Sprache – Identität – Kultur

Herausgegeben von Ralph Ludwig
und Sabine Schwarze

Band 6

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(eds.)

Testo e Traduzione

Lingue a confronto

Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem,
säurefreiem Papier.

www.peterlang.de

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Metaphor, figurative language and translation

Over the last twenty-five years some radical rethinking has taken place in linguistics, particularly on some of the basic principles in which linguistics research since the 1950s has been grounded. This radical rethinking has changed the possibilities and ways we discuss cognition, metaphor, and translation.

For instance, criticism gradually developed around the presuppositions of generative grammar, which sees language as a biological phenomenon with innate language universals and specific parameters for specific languages. On the basis of this rethinking, Chomsky's modular view of language, which is central to generativism, was also criticised. In contrast with this autonomous view of linguistic structures, new research has returned to a different and older tradition (cf. Fauconnier 2000). This is a tradition which has always seen language from the point of view of meaning and does not isolate meaning from the other aspects of cognition. Besides, from this perspective, language competence is not attributed to innate potentiality but derives from social interactions and the cultural context of use in which language is acquired and developed. A major finding of this research is that language faculty cannot be separated from other kinds of cognitive competence. Language is the result of a wide range of cognitive resources, which bring about a large number of connections and coordinate much information.

This viewpoint inevitably sees meaning as a central aspect of linguistic research. Meaning is not separated from syntax, as in classic American structuralism and in generative grammar, but becomes its substance. For example, in the framework of Cognitive Linguistics, both Langacker and Lakoff have foregrounded these aspects. Lakoff (1987) has argued, more than once, that the most important aspects of syntax depend on thought, since the main function of language is that of expressing thoughts. To quote Fauconnier, "… language is in the service of constructing and communicating meaning, and it is for the linguist and cognitive scientist a window into the mind" (Fauconnier 2000: 95). Langacker (1987; 1991) argued that syntax is a formal system whose purpose is to give shape to meanings. Thus grammar also acquires meaning and consists of symbolic relations between meaning and phonological structures. Grammatical units make up a continuum with lexis, setting up various levels of abstraction.

This way of looking at language can open up interesting research routes. For example, it helps us to see figurative language not as only a formal (syntactic) tool but as the manifestation of more deeply-rooted, more general cognitive com-

petence. In the frameworks of Textual Rhetoric, I have discussed in some of my works, the anthropological ability to build up representations of the world through figures. Rhetorical figures are realised on the basis of conceptual domains, creating categories. We thus have access to a kind of reality that would otherwise be indeterminate. In other words, we can say that human beings have the cognitive ability to organize the world in figurative terms. This ability allows them to categorize reality, providing it with structure. In this sense figurative activity is the ability to construct world images employed in reality.

Figurative competence can be seen as an imaginative tool allowing the construction of   meaning on the basis of patterns. In other words, we can refer the phenomena that create and present figures back to cognitive processes, which I see as both anthropological and expressive. These processes are anthropological because they concern a specifically human characteristic; they are expressive because they refer to the means by which human beings organize their communicative faculties. These processes are not restricted to verbal expression. It is in this way, for example, that we can see the imaginative faculty, myth, the unconscious, and, more generally, domains linked with expressive behaviour as functioning in accordance with figurative patterns. In this sense figures concern the symbolic and sign domains. Fauconnier appears to be following this line of thought when he writes:

> Figure ground and viewpoint organization pervades the sentence, the Tense system, Narrative structure, in signed and spoken languages, and of course many aspects of non-linguistics cognition. Metaphor builds up meaning all the way from the most basic levels to the most sophisticated and creative ones. And the same goes for metonymic pragmatic functions and mental space connections, which are governed by the same general Access principles. Frames, schemes and prototypes account for word level and sentence level syntactic/semantic properties in cognitive and construction grammar, and of course they guide thought and action more generally. Conceptual blending and analogy play a key role in syntax and morphology, in word sentence level semantics, and higher level of reasoning and rhetoric […]. (Fauconnier 2000: 97)

As mentioned above cognitive linguistics draws on a view of language with roots in the past. For example it is interesting to highlight the closeness of this line of research to Nietzsche's view of figurative language. In *Darstellung der antiken Rhetorik*[1] Nietzsche writes that rhetoric is not an artifice overlying language; the opposite is rather the case. Nietzsche did not envisage a "zero degree" of language; there was no such thing as a non-rhetorical condition. His view of rhetoric

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1   F. Nietzsche, *Darstellung der antiken Rhetorik,* in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, Bd. 4, Vorlesungsaufzeichnungen (WS 1871/72 – WS 1874/75), Bearbeitet von Fritz Bornmann und Mario Carpitella, Berlin-New York, de Gruyter 1995.

involved a cognitive competence that selects particular forms, by means of which the surrounding environment is defined. In other words the rhetorical viewpoint builds up a certain structure which could not otherwise have substance. Once this approach had been established, Nietzsche inevitably went on to interpret the figures as the authentically original manner of signification. Starting out from the idea that the structure of language is essentially figurative, Nietzsche reaches the idea of the intrinsically metaphorical nature of communication. With a striking resemblance to the cognitive and textual rhetoric approaches, he attributed an essentially figurative structure to language, since he had identified the presence of a metaphorical process underpinning the formation of the concepts. In Nietzsche's view, language has its roots in a figurative nature because it is this characteristic that allows imaginative expression of the structure of reality. Linking up with Bruner, a number of cognitive linguists have foregrounded the importance of narratives in cognition. When we believe we are entering into contact with things themselves, thanks to words, we are actually facing metaphors, which have no direct connection with the "essence" of things. Language, we could add, from a contemporary viewpoint, is not a means for touching reality but rather a lens overlooking the world and setting out its categories.

The idea that figures play a conceptual role leads us also to the thought of Giambattista Vico (cf. Danesi 2001; id. 2003). In my view, we can see a direct connection between the cognitivist approach and the work of Vico. According to Vico, knowledge does not lie in pure *cogitatio*, as it did for Descartes, but also in the human ability to produce symbols and in the possibility for these symbols to turn into language. This is already visible in what Vico wrote about the tropes in *De Constantia Philologiae*. Here we have an idea of rhetoric, linked to anthropology, that interprets figurative speech not as superfluous decoration, but as normal and originative language. Figures give rise to knowledge, just as it does during a child's language acquisition.[2] In this sense Vico appears to have placed the figures in the very construction of reality, making up, as it were, the guidelines for language articulation.[3] Vico appears to be interested in the conceptual patterns un-

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2   In the words of Donald Phillip Verene: "The *universale fantastico* is a way of making intelligibility. It is a conception of how intelligibility takes place at the origin of human mentality, at the beginning of the human world. The fable, which depends upon the mind's power of *fantasia,* is the means by which the world first takes on a shape for the human" (Verene 1981: 71).

3   Cf. the clearly expressed view of Augusto Ponzio: "Metaphor is the central driving force of human reason, which does not merely consist in representing objects (indicational modelling) but in their depiction, which is modelling proper to language and the modelling systems based on it, i.e. the ("secondary") ones of languages and ("tertiary") ones of the cultural systems proper to the human species, with a capacity for symbolically highly abstract processes. Research in the strongly interdisciplinary sector for the

derpinning the various expressive manifestations of human beings. For Vico these patterns are rhetorical and cognitive means through which language and the world come into contact.[4] In this regard Vico arguably could be an interesting source for the placing of rhetoric in cognitive semiotics. I am thinking here of what Juri Lotman had to say about metaphor:

> La metafora e la metonimia appartengono alla sfera del pensiero analogico; per questa qualità esse sono organicamente legate alla coscienza creativa come tale. In questo senso è sbagliato contrapporre il pensiero retorico, in quanto specificamente artistico, a quello scientifico; la retorica è intrinseca alla coscienza scientifica nella stessa misura in cui lo è quella artistica. (Lotman 1980: 1056)[5]

and:

> il tropo non è dunque un ornamento che appartiene soltanto alla sfera dell'espressione, non è l'abbellimento di un contenuto invariante, ma è il meccanismo di costruzione di un contenuto non costruibile all'interno di una sola lingua. Il tropo è una figura che nasce al punto di congiunzione di due lingue, e in questo senso, è isostrutturale al meccanismo di coscienza creativa in quanto tale (Lotman 1980: 1055).[6]

Along these lines, we can say that figurative language is an inherent element of language and consciousness and does not divert or break up common language. The figure does not come about by adding something to the word but by means of intersections, antitheses, inclusions, nearness, suppression of conceptual areas. In this sense re-reading Vico allows us to highlight the fact that the word and figurative word do not exist separately. What does exist is the figurative word creating expression. Vico seems to be telling us that we would have no standard language without figures, rather than the opposite.

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study of associative-metaphorical processes has shown that metaphor takes shape in the brain hemisphere controlling overall synthetic creative acts and meanings" (Ponzio 2002: 135).

4   Some contemporary research in the cognitive field appears to have a comparable approach. Cf. Danesi 2001.

5   "Metaphor and metonymy belong to the field of analogical thought. This is why they are organically linked with creative consciousness as such. In this sense it is a mistake to contrast rhetorical thought, inasmuch as it is specifically artistic, with scientific thought. Rhetoric is intrinsic to scientific consciousness in the same way as it is to artistic consciousness".

6   "the trope is not an ornament which only belongs to the sphere of expression. It is not decoration of invariant content, but rather the mechanism for constructing content which cannot be controlled within a single language. The trope is a figure that comes into being at the joining point of two languages, and, in this sense, is isostructural to the creative consciousness mechanism as such".

This new view is found in contemporary cognitive approaches. Tomasello (2005), for example, has underlined the ability of children to understand figures and to use them to relate the most concrete domains in their experience to the more abstract ones linked with adult social and mental life. From my point of view the new cognitivist approaches, as the perspectives of Textual Rethoric, can offer new possibilities to the broad area of studies on translation, above all in extending the limits of the discipline.

As is well known the founding text of Translation Studies is the article by James Holmes entitled "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" (Holmes 1972). This manifesto laid the epistemological foundations for much subsequent research. Holmes divided the subject into two main branches. The first one consists of a descriptive part concerning concrete translational phenomena and a theoretical part establishing general principles to explain and predict such phenomena. The second branch applies to translator training, translation criticism and translation aids. Results achieved in the descriptive branch contributed to a general theory of translation and partial theories concerning specific fields. Holmes's model was taken into consideration by most scholars after him since it opened up the way to further development in the field and became a point of reference as an epistemological model. However, as Gentzler (1993) noted, the theoretical aspect was greatly dependent on the descriptive one, with an approach that was very close to those of the past century, which has been criticized by most 20th century epistemology. For example, both Bachelard (1928) and Popper (1970; 1972) insisted that it was not possible to separate observable facts (even in sciences such as physics and chemistry) from the code. Descriptions of facts are influenced by the code and described in the light of a specific socio-semiotic system. Modern Einsteinian physics is a wonderful example of this merging of code and data: in this approach to physics the elemental particles of the universe (the data) are named metaphorically: proton, neutron, atom, electron, etc, thus giving a conceptual/figurative reality to what are essentially hypotheses based on higher mathematics. Traditional celestial navigation depends on a set of 57 navigational stars (data) whose names are metaphorical and derived mostly from the ancient Phoenician names for these heavenly bodies: Acamar, Achernar, Acrux, Alioth, Alphecca, Arcturus, Belletrix, Betelgeuse, Hadar, etc.

If we accept the Bachelard and Popper approach it is easy to deduce that the descriptive part of Translation Studies, which should supply material for theory, does not describe "reality", but rather a reality that is already structured and prescriptive, only describing and allowing data that is considered describable and disallowing data that is not suitable, for example, certain types of translation phenomena. Considerations of this kind have long been accepted, not only by anarchist epistemologists like Feyerabend, but also by critical realists like Niiniluoto

(1993: 79-88). It is therefore somewhat puzzling that, despite the fact that most of modern epistemology has highlighted these aspects, the idea that "the object-level of translation studies consists of actual facts of 'real life'" (Toury 1985: 16) could still be found in one of the books (containing essays by various like-minded scholars) that contributed to the foundation of Translation Studies twenty years ago.

This is an epistemologically naïve stance. For instance, let us compare it with a statement by Goodman (2008) to the effect that descriptions are ways of illustrating the world and that different codes "build up" different worlds. This means that each description creates its own world, which excludes the possibility that the world generates its descriptions and that these should tend to represent it faithfully. More recently, several contemporary epistemologists working in the field of Science Studies have emphasised the fact that concepts such as truth, objectivity and reality are social constructs (cf. Biagioli 1999; Latour 1987).

Despite the fact that translation research has developed considerably over the past twenty years, with several epistemological turning points, the above–mentioned epistemological naïveté has continued to play a large role. This can be described as something like an "original sin." (to use a fine metaphor!) In my opinion the importance of the role of figurative speech in the new rhetoric is as important to translation as was the explosion of semantics in the cognitive studies and the idea that metaphors structure our world perception. Such an appreciation of figurative speech can permit us to go beyond these limits and encourage a possible rethinking of translation studies founded on a wider consideration of the kind of facts which are connected with translation.

For example concepts like rhetorical field or, in a cognition framework, concepts like domain, frame, profile, mental spaces, and similarity can be very productive in this area. The distinction between profile-frame and dominion is particularly useful in order to understand the nature of phenomenon such as the semantic differences between words and their apparent equivalent in other languages. In this case it is useful to cast light upon difficulties of translation that depend on the differences of profiling certain concepts. Even the traditional contrastive linguistic approach, which generally dealt with the style, could be rethought in cognitive terms, considering not only the profiles, but also their relation with the frames and dominions.

Even the problem of equivalence can be completely reformulated and rejuvenated, even though TS declared it, often obtusely, old fashioned. Sometimes the non-equivalence between languages depends on the type and amount of information specified in the cognitive frame (Relevance theory is particularly "relevant" here since it studies the role that implied information plays in human communication). The Italian word "casa" (house) presumes a frame that specifies some important structural characteristics. In English the word "house" has a different

meaning from "home". Both "house" and "home" when translated in Italian are translated into "casa." But this translation is a false equivalence; it is only a partial equivalence that is limited to the profile. The presupposed dominions of the two terms are very different. "House" is outlined by physical objects while "home" belongs to the affective sphere. It is assumed that abstract dominions from these two various types of conceptualization are related to two various spheres of cognition: the material one and that emotional one.

Another example is the term "eat", "mangiare" in Italian, which stands for the process of consuming food. In German we have "essen" and "fressen": both describe the process of consuming food, but one is used for human beings and the other term is used for animals. Even in this case the difference is the frame. There are times where the word "fressen" can be used to describe a human action but in this case it is considered in a very different way from "essen", the word in the sentence is constructed in order to make a human action like an animal action (cf. Croft-Cruse 2004: 20). It is a bit what happens when violating the principles of Grice.

When analyzing the nature of the meanings of the words in different languages we often don't consider the differences at the level of frame/dominion that in many cases are culturally determined. Take for example the illustration of Croft and Cruse (2004: 21). They point to the verb "to genuflect", which is a movement of the body, more or less the same as the concept of kneeling down. But "genuflect" belongs to a much more specific frame, which is Catholic liturgical use. One can actually dig even deeper since "genuflect" is really an ecclesiastical Latin word "domesticating" and translating the Greek verb "proskunein" which had the widest of usage in pagan cultic, administrative, and royal frameworks. Often the frames are very culturally specific, and the idea that translating necessarily implies a loss simply means that there is a non-equivalence of frames.

The distinction between profile and frame is very useful also for the analysis of those words that have been defined as untranslatable, another untouchable topic for the Translation Studies. We could use as an example the Japanese concept of *iki*. Kuki Shuzo, a student of Bergson, Husserl and Heidegger wrote a book about this concept (*The Structure of Iki*). What does *iki* mean? In the XVII century, with Chinese pronunciation it meant something worthy of particular attention. In successive ages it changed its meaning into someone who is expert in the art of making love. In the XIX century it stood for the behavior of the geishas, representing an ability to move in situations under pressure--the ability to deceive and to be spontaneous and elegant. Kuki considers *iki* the maximum level of the Japanese culture. It can mean elegance, but also to despise someone, and it can also stand for the best behavior and essence of someone. Therefore in order to understand the

term *iki* it is necessary to comprehend an enormous portion of the Japanese culture and its way of categorizing the world.

Kuki Shuzo gives us another example himself. The term *esprit* represents the entire history of the French. Germans generally translate it with *Geist*, but it doesn't have the same meaning because it comes from Hegelian terminology. Not even the term g*eistreich* is exhaustive in showing all the shadings of *esprit*. If g*eistreich* was to be used as the translation of *esprit*, an ulterior shading would be added to its original cognitive value. *Esprit* doesn't have a perfect translation into English, "spirit" and "intelligence" diminish its meaning, while "wit" is excessive.

Croft and Cruse (2004: 21) take in consideration the German term *Bildung*. And they cite William Glen-Doepel, the English translator of Hans-Georg Gadamer. In the introduction of the English edition of *Truth and Method* he states that when *Bildung* is translated with "culture" it has to do with the reality of German culture between the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s. Therefore *Bildung* is outlined in a frame that refers to the German culture of the intellectual élite that goes back to two centuries ago.

In other words the reason why *iki, esprit and Bildung* are not translatable is due to the specific cultural characteristics of the frame in which and against which the concept is profiled. Translating *iki* with elegance, *esprit* with *Geist* or *Bildung* with culture creates an approximate equivalence between the profiles, but absolutely not on the frame level.

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Abstract

Over the last twenty five years some radical rethinking has taken place in linguistics, particularly on some of the basic principles in which linguistics research since the 1950s has been grounded. On the basis of this rethinking language competence is not attributed to innate potentiality but derives from social interactions and the

cultural context of use in which language is acquired and developed. A major finding of this research is that language faculty cannot be separated from other kinds of cognitive competence. Language is the result of a wide range of cognitive resources, which brings about a large number of connections and coordinates much information. This viewpoint sees meaning as a central aspect of linguistic research. For example it helps us to see figurative language not as only a formal tool but as the manifestation of more deeply rooted, more general cognitive competence. The new cognitivist approaches can offer new possibilities to the broad area of studies on translation, above all in the direction to go beyond some of the limits of the discipline. The new appreciation of figurative speech encourages a possible rethinking of translation studies founded on a wider consideration of the kind of facts which are connected with translation. For example concepts like domain, frame, profile, mental spaces, and similarity can be very useful in order to understand the nature of phenomenon such as the semantic differences between words and to reformulate traditional problems like that of equivalence.