

TRANSLATION AND LANGUAGEHOOD

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According to one influential view, something which we might have reason to think is a language, is not proven to be such until it has been translated.¹ I will try to show, to the contrary, that it is necessary to appeal to factors which are independent of translation in order to establish that it is indeed a language which has been translated in the first place. If this is right, it follows that proof of languagehood, so far from depending on translation, is in fact logically prior to translation.

Let me briefly clarify the view I seek to challenge. The view is not that one is unable to have good grounds for holding that something is a language prior to translating it. For it may allow that there may be strong grounds for taking untranslated inscriptions, sounds or activity to be linguistic. The view, rather, is that such grounds can yield at best only a *prima facie* case for languagehood. Translation alone provides a criterion of being a language.

This view depends on a contrast between translation as criterion of languagehood and translation-independent evidence for languagehood. Translation – the rendering of words or sentences of one language by means of words or sentences the same in meaning in another language – is taken to constitute definitive evidence for languagehood. Non-translational evidence, on the other hand, consists in non-semantic or pragmatic features of purportedly linguistic material.

The latter sort of evidence may include facts about the social setting in which speech-like behaviour is observed or the physical environment in which apparent inscriptions or symbols are found. It may also include formal aspects of the material, which indicate the presence of syntactic structure, or of morphological or phonetic properties. There is much that such evidence can include, but it excludes semantic information such as reports of the meaning of a given word or sentence, for that would be to invoke translation.

The contrast between translation and translation-independent evidence of languagehood seems to mark a genuine difference. A translation of a language tells us such things as what its words and sentences mean, and it presupposes that what is translated is a language. This contrasts sharply with the situation in which evidence is proposed for taking untranslated sounds or inscriptions to be linguistic. Real as the contrast is, however, it cannot bear the weight placed on it by the position we are considering.

The trouble is that the claim that a language has been successfully translated is a claim which itself stands in need of evidence. Translation may fail and it may fail in various ways. It is possible not only to mistranslate, but – and this is of most relevance to the issue of language recognition – it is even possible to mistakenly identify material as linguistic and propose a translation for what is not in fact a language. The possibility of misidentification and mistranslation reveals translation to be a theoretical enterprise. As such, it must be supported by evidence and, like all theoretical undertakings, is fallible.

Consequently, any purported translation must be capable of being supported by evidence that it is indeed a translation of something linguistic. Such evidence cannot itself appeal to semantic information without begging the question. It would not do, for example, to defend translation of a sentence P of language L into our language by saying that P in L means the same as our sentence Q, for that would presuppose the correctness of the translation to have been established already. Nor would it do to defend the translation of P as Q by claiming that such a translation is consistent with the translations of other sentences of L which have already been given. For that would presuppose the legitimacy of the translation of the other sentences, and indeed of their identification as linguistic. It follows, therefore, that evidence for translation must ultimately depend on factors which are independent of translation.

Unless non-translational evidence can be put forward there is no reason to take a purported translation to be a legitimate rendering of something linguistic into our language. Hence translation-independent evidence must be employed to defend translation, which cannot therefore play the role in identifying language that has been claimed for it.

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NOTE

See, for example, Donald Davidson, 'On the very idea of a conceptual scheme', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 183-198.

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