On Glossing
Author(s): A. L. Becker
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A. L. Becker

"Each
language
represents a
different
equation
between
manifestations
and silences.
Each people
leaves some
things unsaid in
order to be able
to say others.
Hence the
immense
difficulty of
translation:transl
ation is a matter
of saying in a
language
precisely what
that language
tends to pass
over in silence."
Ortega, 1957.

The publication in 1825 of August Schleicher's monumental work, Die Sprachen Europas, marked as clearly as anything can the split between linguistics and philology as separate disciplines.[1] The split was based upon the notion that some things are subject to "nature's unalterable laws" while other things are within "the sphere of operation of human free will." We wouldn't say it that way today, but we would still recognize a difference between those who pursue universal, ahistoric laws and those who seek undertanding of particular, temporally changing cultural phenomena. The linguist is ideally a scientist, the philologist a humanist. Their methods are different because their goals are different, and their goals are different because the problems they confront are different.

The major issue around which these differences were shaped in 1825 was accidence --- the way a root appears as adjective, noun, verb (and so on) and is marked for case, tense, mood, etc. Accidence involved the shaping or morphology of words, and morphology was seen as something subject to "nature's unalterable laws." Linguistics was a natural morphological science, in Goethe's scheme of things, along

with the other morphological sciences of botany, crystallography, and anatomy.

Using arguments one hears yet today, Schleicher argued that linguistic laws are universal because they reflect concepts and relations of thought which were (and for some still are) held to be universal. But right from the start there was an assumption that some languages reflect these concepts and relations of thought better than others, and so there was a politics to it right from the start. It is not irrelevant that these notions developed in places and at a time when economic, political, and religious colonialism was expanding and seemed both moral and profitable. Like people, languages were seen as evolving, and some were farther along than others, and --- oblige noblesse --- the speakers of more advanced languages had a moral duty to instruct the others. In linguistic morphology the stages of this universal evolutionary progression were called isolation, agglutination, and inflection.

This is not to suggest that linguistics has been more colonialist then philology, but only that linguists are not always mindful of the implications of universalist claims, and how these claims aid a kind of linguistic colonialism, the spread of American English.

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At the center of linguistic practice, right from the start, has been analysis, which in linguistics is called parsing --- the principled division of wholes into parts.

At the center of philology, on the other hand, is translation, which in linguistics is called glossing. If careful, skillful parsing is the defining skill of the scientific linguist, then careful, thoughtful translation is the defining skill of the philologist. A philologist ideally is as sentive to the differences between a Homeric or Javanese term and its English translation as a linguist is to the difference between, say, subtypes of ergativity or varieties of anaphora.

For philologists, the most useful "theory" in understanding a distant text is their own language. The skill lies in seeing the differences between the translation and the original. As the great Spanish philologist, Jose Ortega y Gasset, put it, a translation --- like any "reading" ---is always both exuberant and deficient (Ortega, 1959). That is, there are always things in the translation which have no counterpart in the original; they are there because of the demands of the language of translation. These are the exuberances. For one working with Southeast Asian languages, these include things like number and tense and copula, which rarely have any counterpart in the original. And there are also things in the original which have no counterpart in the translation, the deficiencies --- things like classifiers and focus markers which are hard even to fake in English. Furthermore, different root

metaphors permeate the morphology of both languages in a translation and provide thereby some of the most basic exuberances and deficiencies a philologist encounters.

It is my experience that any translation into English from a Southeast Asian language is at least fifty-per cent exuberant and deficient: that is, at least fifty per cent of the translation is exuberant and at least fifty percent of the original does not come through in the translation and is thereby deficient. What a careful translator does is sort out --- for a word, a sentence, or a complete text --- the exuberances and deficiencies across the languages. These are the things one must unlearn and learn in the course of learning to understand a distant language.

I would like to share with you briefly the experience of translating a single Burmese verb phrase into English, concentrating my attention on the root metaphors and the deep differences between the Burmese and its English translation.[2] The Burmese verb phrase is only four words long, and it makes a complete clause. That is, Burmese is a language full of what we so linguocentrically call "zeroing" or "zero anaphora" --- as if something (here the NP arguments) had been deleted or was, as we used to say, 'understood.' It is very hard to teach students of Burmese that nothing is missing --- that that phenomenon of a sense of absence is a result of glossing. It is not that subjects and objects, like tense and number, are left out in Burmese. They just aren't there. This is perhaps the greatest exuberance in going from Burmese to English: the assumption that what is in the English but not the Burmese is somehow 'understood' in the Burmese. And we have invented a glossing called "deep structure" or "logical" structure to introduce these things into Burmese or any other language we are studying.

It is this which makes a modern philologist want to say that all grammatical analysis of another language is comparative, always one language put into the categories and metaphors of another. At the very least, in this short essay, I want to hold up parsing and glossing as themselves language games, a point Wittgenstein made some time ago. They are prominent among the language games we play across two or more languages.

Any tongue takes on many metaphors from the way it is written, and so going from Burmese,

to English,

'Put that aside, please'

involves us in some rather basic exuberances and deficiencies. Our alphabetic writing leads us to imagine words, even spoken words, as sequences of phones, which can be analyzed into

initials, medials and finals. Burmese syllabic script, one of the Southeast Asian variants of Pallava script, leads one to imagine words, even spoken words, as overlays built around a center. That is, there is a basic core sound with modifications and elaborations in front of, behind, over, and under it. In Burmese writing there is no initial, medial and final. Phonemic analysis requires transliteration, in which one's image of language itself changes. Phonemic analysis, as we understand it, is not possible in Burmese writing (Becker, 1984).

This different image of a word came across vividly in a linguistics class at Michigan some years ago when a Southeast Asian student pointed to the final letter of a word written on the blackboard and said, "Here, at the front of the word...." Upon being pressed, he said that he imagined words coming toward him. Assume with me for a moment that this anecdote is not about the idiosyncracy of a particular person but a widely shared image, and you can see one of the roots of what we call reverse deixis or hearer centered discourse (where 'here' means close to the 'hearer').

Putting aside all the exuberance and deficiency of transliteration (which is too often assumed to be a meaning-preserving act), we can romanize the Burmese as:

hta:pato.le

We have translated it freely as,

'Put that aside, please.'
or
'Let that be.'

The only things in the English with counterparts in the Burmese are 'put' and 'please'. The rest of the translation is there because of the demands of English, i.e. that 'put' takes an undergoer and a location.

The deficiencies are difficult to gloss. We might see the whole phrase as a string of metaphors:

hta: 'put' is a metaphoric 'putting down' of a topic of discourse prior to 'picking up' a new one.

pa polite 'include' is a metaphoric use of a verb which we might translate as 'include' or 'be with' or 'accompany'. It is a very old metaphor for politeness.

to. 'toss'(?) is the metaphoric use of a verb which describes the act of hitting something into the air with hand, foot, or stick --- as in the widespread Southeast Asian game (Burmese hcin:loun:) in which the players keep a rattan ball in the air with their feet.

lei 'evaporate' is a metaphoric use of a verb which Judson's dictionary translates as 'to be scattered, lost, evaporated, as camphor, quicksilver, etc.' The verb also seems close to a noun we gloss as 'air' or 'wind'.

To think of this Burmese verb phrase as an aggregate of metaphors is to foreground dissimilarity. For many linguists it may seem to exoticize Burmese in a way that is perhaps historically accurate (perhaps not)[3] but certainly not the way native speakers would imagine their own language. Over time, as one learns the language better, these metaphors become bleached and ordinary --- become grammaticalized, some would say, but for the comparative philologist, interested in how that very ordinariness comes about, it seems right (and, as Pike would say, emic) to see the metaphors first and then, on the assumption that grammaticalization is a figurative rather than a logical process, to see their present use as extensions of the metaphors into new contexts.

We all wince, of course, when the everyday metaphors of a language are uncovered: they are things to be seen, as Gregory Bateson used to say, only out of the corner of the eye. Yet, we do live in them and not in the clarity of abstractly defined categories. Words which have non-metaphoric uses in identifying and specifying acts and events in nature (e.g. PUT, INCLUDE, TOSS, EVAPORATE) have been displaced to identify and specify acts and events in the management of the text and the language game itself. The things which are PUT, TOSSED, and EVAPORATED are words and not rattan balls or quicksilver. The metaphoric movement is from nature to language itself.

As far as I can see, all of the words in Burmese verb phrases which have been called auxiliaries and particles are metaphors, open always to new uses.

It is clear, however, that to translate the passage above as PUT INCLUDE TOSS EVAPORATE is clearly not an acceptable English translation of the Burmese. I would only argue that emic understanding may well have to pass through that blatant string of metaphors and note them and hear their echo, "under erasure" (i.e. crossed out but visible, Derrida's suggestion for a new mark of punctuation). Their loss is surely a major deficiency of glossing.

I leave them behind reluctantly and move on to a more grammatical view of the Burmese passage as,

PUT polite change-of-state persistive

or, at a more abstract level, as,

VERB auxiliary aspect euphonic

To go from an understanding of the passage as a string of metaphors to an understanding of it as a string of abstract categories is to familiarize it, to put it into the categories of our understanding.[4] That is a useful, even necessary thing to do, but it is even more heavily weighted with exuberances and deficiencies. I think we are farther from Burmese, closer to English, when we do that.

And the grammatical glossing, of course, implies a parsing, while the metaphoric glossing did not. That is, we would be tempted to analyze the phrase as a headword which is a verb (PUT) and a string of subsidiary modifiers of the headword: auxiliaries, aspectuals, and other species of operators (at levels of nucleus, core, and periphery). The parsing, in any case, is a function of the glossing. There is no such thing as a language-neutral analysis.

Just as I can describe my Burmese experiences in English, so I --- with the help of many others over two centuries of glossing and parsing Burmese into English--- can describe the Burmese language in English. The question is not Can this be done, with rigor and generality? Rather, the question is, What are we doing when we do it?

There are, I think, as many exuberances and deficiencies in parsing as there are in glossing. The grammatical figure of head and modifier (endocentricity) is very robust in our grammatical language. We would, I think, consider it the unmarked case that words be seen as roots and affixes, phrases as heads and modifiers, and clauses as predicates and arguments. In each case there is a single head or center. Learning Burmese involves, I believe, seeing the unmarked case as double-headedness. To use a term suggested by Mary Haas and extended by James Matisoff (1973), Burmese always seems elaborate to an English-speaking learner. In spite of all the so-called zero-anaphora, one always seems to have to use more words than are necessary in Burmese, and this, I want to suggest, is because we are not attuned to double-headedness as a pervasive phenomenon.

Burmese words are usually built around two morphemes, like

hma: ywin: 'mistake' (ERROR MISPLACE)

a myin a yu 'belief' (APPEAR BELIEVE)

cei na' 'be satisfied'(GRIND COOK)

At the phrase level we are familiar with this phenomenon of double headedness in many languages as classifier constructions, which have many uses besides just counting things, as in these two examples from Professor Hla Pe's bold attempt (Hla Pe, 1967) to render a Burmese view of classifiers into English:

sani' t kya (i.e. 'be systematic')
system one fit

hma' t me (i.e. 'be unthinkable')
notice one lack

John Verhaar has suggested to me that we can get the same sense of double-headedness in English in phrases like

a whale of a story

in which there is a tension between the grammatical head (whale) and the referential head (story).

I hope that these few examples will suffice to illustrate what is a widespread phenomenon in Burmese, double headedness. Much in Burmese rhetoric and poetics seems to me to be built around this grammatical figure.

I have recently argued (Becker, to appear) in more detail than is possible now in this short essay that it can be illuminating and more emic to think of the verb phrase in Burmese as double headed. A structural deficiency of glossing Burmese is, in this view, to reduce double-headed constructions to single-headed ones.

In this double-headed view a Burmese verb phrase at its simplest has two poles, a verb and a final particle. Around these two poles the structure is built.

Around the left pole, the verb, before and after it, cluster the words, almost entirely metaphors, which particularize the referential event or act by identifying and specifying it.

Around the right pole, the final particle, before and after it, cluster the words, also metaphors, which particularize the language event by identifying and specifying it.

Around the two poles and between them is the grammatical space they shape, which I will leave unexplored here and return to the Burmese passage we have been examining:

hta:pato.le
PUT INCLUDE TOSS EVAPORATE
PUT polite change-of state persistive
VERB auxiliary aspect euphonic

What is missing here is the sense of double-headedness, the bipolar figure. The left pole is the verb PUT plus the polite auxiliary, which might be seen as including the hearer in the act of putting. (This analysis of pa is much too simple, and it might just as well be seen as the leftmost adjunct of the right pole in the double-headed contruction.)

The right pole in this positive imperative verb phrase is the zero member of a set of final particles. The small set of aspectuals occur before indicative finals, and after the negative imperative final, so that we might put the final into the gloss just before the aspectual (to.):

VERB auxiliary (FINAL) aspect euphonic

Since the absence of the final is significant in Burmese, it is, I think, important to include it in the glossing. That is, zero makes sense in indicating a deficiency, but not as an exuberance (like, for instance, a zero marking the object of PUT, an exuberancy of the English translation).

The goal here is not an exhaustive description of a Burmese verb phrase, for even a single instance is extremely complex. Translation is always a utopian task, one which never arrives at any finality. The Burmese passage was presented in order to illustrate a point: all grammatical analysis of another language is always comparative, for there is always, at any level, a great deal of exuberance and deficiency. There is no neutral language of analysis.

And there is a more general point. It is that we reconsider the split between linguistics and philology, not in order to say that they are one and the same, not to recombine them, but rather to strengthen the dialogue between the analyst and the translator, between the parser and the glosser, between "nature's unalterable laws" and "human free will", between generality and particularity, between universality and deep cross-lingual differences. For the sake of that crucial dialogue, I do not think it is good for linguistics if philology is weak in either theory or practice.

Endnotes

1. A thorough discussion with complete bibliographic reference concerning the split between linguistics and philology and Schleicher's role in it can be found in Arbuckle, 1970-71.
2. A more complete description of Burmese verb phrases is to appear in Becker, (to appear). The phrase discussed here is from the story by Dr. Maung Maung Nyo, "ingalan ameiyikanhnin. myanmapyitha:" (A Burmese Encounters England and America) (Rangoon, 1977), provided to me by John Okell.
3. The results of the Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary Project under the direction of James Matisoff at Berkeley will help us check the accuracy of the glossing of these metaphors. I feel sure that these words, and other so-called particles, can be described as metaphors, but less sure that I have correctly captured their metaphoric action.

4. The parsing is based on the grammatical descriptions of Allott, 1965; Okell,1969; and Wheatley, 1982. They bear no responsibility, however, for the reanalysis undertaken here.

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