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Reason, understanding and the limits of translation

William A. Foley

All language description and documentation is an exercise in translation. This holds true even for seeming monolingual tasks in the discipline like writing a French reference grammar in French or the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as language forms to be described and analyzed (the *object language*) must be handled in another form of the language (the *metalanguage*) in order to be claimed to be elucidated at all. Obviously, in the descriptive and documentary tasks that most field linguists of endangered languages engage in, a more radical form of translation is required: the linguistic forms of the language under study (the object language) are described and analyzed (not to mention providing metadata in the process of documentation) in a completely different language, typically a European metropolitan language like English (the metalanguage). This holds true regardless of whatever theoretical framework one wishes to cast their description in: the framework itself needs to be elucidated, e.g. requires a metalanguage, and the object language needs to be translated into this metalanguage before any description can take place.

In practical terms, field linguists tend to be guided by two heuristic principles in their necessary tasks of translation: effability and the Conduit Metaphor. The first holds that what can be said in one language can be said in any other language, the result of an endowment of universal human reason; and the second that the relationship between a word and its meaning is like that between a container and its contents, i.e. a word or a sentence HAS a meaning, like a glass has water in it. More precisely the Conduit Metaphor can be spelled out as having the following components (Johnson 1987):

1. ideas or thoughts are objects
2. words and sentences are containers for these objects
3. communication consists in finding the right word-container for your idea-object, sending this filled container along a conduit (e.g. writing) or through space (e.g. speech) to the hearer, who must then take the idea-object out of the word-container

These two principles gel together so that the task of translation is mainly seen as one in which the translator needs to align the containers in the object

language and metalanguage, as effability guarantees that there will be a match up in the contents of these containers across languages.

This view of translation, albeit not one often explicitly articulated, but taken as a working methodology, is simply not tenable, as this paper will endeavour to demonstrate. Even if one assumes a principle of effability, Quine (1960, 1969) has pointed out that it is never possible to establish a unique container in the metalanguage to correspond to that of the object language; this is the Quinean principle of the indeterminacy of translation: there is no unique optimal fit of data to analytical metalanguage; rather a range of interpretive conceptual schemes may be entertained as compatible with the data. Fundamental to all of Quine's philosophy is the idea that our sensible experience of the world underdetermines our response to it, in the form of those conceptual schemes we construct to understand it. Our theories of the world, embodied in linguistic and cultural categories are rather autonomous from and in rather loose fit with our sensible experience; we can deal with our experience in conceptual terms in different ways. It is not the case, of course, that just *any* conceptual scheme will fit our experience, but it is also equally not true that just *one* will. As all understanding of experience is couched in some chosen conceptual scheme or other, there is by necessity a limit to the certainty of our knowledge due to this indeterminism.

This conclusion has obvious implications for the theory of translation. Because we are always understanding from within some conceptual scheme or folk theory or another, we will have to understand some other theory in terms of our own, translate into the terms of our own (or translate both into the terms of a third) metalanguage, but this too consists of its own particular categories underdetermined by experience. Let me illustrate with Quine's famous example of *gavagai*, a word of some alien language. Suppose the native speaker consistently supplies this as a response to passing rabbits. The linguist would probably confidently translate this as 'rabbit'. But how do we know this is right? In English the class of nouns to which rabbit belongs to are associated with semantic sense properties of the object they describe as being 'bodies', coherent wholes with sharply defined borders; this is part of the semantic system to which the word belongs. But the alien language, like some human languages such as Yucatec (Lucy 1992) might employ a different semantic system for its nouns. *Gavagai* might belong to a class more like English mass nouns in which things are manifested fragments of substances, so that *gavagai* is more like 'rabbit stuff'. It may be that there is little in the linguistic behaviour of the speakers of English and the alien language to betray this difference in the basic semantic systems. Hence, the meaning of a word is underdetermined and so is the task of translation. The latter always requires the translator to make underdetermined guesses about matches between the systems which cannot be completely resolved. And inevitably the

kinds of guesses likely to be made are those embedded in the categories and practices, the conceptual systems, of the translator's metalanguage.

But even Quine's worries about the vicissitudes of translation, in my view, significantly understate the problem. By relating the indeterminacy of translation to alternative interpretive conceptual schemes, Quine falls afoul of what Merleau-Ponty (1962) calls the fallacy of 'intellectualism', the view that meaning is in the thoughts and intentions of the speaker. In essence, Quine's invocation of alternative conceptual schemes localises translation as an intellectual task, matching up the mental states of the speakers of the object language with those of the translator using the metalanguage. This is an adaptation of the principle of effability: the mental states of these can be aligned because of the endowment of universal human reason. Translation may be indeterminate, but the generation of alternative conceptual schemes is always guided by this equivalence principle of human mental states or beliefs. Translation is an intellectual task, coolly, dispassionately and objectively carried out in the privacy of one's own mind. Clearly, such a view presupposes taking meaning itself as a mental state or belief.

For Merleau-Ponty (1962), this understanding of meaning is quite misguided. He calls this 'intellectualism', the view that meaning in language is in the thoughts of the speaker; in more modern parlance derived from the Anglo-American ordinary language tradition, meaning inheres in the intentions of the speaker. One of the most sophisticated and influential articulations of this view is that of Grice (1957), which I paraphrase as follows (Bennett 1976:13):

If U does c, thereby meaning that P, he does it **intending**:

- that some audience A should come to believe that P
- that A should be aware of intention (i), and
- that the awareness mentioned in (ii) should be part of A's reason for believing that P

Note the crucial appeal to individual speakers' intentions in this definition of meaning: her intention to produce an effect in an addressee (i. e. believe a proposition); that this effect be accomplished exactly by producing this utterance and not some other course of action; and finally that the addressee recognise her intention to produce this effect through this utterance – a trifecta no less of intentions, all localised in the speaker, presumably some mental state thereof. But it seems to me that such an articulation of a theory of meaning owes more to Western, specifically Anglo-Saxon Lockean understandings of an autonomous voluntaristic self than a generalised theory of meaning in semiotic systems, even given Grice's restriction of his theory to what he termed 'non-natural' meaning. Consider the simple problem of indexes (Peirce 1991), i.e. signs whose meaning is interpreted from the

context in which they are uttered. A good example is the choice between languages in a bilingual situation. For example, in Yimas village of the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea, two languages are spoken daily: Yimas vernacular and Tok Pisin. They do carry rough conventional symbolic (Peirce 1991) meanings: the former signals concern with traditional cultural practices, domesticity and intimacy and local conditions, while the latter signals modernity, the power associated with it, and the wider world. While they bear these symbolic meanings, the actual meaning communicated is subject to context as befits a true indexical. If the village headman, who, given his political position, mostly speaks in Tok Pisin to everyone, were to use it to speak to his mother, to whom he would normally speak in Yimas vernacular, this would immediately be taken as sign of his displeasure with her (a distancing device), regardless of whether he intended to signal this or not (he may have been pre-reflectively following the principle ‘speak Tok Pisin to everyone to signal my political importance’). Within a Gricean framework establishing meaning here is problematic because condition (ii) fails to hold, i. e. the audience did not recognise the speaker’s intention behind the utterance and took it to mean something else, ascribing a different, but inaccurate intention to the speaker. But this analysis in terms of failure to mean through mistaking the speaker’s intentions actually misses the point because on the **ground** (a concept to be developed below), displeasure toward the addressee is exactly the utterance’s meaning, as confirmed by the reaction of any Yimas speaker, including the headman, on reflection, when presented with such a scenario. To adhere to a Gricean perspective here seems to be more an outcome of an intellectualist ideological position on where meaning must be, rather than a careful observation of the ground in which meaning is made.

Let me explore this idea of the ground of meaning in more detail. Clearly, the principle that speaking Tok Pisin to a family intimate means displeasure with that individual is a speech community norm. However, it remains completely an indexical, i.e. an interpretation subject to then context, for if the interlocutor was an individual who could not competently speak Yimas vernacular, e. g. a child or a spouse who married in from a different language group, it could fail to signal that meaning. But we have to be very careful when asserting that meaning is a speech community norm. The point is not to jump from the subjectivism of Gricean intentional states to the extreme objectivism in a structuralist view of language as a social institution which speaks through us as merely passive vessels. Rather the point is to state that linguistic behaviour puts things in the open between interlocutors, to disclose (Heidegger 1971) things in public space. Meaning is not, or at least not only, something in the head; it is in the world between us, the *entre-deux* of Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1963) or *entre-nous* of Taylor (1985). Meaning does not just, or perhaps even primarily, transmit information, bringing about a change in the mental state of the hearer and aligning it with that of the

speaker. Rather meaning discloses. Some matter is now between us in public space. Therefore, translation between languages cannot simply be the alignment of the mental states of the speakers of the languages involved. In this coming together that is meaning, something becomes a point of interest or concern for both of us; it is not simply my recognition of your intentional state, as a study of a transcript of any conversation will demonstrate.

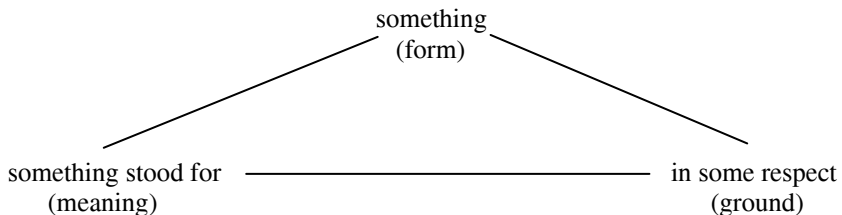
There is an abundance of ethnographic literature that has emerged in the last few years that strongly supports this view of meaning as an emergent in the public space between us and not the externalization of the intentions of a speaking person. Duranti (1988) argues that in Samoan culture, the meaning of utterances, at least in formal speech events involving political and judicial oratory called *fono*, are arrived at constructively by all participants, albeit hierarchically structured along the lines of the society generally: "Rather than taking words as representations of privately owned meanings [as in Searle's (1969) analysis of speech acts], Samoans practice interpretation as a way of publicly controlling social relationships rather than as a way of figuring out what a given person 'meant to say'" (Duranti 1988:15). Meanings are thus dialogically constructed in the ongoing speech event and do not reside in any person's intentions or psychological states. Reflecting this, Samoans do not say, 'you mean x?', but 'is the meaning of your words x?', focussing on a view of meanings as interpretations arrived at in context, rather than the intentions of the speaker. Further, in a *fono* speech event, the meanings of utterances are debated by the orators, who both cooperatively and competitively work toward a public interpretation of statements and events. Note that it is the asymmetrical distribution of linguistic resources across the Samoan speech community which largely determines the differential weighting given to competing interpretations. In this hierarchical society, the interpretations put forward by those of the highest rank carry the greatest weight; in a very clear sense here, meaning is a norm of the speech community.

Du Bois (1993) looks at meaning within the context of divination rituals. Divination rituals are means of getting information that is unavailable through ordinary sensory means, e.g. Which month should I marry?, Who is responsible for my illness?, etc. The question is put to the oracle, some ritual is performed and the results are read for the answer; a good contemporary example might be Tarot cards. Note that it is the pattern of the cards that gives the answer; the diviner is just supposed to read and integrate it. Clearly there is no necessary assumption of a personalist intentional state behind the meaning of the cards. The meaning is grounded in the pattern of the cards as they are laid out in the public space between us. It may take a trained specialist to read this meaning, but clearly the assumption of those who engage in such rituals is that the meaning constructed is not a manifestation of the intentional state of the reader (that's the belief of the skeptic!).

But there is still a more vital point here and the most important insight of Merleau-Ponty. We can only establish meaning in the public space of the world, if it is expressed, ultimately embodied in some medium: the word must be made flesh. The single greatest failing of intellectualist understandings of meaning is the way they blind us to the ultimate grounding of all language, meaning making, in the body. It is not minds which talk, but bodies, and it is the great genius of Merleau-Ponty to see this. Much of his thinking about language was guided by his reading and revising of Saussure's (1959 [1916]) *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. A cornerstone of Saussure's theory of meaning was his analysis of the sign. First, he turned the attention of linguistics away from speaking (*parole*) to the abstract mental capacity for language (*langue*), thereby at one fell swoop removing the role of the body from further consideration. Second, he emphasised the arbitrary relationship between the form of the sign in *langue* and its meaning: German *Baum*, French *arbre*, Yimas *yanN*, Watam *padon*, Tagalog *kahoy*, all have the same meaning 'tree'. Hence there is no natural relationship between a form, even in its spoken, e.g. embodied form, and its meaning; thereby Saussure further eclipsed any pivotal role for the body in linguistic behaviour and strongly asserted an unbridled intellectualist approach to meaning. Many of Merleau-Ponty's writings on language are musings on and revisions of Saussure's ideas in order to bring them more into line with his own thought, largely, I think, unsuccessfully, but unknown to him there appeared across the Atlantic some several decades before Saussure a theory of the sign much richer than Saussure's and much more attuned to his own outlook- that of Charles Saunders Peirce.

Peirce (1991) proposed a much more elaborated theory and typology of the sign. Instead of Saussure's binary analysis of the sign, a form paired to a meaning (idea), Peirce offered a trichotomous relationship, arrived at by problematising the notion of how things can stand for something else, which he called the **ground** of the sign relationship (a triangular delineation not unlike Merleau-Ponty's (1962) own reanalysis of the phenomenological notion of intentionality):

Figure 1: *Peirce's Theory of the Sign (after Hanks 1996)*



It is in the nature of all signs that the ground for a sign relationship be conventional, but the notion of conventionality in Peirce's system is not equivalent to Saussure's arbitrariness: conventionality admits of degrees and types that is not so obvious with arbitrariness. Peirce distinguished three types of signs on the basis of the nature of the ground: icon, index and symbol. Icons are signs in which the ground of the relationship between form and meaning is due to some perceptible likeness: the English verb *buzz off*, suggesting the path of a bee as it moves away is a prime example. Note that there is some type of 'natural' relationship between the form and its meaning, but conventionality still plays a major role in the sign relationship, for the sounds of swans taking off from a lake, something like *whoosh*, could just have easily been conventionalised in this meaning.

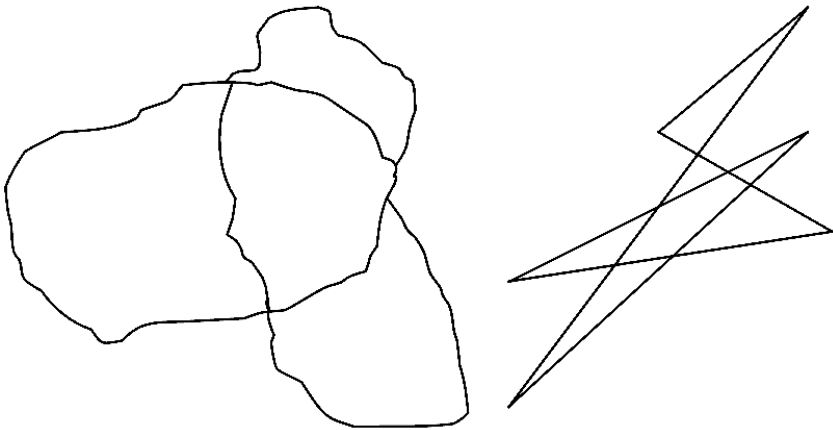
An index is a sign whose form-meaning relationship is grounded in the context in which it is uttered, such as the use of Tok Pisin to signal displeasure discussed above. Again conventionality is at play here: speech community norms could have failed to conventionalise Tok Pisin usage in this way, stipulating that Yimas vernacular always be used to intimates, even in anger. Further, indexes vary in the rigidity of their conventionalization. Australian Aboriginal kinship avoidance languages are highly conventionalised in their usage: the relevant kin must be addressed in this code and its indexical function is tied to this context. On the other hand, the use of Tok Pisin in Yimas village is much less conventionally mandated: it has a range of indexical meanings it can signal, from displeasure with an intimate to marking oneself as a sophisticated man of the world, depending on the context in which it is used.

A symbol is a sign in which the relationship between its form and meaning is strictly conventional, neither due to perceptible likeness nor contextual constraints. This is the type highlighted in Saussure's definition of the sign. The crucial effect of the conventionality of the relationship between form and meaning in symbols is that, unlike context bound indexes, it frees the domain of the sign's meaning from the constraints of the immediate context. This is what it means to say that a word which is a symbol has a sense, a meaning which can be stated via paraphrase and holds across contexts of usage. Thus, *woman* is an "adult female human", and this hold across innumerable contexts, whether we are talking about giving birth, teaching a class, fixing a Ferrari or piloting a jet airliner. Paraphrase or metasemantics holds of all symbols via their pure conventionality; this is by and large not true of indexes, nor, as we shall see, of icons.

Icons and indexes are central to any theory of meaning that views it as something constructed by embodied beings in public space. The ground of likeness between a form and its meaning that is necessary to forge an icon is an act of perception, and perception, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) so clearly

showed, is an embodied practice. The pervasive iconicity in language has been largely sidelined in linguistics (but not anthropology; see Feld 1982 for an example) because of the discipline's strong intellectualist bent. The obvious role of embodiment in iconicity seems almost an embarrassment, but I repeat: it is bodies that do the talking. Iconicity manifests itself robustly in the inaptly named field of 'sound symbolism', in which there is a conventionally established, but 'natural' relationship between the phonetic forms of words and their meanings. While perhaps not common in English and European languages (though debate continues on this), it is extremely widespread in the languages of the world. Consider the following classic experiment by Wolfgang Köhler (1929): which geometric figures would you describe by the sound sequences *takete* and *maluma*?

Figure 2: *Geometric Figures in Köhler's Experiment on Sound Symbolism*



Overwhelmingly, people associate the right figure with *takete* and the left with *maluma*. The front vowels and voiceless stops of *takete* seem to be grounded iconically with jagged shapes, and the back vowels and sonorants of *maluma*, with rounded ones. Another very widespread, albeit not universal (there are alternative ways to construe embodied experience!) iconicity is that between high front vowels, the most closed vocalic articulatory position, and diminutives, indicating smallness, and by extension, endearment or cuteness or sometimes depreciation, as in English:

dog	doggie
cute	cutie
mosquito	mozzie
prostration	prozzie

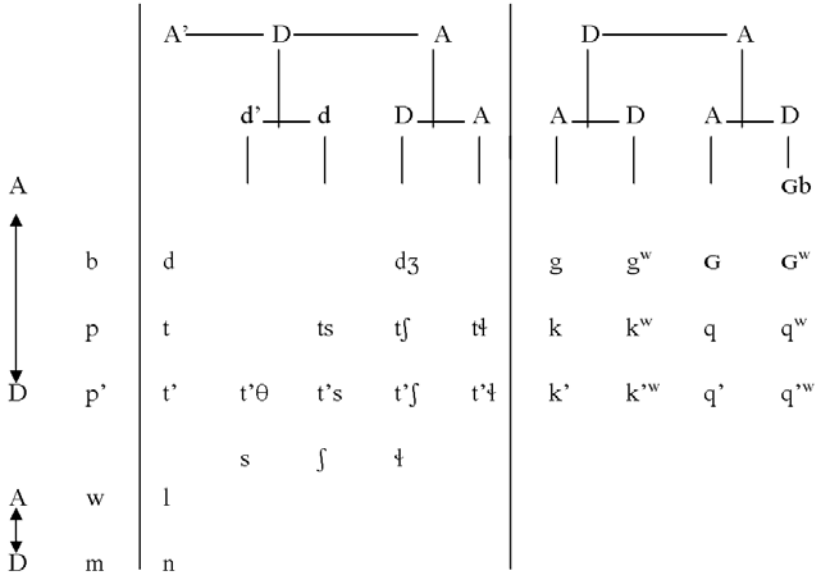
But the case I want to look at in more detail here, because I think it has important ramifications for our understanding of meaning, and in turn the limits of translation, is the system of consonantal alternations to signal diminutive and augmentative meanings in Wasco, a Chinookan language of the western United States (Silverstein 1994). Typically, diminutive signals smallness, attachment, affection or pity, while augmentative expresses bigness, with common pejorative extensions, like distance, aversion or disgust. The diminutive/augmentative contrast is not signaled by any single morpheme or word deformation, but by wholesale transformation of the consonantal, an to a much lesser extent, the vocalic, phonology of the word. Consider the Wasco phonemic system (Silverstein 1994:43):

Figure 3: *Wasco Phonemic System*

p	t	ts	tʃ	tʰ	k	k ^w	q
q ^w	ʔ						
p'	t'	t's	t'ʃ	t'ʰ	k'	k' ^w	q'
q' ^w							
b	d				g	g ^w	G
G ^w							
	l	s	ʃ	ʰ	x	x ^w	χ
χ ^w	h						
m		n					
w			j				
				i			u
					a		

This phonemic system undergoes massive transformation to signal diminutive and augmentative: for diminutives, voiced stops and affricates become voiceless, and voiceless stops, ejectives. A shift forward also marks diminutives (rather like the high front vowels of English): alveolar < palatal and velar < uvular. The augmentative shifts are largely the reverse of this. There are also three sounds, [t'θ], [dʃ] and [Gb], which are not part of the regular phonemic system of Wasco and only exist as a result of this process of consonantal shifting. The full system is presented by Silverstein (1994:47) as follows:

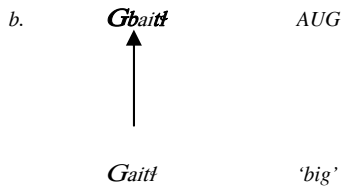
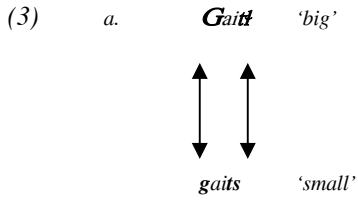
Figure 4: Wasco Diminutive/Augmentative Sound Shifts



Some examples (Boas 1911:638):

i-t'siau 'small snake' ← *i-t'fiau* 'snake' → *i-d₃iau* 'big snake'

i-f_gan 'cedar plank' → *wa-skan* 'box' → *wa-tsk'un* 'cup'



Gʷaitʔ



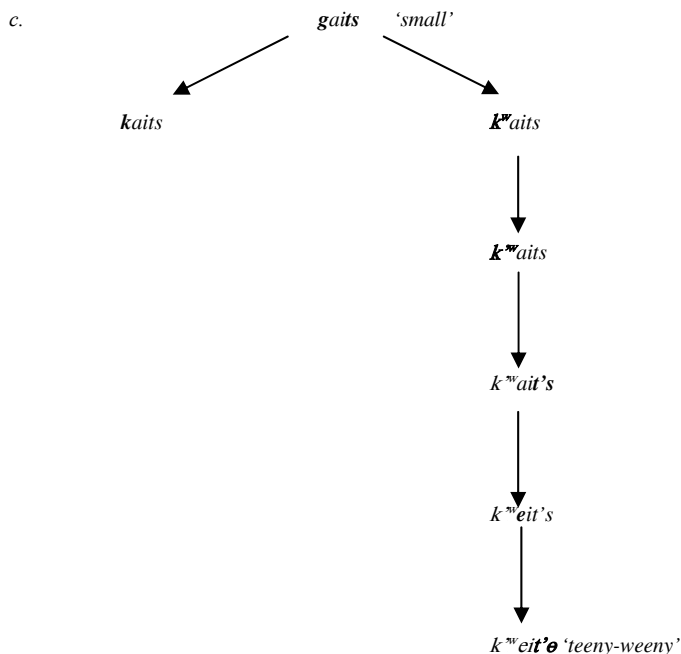
qʷaitʔ



qʷʷaitʔ



qʷʷaitʔʔ



Note that this pattern is radically different from the norm digital pattern of binary contrasts we expect of language, e. g. *pig* contrasts with *big* and *kick* with *quick*. Rather it is analogic; gradual shifts in meaning are correlated with gradual shifts in form. In this way it is like the distribution of notes on a musical scale.

While Wasco represents possibly the extreme development of systems of this type, they are not rare. In another example, consider these forms from Bahnar, a Mon-Khmer language of Southeast Asia (Diffloth 1994:110-111):

- | | | | |
|-----|----|----------------------|---|
| (4) | a. | <i>kheɛŋ-cəkheɛŋ</i> | 's. o. carrying a heavy burden on shoulder' |
| | | <i>kheɛŋ-kəkheɛŋ</i> | 's. o. carrying a small burden on shoulder' |
| | b. | <i>jul-kəjul</i> | 'large creature moving about' |
| | | <i>ɔl-kəɔl</i> | 'small creature moving about' |
| c. | | <i>dəbuuŋ</i> | 'curved ridge of immense roof' |
| | | <i>dəbooŋ</i> | 'large roof' |
| | | <i>dəbɔɔŋ</i> | 'small roof' |
| d. | | <i>halul</i> | 'a vast filled up container' |
| | | <i>halol</i> | 'a large filled up container' |
| | | <i>halɔl</i> | 'a small filled up container' |

While there are fewer intervals in the scale of iconicity in Bahnar than Wasco, the basic analogic principle still holds, this time with vowels: degree of vowel height correlates with size, high for augmentative and low for diminutive (note the opposite holds for English, e.g. *doggie*). Note that while it is possible to offer rough glosses of these forms in Wasco and Bahnar, in no sense can they be called *translations*. There is no way in English to model in translation the rich embodied meanings these varying forms invoke; this is particularly clear with the manifold exuberant continua of Wasco. What we can provide is discursive notes to try to explain to the English speaker what the system expresses and how it does so, something like the footnotes supplied in anthologies of poetry of classical mythological allusions. These are not translations, but explanations to guide the reader to an aesthetic enjoyment of the poem. So too is what we can aim for here, to allow, for example, English speakers to gain some grasp of the aesthetic affect that consonantal shifts have for Wasco speakers. These consonantal shifts are part and parcel of the Wasco linguistic 'forms of life' (Wittgenstein 1958). We can gain access to this affect somewhat by explanation, but we cannot translate it into English with full accuracy, because the English linguistic 'forms of life' are fundamentally different (Wierzbicka 2006).

Having established the importance of meaning making in natural language through analogic sound modulation, clearly an embodied practice, and the difficulties these pose for translation, let me explore briefly some other important ramifications, particularly its extension to Gumperz's (1982) notion of contextualization cues. These are patterns of sound which index social meanings, emotional states or generic types, such as volume, pitch, allegro versus slow monotone delivery, etc. For instance, it is commonly reported in many cultures (Errington 1988; Irvine 1974, 1979) that slow, even delivery is an index of high status speech. Of course one correlate of a slower delivery of information is a necessarily greater bulk of forms to embody it; note for instance that the learned vocabulary of English, typically of Romance or Greek origin, consists of words of more syllables than the everyday vocabulary. We have typically not viewed this as meaning because we have been focussed on meaning from an intellectualist/ideational perspective, but clearly it is, in the same way that the analogic sound shifts of Wasco are (also note the English speaker's folk idea of 'big words' and its associated social meaning). Further if we look at honorific styles in languages that have them, they invariably correlate to longer sound forms, in essence an augmentative, with its typical indexical value of distance:

(5) a. Japanese (Inoue 1987:287)

Sakai ga Suzuki ni chizu okai-ta (12 syllables)
 PN SUBJ PN for map OBJ draw-PAST

‘Sakai drew a map for Suzuki’

Sakai san ga Suzuki san ni chizu o o-kaki-ni
 PN Mr SUBJPN Mr for map OBJ HON-draw-for
 nari-mashi-ta (21 syllables)
 become-POLITE-PAST

‘Mr Sakai drew a map for Mr Suzuki’

b. Javanese (Errington 1985:290)

apa kowé (2)njupuk sega semono (11 syllables)
 Q you take rice that much

‘will you take that much rice?’

menapa panjenengandalem (6) mundhutsekul
 Q you take rice

semanten (16 syllables)

that much

‘will you take that much rice?’

Similar principles of sound gradation apply to the framing devices or contextualisation cues which index genre types. For instance, the short pithy formulation of a proverb (‘no use crying over spilt milk’, ‘a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush’, etc) indexes it as a proverb, but this formulation itself is an icon of its stature as encapsulated received wisdom. Chafe’s (1993)

study of three speech events in the Iroquoian language Seneca is a more extensive exemplification of this principle. He looked at three speech genres, ordinary conversation, recitations of the teachings of the prophet of the indigenous religion and chanting styles of thanksgiving speeches at ceremonial events, with respect to the sound properties of prosodic delivery; stereotypical, formulaic utterance form; fragmentation or integration of sentences (this is a grammatical property, but has reflexes in their spoken form); and evidentiality expressed by *nó:n* 'I guess' versus *wai* 'indeed'. Figure 5 (Chafe 1993:86) summarises the results:

Figure 5: *Features of Three Speech Genres in Seneca*

	Conversation	Religious Teachings	Thanksgiving
<i>Prosody</i>	<i>free</i>	<i>somewhat stylised</i>	<i>highly stylised</i>
<i>Formulaicity</i>	<i>low</i>	<i>moderate</i>	<i>high</i>
<i>Sentences</i>	<i>fragmented</i>	<i>somewhat integrated</i>	<i>very integrated</i>
<i>Evidentiality</i>	<i>uncertain</i>	<i>unexpressed</i>	<i>certain</i>

While the distribution of the formal devices is an index of their specific generic types, they are also icons of the meanings expressed by them. The free prosody of everyday conversation is iconic of the actual **latitude** people have in constituting and pursuing conversations, while the highly stylised prosody of the thanksgiving speech is, like high status speech, iconic of distance and the effacement of the speaker in favor of a higher authority. The fragmented sentence structure of conversation is iconic of its free-wheeling, off the cuff structure, but the highly integrated structure of sentences in thanksgiving speech is like the carefully planned structure of the ceremonial event itself. Note again the analogic gradual progression of the form-meaning correlation as we pass from everyday conversation to thanksgiving speech through the intermediate grade of the recitation of the teachings of the prophet. Note further that for all three genres, while the formal devices are indexes of their respective genres, they are also within the gradation exemplified, iconic of the meanings of each generic type. Indeed, it is probably these iconic properties that allow fieldworkers ultimately to identify various genres in exotic communities, by matching them to the iconic properties of their own native parallel speech genres (how do we recognise proverbs in different cultural traditions, for example?). The indexical cues, tied, as they must be, to the highly variable features of context are probably too fleeting to make such identification secure. Indeed, we recognise narrative in other languages by the iconic properties of sequence in time of reported events that they share with our own narrative genres. It is quite likely that it has been the difficulty of

finding any apparent crosslinguistic iconic properties of poetry that has made ethnopoetics such a vexed field.

The point of this paper was to show that the current (albeit often unarticulated) assumptions which guide translation practices in descriptive and documentary linguistics are inadequate to the extent that they are based on a misguided theory of meaning and to argue instead for Merleau-Ponty's middle way theory of meaning, between 'empiricist' approaches in which meaning is external to language and its speakers (e.g. referential theories of meaning, meaning as the extension of a term) and 'intellectualist' views, in which meaning is simply the externalization of a mental state (e.g. Grice 1957). In neither of these approaches is there really a place for the speaker's body and its enaction of linguistic practices in the public space of the speech community. Let me be very clear here. I am not claiming that speakers cannot have an intellectual awareness of the meanings of words and sentences and report these with other words and sentences (e.g. metaseantics). They clearly can, but this metasemantic glossing is simply another linguistic practice (and one which varies widely in provenance across speech communities), and not **the** meaning of the expression, just as a description of how we went about solving a mathematical puzzle is not the solving of that puzzle. And further, the ability to engage in this metasemantic practice is very much a function of the degree of the expression's conventionalization or freedom from contextual interpretation (Silverstein 2000). Symbols, with their highly conventionalised meaning are easily metasemantically glossed, and given that they are the most context free of all sign types, normally little is lost by this move. Both of these factors make the translation of symbolic meanings less fragile. But indexes, and especially icons, are much more problematic. What, for instance, could be the glosses of the framing devices/contextualization cues that serve as the indexical signs of Seneca thanksgiving speeches? We can describe them, as I have done, but this is in no sense a gloss, and it would be a brave person indeed who asserted that such description corresponds to the awareness the native speaker has of these. And finally, iconic meanings are deeply felt embodied experiences (big words mean 'knowledge, power, distance'); in no sense can they be understood apart from perceptions we have in our bodies, our mouths, our throats. How can glosses of Wasco *ɔbaitʰ* as 'really big' and *k^wɛitʰ* as 'really small' ever do justice to the rich sensory soundscapes incarnate in these words (English 'teeny-weeny' with its own tones of diminutive in the high front vowel does though bring us closer to the latter). Meaning as we find it in indexes and icons seems to fall under the rubric of Bourdieu's (1990) notion of the *habitus*: "a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are regular without being consciously coordinated" (Thompson 1991:12). We don't know the meanings of these signs; we feel them. A theory of translation

that stays in the head and forgets about the body is very unlikely in the long term to serve the documentary linguistics community well. It is highly probable that high value put on 'intellectualist' approaches to meaning is a function of our own academic, literate and intellectual 'form of life', which favours decontextualised, truth determining, abstract analyses. We need to be wary of elevating our own ways of living in the world to theories about humanity in general; belief in the Conduit Metaphor is indeed a poor model on which to base a theory of meaning and translation.

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