to encompass succinctly the work’s intellectual content” (p. 69). Garrett’s claim could be disputed on at least a few grounds, not the least of which is that intellectual content is also factual. More importantly, one who consults a bibliographic record may well be able to understand the two elements (or intentions) of a record, without experiencing incommensurability at all.

There are other examples of appropriation that are not presumed to be tropes, but appear to have literal intentional meaning. The literal elements create difficulties for meaning, and the difficulties arise first with those who employ the language. As James Carey says, “Our basic orientation to communication remains grounded, at the deepest roots of our thinking, in the idea of transmission: communication is a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people” (p. 15). Further, W. Barnett Pearce states, “If you were to ask the first ten people you meet on the street to define ‘communication,’ all ten would likely give you some version of what we call the transmission theory.” Pearce’s observation can actually be quite comforting. It confirms a persistent feeling: most people have a firm and quite unproblematic notion of communication. After all, it is obvious; communication is a process of transmission: “Communication is the exchange of ideas,” they say. “It’s the process by which a message is transmitted to another person. It’s about making oneself understood.” Some people throw in terms they have come across in communication classes, such as “sender,” “receiver,” “encode” and “decode.” But it all comes down to the same basic idea: communication is about a message moving from one place to another and, at this level, it all seems very straightforward. “I have an idea,” they elaborate, “and I transmit it to you, and you have the idea. If the resultant ideas are the same, we have communicated.” This appears to be the transmission view of communication in a nutshell. But why do we talk about communication this way, and where did this way of talking come from? Does this way of talking describe the “reality” that is communication?

Also within the presentation, the profound impact of the mathematical theory of communication developed by Claude Shannon (1949) will be examined. “Profound” is used here, not necessarily because of the insights that Shannon offered in his theory, but in the manner in which Shannon’s theory legitimated a whole realm of discourse that became our common sense conception of communication. As Peters (1986) argues, “While communication was trying to carve out an institutional place for itself in universities during the 1950s and 1960s, something else was happening in intellectual life that served to elevate the fortunes of communication-information theory. The concept of “entropy” in information theory is sometimes appropriated by, for example, literary studies. The appropriation is most frequent in criticism that tends to be avowedly “postmodern.” Of course postmodern itself embodies polysemy; there are numerous definitions of the word across disciplines and within a discipline like literary studies. In semiotic terms, postmodern borders on being an empty signifier; in the absence of an explicit definition it may lack meaning (see Lyotard (1984), for instance). Buehrer’s examination of Gaddis’s novel, JR, employs an economic usage of postmodernism, but he extends the analysis to entropy:

This engineering or mechanization of the human character looms as part of the entropic undercurrent of JR, and fragmentation—particularly of speech and the human body—serves as Gaddis’s principal fictional device for exposing this “man in the machine” theme, or man as a merely quantifiable function(ary) of a systemic or corporate entity (p. 368).

Buehrer equates machinic with entropic in this investigation; the equation is not atypical in literary studies. The appropriation extends beyond the concept of entropy to the operations of machines no matter what their purposes or functions.

3 Discussion

Taken together, the above examples illustrate a potentially deleterious effect for the creation and transmission of meaning through the appropriation of language intended for specific purposes.
Phenomenology enters the picture here. If a speaker incorporates terminology that has been coined to refer to operations, processes, or phenomena that are particular to certain purposes, that person is likely to have an intentionality that accompanies the act of coining the terminology. One philosophical stance—realism—that cannot be ignored is that articulated by John Searle (1998): “There is a real world that exists independently of us, independently of our experiences, our thoughts, our language” (p. 5). If that viewpoint obtains, then many usages of problematic signs (such as paradigm and entropy) are not warranted. If that premise is true, the author employing unwarranted language should take care to use signs that are more reflective of the actual state of the world. If the premise does not hold, the authors must take care to provide explicit operational definitions for the signs they use. If, for example, one does follow postmodernism, one is more likely to adopt a relativist stance regarding language. That stance is mistaken, however, at least insofar as meaning (semantics) is a necessary feature of language. In any event, the terminology, divorced from the intentionality, becomes a challenge for meaning and understanding; moreover, the problematic language can lead to challenges to understanding and, ultimately, to action.

What is needed is the seeming paradox of objective language that can express subjective sensibility of the world as it is. Husserl (1970) articulates the aim: “True being is everywhere an ideal goal, a task of episteme, or ‘reason,’ as opposed to being which through doxa is merely thought to be, unquestioned and ‘obvious’” (p. 13). Sokolowski (2000) also notes that the phenomenological project examines both presence and absence, so there is a dual perception at work that is not easily captured by wholly objective language. He remarks that, at times, we are presented with things that we know we cannot comprehend; the meaning of something (including the appropriations of another discipline’s signs) eludes us (p. 37). If, to refer to an example above, someone claims that information science is “preparadigmatic,” a hearer may well know that something critical is being mentioned, but may not be able to translate it into language that makes sense outside Kuhn’s specific meaning. In part, what is missing is historical knowledge. Without a full understanding of the history from which Kuhn or Shannon operate, a hearer or reader is without a context within which to place the meaning of these signs. In short, what is lacking, in phenomenological terms, is full consciousness of the linguistic state of affairs someone intends to communicate. At another level, if the language (the set of signs) of one discipline is misappropriated by those in another discipline, then there may not be a possibility for consciousness of meaning. As Merleau-Ponty (19862) explains, the experience of the one who apprehends/perceives what is appropriated from another discipline is a totality that does not include the original sign system of the creating discipline.

The experience does not mean that the original expression or sign does not refer to the world as it may be perceived. “I” do not possess the historicity that is held in common by, for example, Shannon when he uses “entropy” to explain the mathematical theory of communication. If, say, a literary critic also does not have the historicity, but uses the sign “entropy” to attempt to explain a literary device, that critic is likewise going to misapprehend the sign. In other words, the language is mis-translated. We do not have a situation where the critic is saying something like, “chapeau means ‘hat’,” that critic may be intending something akin to, “‘entropy’ is the equivalent of the dissolution of familial relations in the particular novel.” The critic’s experience may not allow for the technical/historical use of “entropy;” there may only be the misappropriation of the sign. Confusion may ensue. Sayer (1992) reminds us of a misconception we may have:

The common tendency to think of knowledge as a product or a thing which exists outside of us, which we can “possess” and which is stored in finished form in our heads or in libraries. We tend not to think in terms of knowing, which is in the process of becoming, “in solution”, as consciousness, but as a thing already “precipitated” (p. 16).

These ideas presented here do not negate objectivity, but they necessitate acceptance of subjectivity as well. The subjectivity includes historicity, which is necessary for comprehensible expression in most disciplines.

4 References


