Foreword: Rapprochement and reconciliation

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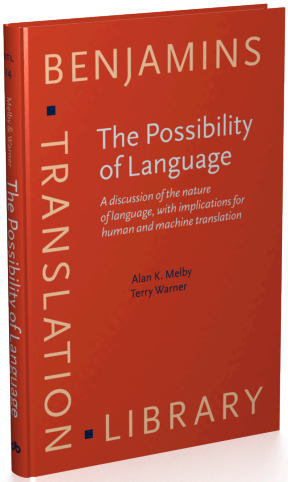

Pages xiii–xvi of
The Possibility of Language: A discussion of the nature of language, with implications for human and machine translation
Alan K. Melby and Terry Warner
[Benjamins Translation Library, 14] 1995. xxvi, 276 pp.

Foreword

The foreword to this book is divided into two sections, each focused toward readers with different interests and backgrounds. Marilyn Gaddis Rose situates the book for those who approach it from a background in literature and/or translation; John Hutchins introduces the discussion for linguists and machine translation developers and theorists.

Rapprochement and reconciliation

Marilyn Gaddis Rose [comparative literature and human translation]

For nearly a half century, linguistics and comparative literature have disputed the terrain of translation studies. The struggle arguably started when Harry Zohn brought Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" into English in 1955. It became quite open when George Steiner divided translation studies between Walter Benjamin and Noam Chomsky in *After Babel* (1975). It became controversial when Jacques Derrida answered Steiner with a Deconstructionist reading of Benjamin in "Des Tours de Babel" in 1980.[1] Generally, the struggle has been civil and, in my opinion, has advanced translation studies. The civility usually surfaces in smiling, unbelieving face-to-face encounters. The linguist and comparatist, wearing dutiful smiles throughout, shake hands and go their *very* separate ways, each reconfirmed in the validity of his or her views and the wrongheadedness of the other's.

Linguist Alan Melby's *The Possibility of Language* changes that face-to-face encounter to the genuine smiles of mutual comprehension (or, perhaps, an open-minded apprehension). His is an essay comparatists can accept and learn from. This is because Melby relates what linguistics, especially computational linguistics and generative grammar, have done in, to, or with the traditional, speculative philosophies of language. The thinking of C. Terry Warner and the works of Emmanuel Levinas (1906—) appear to have been his bridge, although, of course, in his study of Chomsky and post-Chomsky linguistics, he had to study Chomsky's heritage from Descartes to Wittgenstein and beyond.

For practicing translators, who have belittled the dispute from a distance, now is the time to start reading—reading Melby.

For the smiling antagonists, now is the time to really mean it, for this essay will show how we can come together.

For the practicing translator any method of analysis is valid if it is personally useful. I would go further: any conceptual explanation that accounts for this usefulness is valid as well, if the user is personally satisfied. We judge translations by our notions of accuracy and style,[2] not by either the currency or the idiosyncrasy of whatever theories, if any, their translators espouse.

A translator's theoretical base remains relevant, however. If we admire a translation—and we may find it difficult to explain our admiration—we may repeat the translator's methodology in the hope of repeating some of his or her success. We judge a speculation in theory by different criteria. We look not only for internal coherence and articulation with tradition which a translation may share if its model does, but we look also for originality, something that would never have occurred to us but which imposes its own logic upon us. This logic imposes partly because we can test it for replicability and applicability.

For example, we would not deny Burton Raffel the brilliance of his many achievements. Consider his *Beowulf*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and *Don Quixote*. Still we may find *The Forked Tongue*, *The Art of Translating Poetry*, and *The Art of Translating Prose* a restatement of the often thought and nearly as well expressed.[3] On the other hand, Benjamin's translations of Baudelaire follow his own dicta to an absurd extent. It is one thing to let the French echo through the German. Another, to force a reader to back-translate to understand Baudelaire's reputation as a major modern poet.[4] Nevertheless, when he wrote "The Task of the Translator" (1923), he gave us new spaces to think in, terrains that re-explorations have yet to contain.

Thus, speculation on what translating is, what a translation represents, how the two or more languages relate, is a value in itself, even when, perhaps especially when, speculations get emended, discarded, or superseded. Such speculations on the nature of translation lure us into thinking we have sighted something about the nature of language. Probably we have, but exactly what that something is will likely always elude us. Generally, the act itself of speculation becomes the value. Melby in *The Possibility of Language* has taken the speculative spaces opened by Levinas and shown where it elucidates dynamic general language, which has eluded computational linguistics and generative grammar.

For many years, Melby, long recognized as one of the most knowledgeable advisers on machine-aided translation in the U.S., was engaged in one of the longest-running and best-funded speculations: the *pour voir*, the "what if," of machine translation. Rather than lament the money and time invested, we would do well to classify the explorations of machine translation and artificial intelligence with all other costly explorations that advance human knowledge considerably ahead of human utilization, for instance, the Mars landing and space stations. Melby does not offer an apologia for his determined pursuit of machine translation (MT) and machine-aided translation (MAT). He does, however, provide here a concise, unbiased account of the MT waves of enthusiasm and discouragement from the immediate post World War II years to the present.

In reading *The Possibility of Language*, we sense that Melby was sorry to give up his belief in the coming conquest of dynamic general language by human-programmed machines. On the other hand, he has compensated for this loss with a belief in the continuing creativity of and in language. Texts in a specific, controllable domain belong to the "Utterly Boring World," as he puts it. When they must be translated, they often respond well to an electronic program. Their lexical terminology units can be updated and inputted. As a trained linguist, Melby is sorry also that linguistics can describe language but not explain it, above all, not predict it. The conceptually complicated matter of MT gave way to MAT, and genuine aid in MAT is limited to the extent of specific domain language in the text.

In the covert autobiographical narrative of *The Possibility of Language*, we sense that this shortcoming of linguistics was disheartening for Melby. Even his appealing sense of humor cannot mask the sinking feeling—which a reader shares—when he recognized that general language is erratic and ambiguous in its formation. Translating from one natural language to another can just as easily compound or reduce the randomness and ambiguity. The unpredictable collectivity of usage in historical settings can destabilize both the first text and the translation.

Did the MT mystique turn out to be a kind of Babel? Should we draw similar morals from the respective situations? Certainly the MT limitations pointed up the vitality and autonomy of natural languages. That vitality and autonomy might have led me back to Benjamin.

For Melby, who traces the history of language in the modern (post-Renaissance) era, the way around the Tower led to Levinas, who stresses the ethical implications of social interactions. Although a Lithuanian who studied in Germany and made his career in France, so we might assume that his

expression involves constant semi-conscious translation, Levinas does not deal with translation qua translation. Melby and Warner extrapolate that when we communicate with and for other people, we accommodate our language usage to theirs. They in turn accommodate ours. This process may be most obvious in conversation, but it occurs in any text in any media. We are especially aware of such accommodations when we translate or study translations.[5] Any time we accommodate our listener or reader, even in solipsistic lyrics we hope no one ever discovers, we are incorporating language change and exploiting ambiguity. Any time as listeners or readers we struggle to follow the implicit dialogue being conducted with us, we incorporate such change and ambiguity while adding our own.

Is it any wonder that God struck down the Tower of Babel or that MT has had to fall back on MAT? The limitlessness of language expands with each limit crossed.

While it is amazing that usage is as stable as it is, it is gratifying, even exhilarating, that it defeats entropy. Melby, if disappointed in some early hopes, has been heartened by that realization. Always resourceful, he engages us here in the ethical face-to-face of communication between users of different languages. He supports and enhances such communication with the expertise and experience of exhaustive and inspired service in the MT vanguard.

Notes

[1] First delivered as a lecture at Binghamton University in October 1980, the essay was widely circulated before being published in an anthology by Cornell University in 1985 (Joseph Graham, ed., *Difference in Translation*).

[2] What leads us to find a translation stylish, to use Kurt Gingold's turn of phrase, (ATA *Series* 1, p. 119) is subjective and only intentionally stay at a remove from the latest usage.

[3] I am grateful for having had the opportunity of reviewing each, but I find his discussions helpful chiefly for explaining my own taste. For example, his observation that "the logic we associate with prose is linear and the logic we more often than not associate with poetry is nonlinear" (*The Art of Translating Prose*, Pennsylvania State Press, 1993, p. 16).

[4] Harry Zohn, trans. *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1955) and *Gesammelte Schriften* 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp, 1972). See my "Walter Benjamin as Translation Theorist: a Reconsideration," *Dispositio* 7 (1982): pp. 163-175.

[5] Prime examples would be stereoscopic handling of texts in humanities classes.