Whence mistranslation?
A Multidisciplinary Survey

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Let me try my hand at a translation from French to English of one of my favorite lines from Antoine de Saint Exupéry’s *Le Petit Prince*.

T1: Quand on veut un mouton, c’est la preuve qu’on existe.

T2: When one wants a sheep, therein lies the proof that one exists.

The above is, at some level, a competent, albeit mediocre, translation. The first clause is translated almost word-for-word, and the second clause attempts to retain the intent of the original. Setting the merits of the translation aside, what is interesting here is that if one were to translate the above quotation as “Come here and give me a banana!”, any sane reader would immediately cry afoul: “Mistranslation! Mistranslation!” By the same token, if I had chosen to translate T1 as “One’s desire for mutton is a rigorous proof of human existence”, there would yet be a large group of naysayers. Therein lies the semantic rub of translation, and the central topic of this essay. Philosophically, the notion of a “mistranslation” is a troubling one, and one that is quite pivotal to translation studies. The goal of this exploration is to see if it is possible to derive some sort of epistemological threshold to determine what exactly constitutes a “mistranslation.” With references to semantic mapping projects such as Princeton University’s WordNet and general issues in translation studies, I intend to delve into the nature of a mistranslation and what translators may do to avoid “mistranslating.” In addition to this search for an objective threshold, I also intend to examine the subjectivity of what is considered an appropriate translation. Finally, I intend to examine the importance of contextual meaning and its effect on mistranslation.

The term “mistranslation” is often uttered happily by individuals, and its use gives us an idea of what popular translation thinking has done to its definition. The Oxford English Dictionary provides an entirely uncontroversial definition of the word by simply calling it “The act of translating wrongly; an incorrect or wrong translation.” (OED Online). It is the “wrongness” of

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1 I am solely responsible for the context of this essay. All errors are my own.
translation that I am interested in elucidating. The definition of mistranslation largely depends on what we define a “right” translation as, but that is a question that is altogether controversial in a different manner. As far as standards for translation go, one may hold the extreme position of biunivocal effability; this is to say that for every utterance in a language L there is one and only one appropriate translation in language L’. In other words, this first outlook, that I will refer to as the Principle of Professor Higgins\(^2\), is quite extreme. For example, if the phrase *chair de poule* is seen in a French work then it must be translated as *flesh of hen* in English (when a more correct translation would be “goosebumps”); anything but this would be a mistranslation. This extreme outlook on mistranslation is uninteresting and hardly common (or practical). What we are then interested in is gloss translation, or sense-for-sense translation, or what Eugene Nida might call dynamically equivalent translation. In this sense, we may translate *chair de poule* as *goosebumps* and it would be intuitively considered a correct translation. In fact, it is difficult to find a translation that would be “more” correct. However, the range of incorrect translations is as large as the difference between the number of words and phrases in the English vocabulary (\(\Omega\)) and the one correct translation: “goosebumps” (\(t\)).\(^3\) So, the number of correct English translations of the French phrase *chair de poule* is represented by \(\Omega - t\), which necessarily equals one here.

However, what about the word *mouton* in the example from *Le Petit Prince*, which is translated into English as *sheep*. A gloss translator might, in a certain context, choose to translate *mouton* as “mutton,” “flesh,” “meat,” “beef” or any other varieties of descriptors that could plausibly, either figuratively or literally, convey the same meaning as *sheep*. In the context of the original, the fact that the author chose a sheep is significant because this particular line is spoken by a fox. In this case, perhaps “flesh,” “meat” or “beef” may be less appropriate, but are they mistranslations? Given the subjective nature of gloss translation, it is easy to justify these as ‘correct’ translations in a given context. One such context could be a translator that is working towards conveying the meaning of the original to a culture where no such animal as a sheep exists, but still wants to retain the idea of hunger and meat. In such a case, it seems intuitive that “meat” would be a ‘correct’ translation.

\(^2\) I’m grateful to David Bellos for providing the inspiration for the nomenclature.

\(^3\) Throughout the rest of this essay \(\Omega\) will denote the lexical corpus (i.e. the entire vocabulary) of a language, and \(t\) will denote the number of acceptable translations (i.e. translations not considered “mistranslations”).
To generalize the case for gloss translation, we can refer to the previous model that had been constructed for word-for-word translation. There, every incorrect translation was expressed by $\Omega - t$, where $t$ is equal to 1. That is to say, given that we accept the notion that anything expressed in one language can be expressed in another language (the principle of effability), there will always be a single best (and equivalent) way to represent a T1 utterance in a T2. For gloss translation, the above model holds except that $t$ takes on a value that is greater than or equal to 1. Every mistranslation is therefore in the set denoted by $\Omega - t$ where $t \geq 1$ and $t < \Omega$. The question that may now be asked is whether $t$ can be objectively defined for every utterance. Figure 1 contains a visual model of the two general definitions of mistranslation.

In this exploration, I employ WordNet, a lexical database for the English language that groups words into sets of synonyms, provides short, general definitions, and records the various semantic relations between synonym sets, for illustrative purposes. WordNet is a great asset to this sort of linguistic query because not only is it a tool founded upon well-accepted principles of linguistics and relational semantics, but it also takes as its goal a rough representation of human cognitive semantics. WordNet serves a philosophical examination of mistranslation well because it offers an objective framework with which to judge semantic relationships. Of course, defining when a semantic term is too far from another to have the same connotations remains a
subjective question, but with the help of WordNet I plan to elucidate some of my examples and examine both of the translation models I propose above.

Let us assume that mouton and sheep have a 1:1 semantic mapping across English and French (we imagine that the two words cause a speaker of English and a speaker of French to draw the exact same semantic conclusions). The biunivocal model mandates that \( t \), the only acceptable translation, be one—in this case, either sheep or mouton depending on which language we translate into. The gloss model allows a larger area for \( t \). We may drop our prior assumption and consider that the word sheep has different semantic implications in English. A WordNet query for sheep yields three semantic results:

- \( S: (n) \) sheep (woolly usually horned ruminant mammal related to the goat)
- \( S: (n) \) sheep (a timid defenseless simpleton who is readily preyed upon)
- \( S: (n) \) sheep (a docile and vulnerable person who would rather follow than make an independent decision) "his students followed him like sheep"

As can be seen, use of the word sheep in translation does not have any one connotation. In this case, the gloss translator might find himself prone to using hyponyms and hypernyms to either specify or generalize the semantic field. In the context of the quotation from Le Petit Prince the most appropriate use of sheep would be the first definition yielded by WordNet (woolly usually horned ruminant mammal related to the goat). WordNet yields the following hypernyms for this first definition of sheep (arranged in ascending order from specific to general):

sheep > bovid > ruminant > artiodactyl > ungulate > placental mammal > mammal > vertebrate > chordate > animal > organism > living thing > unit > object > physical entity > entity

Instinctively, some of these words are more appropriate substitutes for the original sheep in the context of the original quotation. For example, we may consider it wholly absurd to translate mouton as artiodactyl and find it acceptable to translate it as bovid or animal. Of course, this particular hypernym regression is overly taxonomical and yields several biological classification terms. But the point remains that in gloss translation the use of hypernyms is a common convention. This is to say that certain words that may be
hypernyms of the *most appropriate translation* fall into the set of “acceptable translations (t)” in the $\Omega - t$ mistranslation model. Hyponyms may not be the only “acceptable translations” however. Hyponyms also fall into the realm of acceptable translations. Wordnet yields the following hyponyms for the first definition of *sheep*: ewe, ram, tup, wether, black sheep, domestic sheep, Cotswold, Hampshire, Lincoln, Exmoor, Cheviot, broadtail, long-wool, merino, Rambouillet. The specific nature of hyponyms make them ideal for gloss translations that wish to localize the semantic content of the T1 into the T2. For example, choosing *ewe* or *ram* as a translation would be appropriate in the context of translating the equivalent of “female sheep” or “male sheep” from an L2 into English. In this sense, hyponyms may even provide greater lexical economy for the translator. Of course, when choosing which definition to initially use, one must practice caution. Hyponyms for the third definition of sheep (a docile and vulnerable person who would rather follow than make an independent decision) are very different:

sheep > follower > person > organism > living thing > whole > object > physical entity > entity

Using this definition to translate *Le Petit Prince* would be inappropriate in this context. While hypernyms and hyponyms help the translator escape the hard-line position of biunivocal effability, they do make one wonder as to why some hypernyms and hyponyms are appropriate and some are not.

The problem of “appropriateness” in translation is not an issue that can be answered through objective linguistic exploration, but is one that depends upon human language cognition. The concept of a mistranslation may not be something entirely objective and linguistically mechanical. While there are certain standards that can be roughly applied to thinking about mistranslation, the appropriateness of words comes not from the structure of language, but from the subjectivity of meaning. Willard V Quine’s argument in *Word and Statement* (1960) regarding the indeterminacy of language tended to deny an absolute standard of right translations and wrong translations. Quine proposed an analytical hypothesis of translation. What Quine had in mind when proposing this hypothesis applied in particular to a “jungle-to-English grammar and dictionary” (165). This is to say that Quine wanted to examine translation between two languages that had hardly any linguistic overlap. Regarding his analytic hypothesis, Quine writes the following:
“How then does our linguist push radical translation beyond the bounds of mere observation sentences and truth functions? In broad outline as follows. He segments heard utterances into conveniently short recurrent parts, and thus compiles a list of native “words.” Various of these he hypothetically equates to English words and phrases, in such a way as to reproduce the already established translations of whole observation sentences.” (165)

Under the umbrella of the analytic hypothesis, the notion of a mistranslation becomes a failure in the hypothetical equation of terms between an L1 and an L2. Quine offers advice that translators should keep in mind when facing problems of semantic subjectivity across multiple translations. Under Quine’s analytical hypothesis, for example, one may translate “sentences S1 and S2 respectively as “Here is a bachelor” and “Here is an unmarried man,” but one may verify that no mistranslation has occurred if the subjective reaction of each “native” (ie. speaker of the T2) to S1 is “the same as that of S2.” The gloss translation model proposed earlier proposes a similar idea of semantic correlation, but perhaps not in the strong one-to-one sense that Quine proposes. Nevertheless, for a translation to be considered appropriate, one should compare it to other acceptable translations and attempt to measure how closely the lexical propositions are semantically located.

Interlingual semantic relativity seems to be the problem that plagues translation when it comes to defining mistranslation. Quine’s example of the mysterious “Gavagai” demonstrates why it matters that the observed meaning of this lexical unit correlate to what its semantic reaction would be in the native. “Lo, a rabbit” is only an appropriate translation of “Gavagai” if the semantic reaction that the English speaking linguist has to “Lo, a rabbit” correlates on some level to the semantic reaction the native has to “Gavagai.” Ian Hacking elaborates upon the Quinean method in his essay “Was There Ever A Radical Mistranslation?” by examining translation as an interaction between two languages and their speakers. He begins with the following story:

On their voyage of discovery to Australia a group of Captain Cook’s sailors captured a young kangaroo and brought the strange creature back on board their ship. No one knew what it was, so some men were sent ashore to ask the natives. When the sailors returned they told their mates, “It’s a kangaroo.” Many years later it was discovered that when the aborigines
said ‘kangaroo’ they were not in fact naming the animal, but replying to their questioners, ‘What did you say?’ (171)

Hacking offers other examples of this sort of “radical mistranslation,” ranging from a Frenchman plausibly translating ‘transom’ in German as a ‘vasistas’ (Was ist das? is the German phrase for What is this?), and the naming of the Indri, a lemur native to Madagascar (173). It would be difficult to call these acts of translation anything but radical mistranslations. Fortunately, Hacking offers a framework that is useful to this exploration of mistranslation in general. His take on mistranslation transforms Quine’s a priori thesis and applies it in the context of interlingual interaction. Hacking’s definition of a radical mistranslation can be paraphrased as follows:

1. Speakers of two languages (L1 and L2) attempt communication.
2. The L1 speaker says s; the L2 speaker understands p (through environmental or contextual association).
3. p has no semantic connection with s.
4. Neither the L1 speaker nor the L2 speaker realizes this.
5. A semantic link forms between p and s until “it is too late to correct” (171).

Mistranslation, from Hacking’s model, seems to again rely on the subjectivity of context for its standards. The probability that s in fact has a semantic connection with p is non-zero in this case. In other words, if “gavagai” indeed did mean “Lo, a rabbit,” then the field linguist may be correct with some luck. Hacking admits that his definition of radical mistranslation does exclude several instances of translation and its effects such as that of “ancient texts … nuance, moderate misunderstandings, and misclassifications that occur to us all the time” (171). Hacking’s analysis, however, expresses the importance of classification and association in the same taxonomical sense purported by the same WordNet-based examples herein. Quine and Hacking’s a priori examinations of translation and mistranslation may not clearly set out a rigid framework for determining what is a mistranslation, but their attention to context in translation are valuable.

The importance of context in translation seems to inextricably be involved in cases of mistranslation. For the sense-for-sense translator, τ, or all appropriate translations, is not a constant number but a variable that scales dependent on context. Epistemologically, it is then very difficult to generalize a
principle that allows the translator to think about choices he makes and avoid mistranslation. An appeal to instinct seems to be the most pragmatic and intuitive approach to contextual translation. If we adhere to this principle, we might say that a mistranslation is any translation that is instinctively felt to be “wrong.” By “wrong,” we may mean inappropriate, incoherent, or simply incorrect. This principle on its own does not take us any farther than saying “translation is completely subjective and there can be no standards of quality.” As such, the nature of this instinct is of interest. Instinctively, we know that sheep is a better translation of mouton in comparison to, say, tree. One does not need to be a French to English translator to understand this. This is knowledge had simply by speaking each language. We associate the word sheep more closely with the semantic connotations of the word mouton than we do the word tree. This is similar to the Quinean method. Instead of using physical and environmental context as the association reference frame, we use our semantic knowledge of another language. The problem with this argument from instinct is that mistranslations occur more commonly than we would like to admit. This implies that perhaps interlingual semantic instinct is perhaps not a reliable epistemic principle for yielding acceptable translations.

Between the Ω-t model of mistranslation and Quinean indeterminacy, an epistemological principle regarding the nature of a mistranslation is all but exactly determined. Contextual subjectivity carries a lot of weight in translation and language in general. Sociolinguistic interaction models such as Dell Hyme’s S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model demonstrate that speech acts contain several levels of meaning beyond the semantics of words themselves. Therefore, while the Ω-t model is a helpful way of thinking about the relationships between diction and meaning, the translator that wishes to be wary of committing mistranslation must be in-tune with context and the nature of interlingual interaction through translation. Applications of better understanding mistranslation extend beyond the sphere of human translation and greatly affect machine translation. Without any sort of deductive and objective standard for determining what exactly is an appropriate translation, it becomes very difficult to imagine an artificial intelligence capable of managing a semantic task as embedded in context as translation.

Machine translators are becoming a popular force in the age of the Internet, and not all of them are built with strict standards in mind. John Searle’s famous thought experiment of the Chinese Room argued that the pitfall of machines in understanding language lay in the fact that machines are purely
functional and objective (Cole). Searle argued that if one were to put a man in a room with a Chinese-to-English dictionary, give him algorithmic instructions to follow for translation and give him any Chinese phrase, the man would be able to successfully translate the phrase. However, Searle’s controversial argument was that despite this man’s ability to successfully follow an algorithm, we would not say that the man understood Chinese in any meaningful way (Cole). This thought experiment has since spawned several rebuttals, but the notion that a machine (or a human following algorithmic processes) is incapable of understanding language is pivotal to thinking about mistranslation. If understanding is a precondition for successful translation, and if by extension understanding is only possible for human beings, who are by nature subjective creatures, then mistranslation as a phenomenon may be inherently subjective. To this date, there is no ‘perfect’ machine translator (incidentally, the same can be said for human translators, but that is a topic for another day).

If perfectly appropriate translations cannot be accomplished through algorithmic mechanical processes, then perhaps mistranslation cannot be accomplished solely through the adoption of a model such as the Ω - t model. The advent of WordNet allows for a computer-based human semantic map and taxonomy that, after further development, shall prove an invaluable resource into understanding semantics and interlingual meaning. The elusive “mistranslation,” for now, remains in the field of human subjectivity. In some ways, perhaps the ideal translator would be a human being following an algorithmic process with the guidance of his semantic instincts inside of Searle’s room. In language, a mistranslation is a fundamentally strange phenomenon. At times its presence is glaring, like a grammatical error or an unwarranted vulgarity, but at other times, more importantly, it remains unnoticed. Among the methods and models discussed herein, it is perhaps best for a translator to be eclectic among all of them. Epistemologically, the subjectivity of semantics muddies the waters when it comes to mistranslation.

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