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ROMAN JAKOBSON (1896–1982)

"On linguistic aspects of translation" (1959)

Keywords:

equivalence, interlingual translation, intralingual translation, intersemiotic translation, linguistic and nonlinguistic acquaintance, meaning, semiotics,

1. Author information

Roman Jakobson was a famous Russian linguist and literary theorist. He studied in the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages and then in the Historical-Philological Faculty of Moscow University, where he also was one of the leaders of Moscow Linguistic Circle. In 1920 he moved to Prague where he completed his PhD. He developed his career as a lecturer in Denmark and New York. Jakobson's three principal ideas in linguistics play a major role in the field to this day. These are linguistic typology, markedness and linguistic universals. He is famous as a co-author of structural analysis of language and a creator of dichotomous scale. Jakobson also initiated a complex research on the relation between poetry and language.

2. Abstract

In his article "On linguistic aspects of translation" Jakobson states that the meaning of any word is a linguistic feature and – to be more precise – a semiotic fact. He also stresses the importance of the fact that, when the verbal code is excluded, a meaning of a word cannot be found only on the basis of its linguistic acquaintance. Hence the meaning itself belongs to the signifier not to the signified.

The author describes three methods of translating a verbal code. The first two are intralingual translation (rewording) and interlingual translation (translation proper). He states that there is no such thing as absolute synonymy in both methods, but they can be applied with the help of meta-language or borrowings. The last way of rendition is intersemiotic translation (transmutation). Jakobson also reveals that there is a problem of equivalence in these three translation methods as some information can be difficult to render when a target language has different grammatical categories from the source one. However, he simultaneously adds that any cognitive experience can be expressed in any language. Basing his proofs on the comparison of English and Russian examples, the author shows that even differences in grammatical categories between source and target language can be translated literally, with the help of meta-language or diverse lexical tools. Jakobson additionally states that languages differ in what they must convey and

that any language listener will pay attention only to the features that are obligatory in his/her verbal code.

In the final fragment of his article, the author's focus is put on the literary translation in Slavic languages, especially poetry, and again he points to the complicated grammatical categories. According to Jakobson the choice of grammatical categories should be different for every language so it is easier to translate problematic utterances. The analysis of Russian and English also reveals that the assumption about phenomena of untranslatability of some words in literary texts is true. The only existing way of rendering poetry is creative transposition.

3. Terminology

Source text term	Meaning	Term in Polish
equivalence	sameness, adequation	ekwiwalencja
intralingual translation	rewording	przekład wewnątrzjęzykowy
interlingual translation	translation proper	przekład międzyjęzykowy
intersemiotic translation	transmutation	przekład intersemiotyczny
linguistic acquaintance	linguistic knowledge	językowa znajomość

4. Methodology

The author shows linguistic dependencies in the process of translation. He focuses on analysing the concept of meaning as a linguistic feature. Jakobson also confronts already-existing theories and explains how they function in practice. He collates English and Russian words in order to describe the importance of a verbal code and gives three methods of translating it into the target language. His methodology is clear and based on analysing examples from both source and target languages.

5. Links with other publications on the subject

-----(ed.) (1998) *Encyclopedia of Translation Studies,* London and New York: Routledge

-----(1997) Translation and Language: Linguistic Theories Explained, Manchester: St Jerome.

Frawley, W. (ed.) (1984) Translation: Literary, Linguistic, and Philosophical Perspectives, Newark: University of Delaware Press.

Jakobson, R. (1969) "Linguistics and Poetics," in T.Sebeok (ed.) Style in Language, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, pp. 350–77.

6. Critical commentary

I find the article very interesting and useful. The author not only presents complex dependencies between linguistics and translation, but also points out the importance of a verbal code. The introduced examples are especially valuable as regards translating languages that greatly differ in their grammatical shape. As Jakobson mentions, the issue is also complicated to analyse from culture's perspective as cultural differences have a great influence on linguistic acquaintance. Moreover, the fact that Jakobson himself was a great literary theorist, enabled the author to introduce useful information about linguistics in the context of translating literary forms, as for example poetry. This article may also serve as a basis for the further research on different Slavic languages.

7. Quotations to remember the text by

"All cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language. Whenever there is deficiency, terminology may be qualified and amplified by loan-words or loan-translations, neologisms or semantic shifts, and finally, by circumlocutions" (Jakobson, 2000: 116).

"Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey. Each verb of a given language imperatively raises a set of specific yes-or-no questions, as for instance: is the narrated event conceived with or without reference to its completion? Is the narrated event presented as prior to the speech event or not?" (Jakobson, 2000: 115).

8. References

Jakobson, R. 2000 "On linguistic aspects of translation", in: Laurence Venuti (ed.), The Translation Studies Reader. London. New York: Routledge.

http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org (retrieved 27th Nov 2012)