Journal des traducteurs
Translators' Journal

Comparative stylistics and the principle of economy

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COMPARATIVE STYLISTICS AND THE PRINCIPLE OF ECONOMY [1]

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Economy as a force in language may be considered as involving the translator in two processes which follow from the working of two linguistic principles. These two processes may be labelled, to use the terminology established by J.-P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet,[2] DILUTION and CONCENTRATION; the two principles are ECONOMY and the ARBITRARY NATURE OF LANGUAGE. In this study, I propose to consider in particular the characteristics of the first of these principles; for a detailed consideration of the processes involved, the reader can do no better than consult Vinay and Darbelnet's masterly survey.

That economy is a basic feature of language is pointed out clearly by Martinet when he states :

> "L'évolution linguistique peut être conçue comme régie par l'antinomie permanente entre les besoins communicatifs de l'homme et sa tendance à réduire au minimum son activité mentale et physique."[3]

Bally[4] adds that this tendency to make the least necessary effort is a linguistic phenomenon whereby the speaker is always trying to express himself as briefly as possible, leaving out anything that is not necessary to make his utterance comprehensible.

Economy occurs on a number of levels and may well be considered first under these heads :

¶ 1. *Phonetic*: As Jones states.[5] "if a word or expression remains perfectly intelligible without a certain sound, people tend to omit that sound."

> *Examples*: Fr. *Peut-être* pronounced [ptɛtr] ;
> Eng. *dust-bin* pronounced without [t] ;
> Eng. *wait and see* pronounced [weitṇsi:].

¶ 2. *Phonemic*: One often finds evidence of the reduction of the number of phonemes in a language or dialect. Many speakers of French have the one phoneme /ɛ̃/ where standard French has the two, /ɛ̃/ and /œ̃/. Classical Hebrew had two distinct 't' phonemes, /t/ and /ᴛ/; two 'k'

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(2) J.-P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet, **Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais.** Montréal, Beauchemin.
(3) André Martinet, **Éléments de linguistique générale.** Paris, Colin.
(4) Charles Bally, **Traité de stylistique française.** Paris, Klincksieck.
(5) Daniel Jones, **The pronunciation of English.** Cambridge, Heffer.

phonemes, /k/ and /q/; and a palatal and velar fricative, /ç/ and /x/, phonemically distinct. These remain distinct phonemes in certain dialects of Modern Hebrew, but in general usage, each pair has been fused into one, leading to a considerable number of homophones.

¶ 3. *Morphological* : Here one may note the tendency to regularisation of morphological forms, something which can be seen historically, (*Example*: the English word *eye* once formed its plural in adding *–n*; cf. *oxen* &c.; but now does so in the regular way with *–s*), in sub-standard speech, (*Example*: the use of *seen* both as past participle and simple past tense, ''I've seen it'', ''I seen it''), and in the speech of children who produce, by analogy, such forms as *borned* and *eated*.

¶ 4. *Syntactical*: One syntactical pattern is often used to signal two quite distinct relationships, a factor that the transformationists use to point out the weakness of an immediate-constituent grammar.
Example: English uses the passive construction to signal both 'under-goer' as subject: *The money was given to the boy* and 'beneficiary' as subject: *The boy was given the money*. There may also be a tendency to widen the use of a pattern.
Example: In English, the *–'s* pattern, denoting possession, ownership, or relationship, has been widened so that it can be used with almost any animate noun and is starting to be used with an increasing number of inanimate nouns: *the car's left front wheel*.

¶ 5. *Lexical* : There would seem to be contradictory tendencies here. The more specific in meaning are the words available, the fewer words will be needed to express something.
Example: Penfield[6] reports that a patient to whose cortex an electrode was being applied said, when shown a picture of a human foot, ''That is what you put in your shoes''; when the electrode was withdrawn, he exclaimed ''Foot''.
We have all had similar experience when, either in our native language or more often in a foreign language, we have been forced to use a cir-cumlocution for want of *le mot juste*. That is to say, economy on the level of the utterance depends on luxury in available vocabulary. At the same time, there is to be noted the tendency to use specific words for more generalised purposes.
Example: *Bendix*, used in continental French or English for any washing machine.

¶ 6. *Stylistic* : Economy of utterance is generally considered stylistically good, most books on style emphasising the need to be as brief as possible.
Economy, then, may exist on any of six levels, but if we look now at its two main forms, we shall see that there is another possibility, economy by moving from one level to another.

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Vinay and Darbelnet[7] define CONCENTRATION as ''la concentration de plusieurs signifiés sur un plus petit nombre de signifiants, ou même sur

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(6) Wilder Penfield, ''The Nature of Speech'', in **Memory, Learning and Language.**
(7) Vinay and Darbelnet, **op. cit.** p. 7.

un seul". What in fact are the units concerned? Let us first consider *signifiants*. Elsewhere [8], they talk of *amplification* as "cas où la LA emploie plus de *mots*" (my italics), but, as we have seen, economy can occur on other than the lexical level. This will become clearer if we move outside of the monolingual framework which we have followed up to now (although this process can also be shown within one language) to a comparative study.

* *Example 1*: Fr. *écolier*   Eng. *school-boy*

French would here seem to use one word for an idea that English needs two to express... The fact that the English word is written sometimes as one, sometimes as two words, and sometimes hyphenated, serves only to emphasise the uncertainty of word-division... But consider the word *écolier*. It consists also of two distinct parts: a lexeme (to use Martinet's terms) *écol–* meaning 'school' and a morpheme *–ier*, 'male connected with' (cf. *fermier*).

* *Example 2*: Fr. *revenir*   Eng. *to come back*

One French word; three English. But again, the French word can be seen to consist of three monemes: the lexeme *ven–* and the morphemes *re–* 'again' and *-ir* which is just as much the sign of the infinitive as is the English word *to*. In other words, we have here the same number of *signifiants* in each case, although in French two occur on the morphological level while English needs three lexical items.

* *Example 3*: Fr. *machine à laver*   Eng. *washing machine*

On first inspection, the English would seem to need one fewer *signifiant* than the French, but even here we may note the existence of another element, on the syntactical level this time, a tagmeme of position. This can be seen when we compare *a washing machine* with *a red machine*: the position of *washing* is fixed immediately before the noun-head, while *red* can be moved: *a red washing machine* and *a washing machine red with blood* are both possible (if improbable), but not **a washing red machine* or **a machine washing*.

An even more striking illustration of this point may be seen when one compares a verse of Biblical Hebrew with its English translation.

* *Example 4*.   *Hebrew*: /vajisa-uhu mibeit avinodov ašer bagiv'a 'im aron ha-elohim ve-aтɪjo holeн lifnei ha-aron./

          English: "And they brought it out of the house of Abinadab which was on the hill with the ark of God and Ahio went before the ark."

On the word level, twelve Hebrew words translated by twenty-six English, but careful analysis shows a closer ratio of *signifiants*:

     /va–/ .... 'and'; also converts imperfect to perfect;
     /–ji–/ .... marker of imperfect tense; with preceding /va–/ is equivalent to past tense morpheme in English 'brought';

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(8) Ibid. p. 5.

/–sa–/ .... 'bring';

/–u–/ .... third person plural subject enclitic: 'they';

/–hu–/ .... third person singular object enclitic: 'it';

/mi–/ .... 'from';

/–beit/ .... construct form of /bajit/ 'house': house of';

/avinodov/ .... 'Abinadab'; as this word is definite, the preceding word in the construct form is also definite; 'the' is thus added to "house'. (This could be considered an example of tagmeme → lexeme.)

/ašer/ .... 'which';

/ø/ .... 'was'; the verb 'to be' is not required in the Hebrew;

/b–/ .... 'on';

/–a–/ .... 'the';

/–giv'a/ ...... 'hill'.

All these examples, then, suggest that economy is possible not only in using fewer words but also in making use of a morphological or syntactical signal rather than a lexical item.

One must also mention briefly the implications of the term *signifié* in the definition. It must be kept clearly in mind that here one can work only on a relative or comparative basis; a generalised term (*Examples*: Fr. *promenade*, Eng. *bell*) includes a great number of more specific ideas, the extent of which can often be established only by comparison with another language. The French speaker does not feel any necessity when using *promenade* to specify the means of locomotion, nor does the English speaker realise the multitude of references of *bell* until he tries to find a French equivalent.

The first form of economy, then, is CONCENTRATION, which may be said to include DÉPOUILLEMENT.[9] The second is ELLIPSIS, leaving out what is not needed. We have already noted that this is most common on the phonetic level; it is possible on the morphological level (the dropping of case endings in English and French, for instance), but is then generally replaced by signals on the syntactical level (word-order) or the lexical (use of preposition). It becomes clearest in comparisons of two languages.

Examples: Fr.   Je crois savoir.   Eng.   I think *I* know.
            Eng. I know.   Fr.   Je *le* sais.
            Fr.   Voici.   Eng.   *Here* is.

These last examples, and those considered earlier, lead us to the second of the principles involved, a principle basic to any comparative study of languages, the ARBITRARY NATURE OF LANGUAGE. There is no need to go any further here than to cite Martinet, "Les faits de langue sont arbitraires ou conventionnels", a fact with which every teacher and student is only too familiar.

It is simple now to set out the two processes that the translator will have to follow. He will first have to counteract the effects of the working of the principle of economy in the text he is translating:[10]

(9) Ibid. p. 7.
(10) Cf. Vinay and Darbelnet, op. cit. pp. 183-188.

ORIGINAL (LD)	TRANSLATION (LA)
concentration	dilution
dépouillement	étoffement
ellipse	amplification

In the case of CONCENTRATION, by DILUTION, which includes the special case of transposition from one level (morphological, syntactical, lexical) to another; and also includes ÉTOFFEMENT where there is DÉPOUILLEMENT; and in the case of ELLIPSIS, by AMPLIFICATION.

This process complete, there remains a second one, for the translator must now apply to his version the principle of economy in accordance with the character and requirements of the language in which he is writing.