

Reesink, Ger. 2010. "The difference a word makes." In Kenneth A. McElhanon and Ger Reesink, *A Mosaic of languages and cultures: studies celebrating the career of Karl J. Franklin*, 434-446. SIL e-Books, 19. [Dallas]: SIL International. <http://www.sil.org/silepubs/abstract.asp?id=52526>

## 25

# The Difference a Word Makes

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### ABSTRACT

This paper offers some thoughts on the question what effect language has on the understanding and hence behavior of a human being. It reviews some issues of linguistic relativity, known as the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis," suggesting that the culture we grow up in is reflected in the language and that our cognition (and our worldview) is shaped or colored by the conventions developed by our ancestors and peers. This raises questions for the degree of translatability, illustrated by the comparison of two poems by a Dutch poet who spent most of his life in the USA. Mutual understanding, I claim, is possible because we have the cognitive apparatus that allows us to enter different emic systems.

## 1 Introduction: Language and Communication

In the novel *Night train to Lisbon* (Pascal Mercier, pseudonym of Peter Bieri, philosophy professor, Freie Universität Berlin), a letter by a Portuguese doctor is read in which he comments on a paper presentation and discussion on 'Lying to liars'. The doctor, Amadeu Prado, writes:

The discussants claimed that they understood each other, that they responded to each other's arguments. But that wasn't the case. None of the discussants showed any evidence that their opinion had in any way been influenced by the arguments they heard. And

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<sup>1</sup>Karl Franklin has had a great influence on my life. As director of SIL-PNG, in 1974 he assigned me to my first linguistic survey in the Western province and suggested that we (my family) could stay in Papua New Guinea rather than waiting longer for visas to go on to our assignment in Indonesia. Later, in 1979, he gave me a prepublication version of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors we live by*, which struck a cord in my thinking, followed later by a photocopy of Haj Ross' *human linguistics*. We changed places as director and as executive committee chairman of SIL-PNG. After I left SIL we have continued a correspondence on various topics, one of them being the issue of emic versus etic levels of analysis of linguistic structures, such as stories. Some of the points raised in that correspondence are weaved into this essay. I hope he and other readers will enjoy these thoughts.

suddenly I realized with a shock, even felt physically: that's always the way it is. Saying something to somebody: how can you expect that it matters? The stream of thoughts, images and emotions that continually goes through us, that strong stream has such an enormous power that it would be a miracle if it didn't drag all the words that someone speaks to us along and render them to oblivion, if not by accident, sheer accident, they would fit in with one's own words. Is it any different with me? I thought. Have I ever really listened to someone else? Have I ever absorbed the other person with his words in such a way that my inner stream of consciousness changed course? [my translation from the Dutch version, Mercier 2007:134.]

Although we may recognize such emotions after some confused, inconclusive exchange between people, often enough we experience—or at least have the illusion—that our communication with fellow human beings has been successful. Human communication most typically involves language. Of course, there are many paralinguistic modes that play important roles, such as facial expressions, gestures, social and physical distance, but here I want to focus on the human-specific medium that we call language. When we consider for a moment what a 'language' actually constitutes, it seems to me that true mutual understanding between any two people is a remarkable achievement.

The answer to the question 'What is a language?' can be something like the following:

A language is a collection of virtual signs and rules stored in the minds of individual members of a certain collectivity of humans which are realized in utterances that are the product of communicative acts between these individuals. [My translation of *Une langue est une ensemble de signes virtuels et des règles conservés dans l'esprit des individus d'une certaine collectivité humaine et s'actualisant dans des énoncés qui sont le produit d'actes de communication entre ces individus* (Lazard 2006:63)]

And in order for communication to be successful, any two (or larger set of) individuals need to have the same set of signs and rules. In other words, the language needs to be exactly the same in the minds of interacting people. But our common experience teaches us that this is not the case. As is common knowledge among linguists since the classic works by Wilhelm Von Humboldt and Edward Sapir, to name but a couple, there are all kinds of variations among individual speakers, as also Gilbert Lazard (2006:65) points out, which can lead to the break-down of communication, from a relative minor misunderstanding among family members to complete incomprehension among speakers of mutually unintelligible speech forms.

Since the way we say things—another characterization of what language is, suggested by William Foley (1997:29)—is inextricably linked to the social network in which we grow up (Sapir 1921:11, 218), the linguistic enterprise has to take all levels of language variation into consideration. This is especially true if we want to contribute to an understanding of who we are as humans and how we transfer our thoughts to each other. This is the way I would phrase the goal of linguistic researchers, following Haj Ross' appeal for "human linguistics":

if we could really understand communication it seems to me that's a field where we linguists should be involved and haven't been enough a real understanding of communication would be a heck of a gift to the world (Ross 1982:2) [...] so basically I

guess human linguistics as I see it is concerned with looking at the relationship between knowledge and wisdom as that pertains to the study of language (Ross 1982:7) [...] I think that any of you and there are probably lots of you who have learned a foreign language you know it changes your soul basically you *are* a new language you are a new person in that language (Ross 1982:29) [following Ross' lack of punctuation and lay-out].

The title of this paper promises some thoughts on what effect a word may have on a human being. It was inspired by my experience with Usan, a Papuan language spoken by approximately one thousand four hundred people in the Madang province of Papua New Guinea (Reesink 1987). In this language there are no other lexical items to refer to speech than *qob*; it can be used to refer to a word, an utterance, a speech variety, a language, and so on. Moreover, Usan speakers use this word to convey meanings such as 'problem' or related concepts, showing a close parallelism with Tok Pisin *tok*; for example, *Qob ue* 'talk no' is equivalent to Tok Pisin *Nogat tok*, when the speaker wants to express that 's/he has nothing to say', or 'sees no problem'. In other words, what difference does a word, a story or speaking a different language make to our understanding or action?

This example already exemplifies one of the topics I want to address, that of translation equivalence. First however, I will consider the relation between thought and language. In section 2 I relate the use of language to 'reality', and in section 3 I will argue that the distinction between propositional and metaphorical use of language is only a matter of degree, not a qualitative difference. Section 4 will address translatability, and in the conclusion I will reiterate that the words or languages we speak do make a difference, and how that difference can be for good, rather than for evil.

## 2 Language and reality

Being a symbolic species (Deacon 1997), humans interact with physical and social reality through language. And we know, each language cuts up the pie of reality with different segments, colors, and texture. The *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005) lists almost seven thousand living languages at present, with the great majority of the world's people speaking a language of the large Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan language families; ninety-five percent of the living languages total only six percent of the world population. In the past, before the enormous expansions of some language families, the diversity must have been far greater than what we see today.

But even today, the diversity of speech varieties is many times greater than the figure attached to recognized languages. Language, like culture, is an abstraction, an idealization of the behavior and traits of individual human beings who are in close (daily, frequent, geographically) contact (see, for example, Sapir 1921, 2002).

As a child learns a (first, second, etc.) language, s/he learns to associate strings of sounds (words, phrases, sentences) with certain effects (= understandings, consequences in behavioral responses from others): symbols are acquired, consisting of Form-Meaning pairings. Such a Form-Meaning pairing

was named tagmeme by Kenneth Pike (1971, 1982), and more recently the term construction seems to capture a very similar concept (Goldberg 1995, Croft 2001). These constructions have a tight, but not inseparable, relation between Form and Meaning. They are being interpreted, tested by certain expansions, extended to other situations, and corrected or confirmed by other members of the speech community. For example, a Dutch toddler may at first use the form *mama* to address or refer to various adults in his daily environment, but then learns to limit the form to his (biological, adopted) female care-giver, in contrast to using *tante* for other related older females.

From the beginning, the child learns to construe reality according to the conventionalized conceptualizations and verbalizations of his/her immediate society (group).

Constructions, whether just lexemes (words or morphemes) or more complex morphosyntactic arrangements, are conventionalized throughout the community. As the child grows up surrounded with the rich linguistic input from parents, siblings, friends, and others, s/he acts like a true scientist, forming hypotheses and testing these, as s/he goes about constructing his/her (private) language (Tomasello 2003).

Two examples will illustrate this process. When a four year old Dutch boy says at the end of dinner, *Mag ik af tafel* ('May I off table') instead of the correct *Mag ik van tafel af* ('May I of/from table off' = 'May I be excused'), he uses the 'original' ablative notion of *af* 'off'. It is quite conceivable that in a small community this might give rise to a new construction; now his hypothesis with regard to the behavior of *af* will be disconfirmed by answers such as *Ja, jij mag van tafel af* ('Yes, you may of/from table off').

The Dutch equivalent for 'fairy-tale' is *sprookje*, containing a lexicalized diminutive [-je]; the form *sprook* does not occur by itself. My granddaughter, at the age of two years and ten months, characterized a long story I had read to her as a *sprook*. She was corrected: *Ja, dat was een lang sprookje* 'yes, that was a long fairy-tale'. Her response was: 'Well, then it is a *sprook*, if it is so long, right?' She had clearly developed an understanding of the bound morpheme [-je] meaning 'something small', and this meaning did not seem appropriate in this context. Her sensible hypothesis received disconfirmation by the conventionalized lexicalization offered by her grandfather.

These anecdotal examples are representative of a large body of literature favoring the idea that we acquire language in a social process (e.g., Vygotsky (1962), Sampson (1997), Tomasello (2003), and Goldberg (2004)) rather than through a genetically programmed Universal Grammar (e.g., Chomsky (1968), Bickerton (1981), and Pinker (1994, 2007)). As Sapir (1921:147ff) has already pointed out, each individual forms a slightly different variety of the language spoken in her/his immediate environment. But the individual differences are overshadowed by the major agreements between members of the speech community to which we belong. Those major agreements form the grooves along which we categorize social and physical reality. I think this implies that my reality is slightly different from that of other members of the speech community

I belong to. And the shared reality as experienced by my speech community is different from the realities of other languages.

The concept of linguistic relativity is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which has been ignored or countered by linguists and psychologists working within the Chomskyan paradigm. Most recently, Steven Pinker (1994, 2007) has debunked the principle of linguistic relativity in favor of some innate, specialized language instinct, in spite of the increasing evidence that the language we speak does influence the way we perceive and interact with the objective physical and social reality we belong to. Following John Lucy (1992), a series of publications by Stephen Levinson and colleagues (Levinson et al. 2002, Levinson 2003, Majid et al. 2004) has shown that speakers of languages with an absolute frame of reference for spatial orientation (anchoring in the environment by means of cardinal directions or elevational dimensions of the landscape) respond differently in non-linguistic tasks from speakers of languages with a relative frame of reference (anchored to position of speaker or object, using orientations such as “left” and “right”).

Work by Maurizio Gentilucci and associates (Gentilucci et al. 2000, Gentilucci 2003) shows that cognitive functions such as language have an effect on visuo-motor transformation in the brain. For example, in their experiments subjects were asked to reach and grasp objects on which were printed the Italian words *vicino* ‘near’ versus *lontan* ‘far’ or *piccolo* ‘small’ versus *grande* ‘large’. The kinematics of the initial phase of reaching-grasping was affected by the meaning of the printed words. When instructions involved the verbs *posta* ‘place’ versus *alza* ‘lift’ or the adjectives *laterale* ‘lateral’ versus *alto* ‘high’, a greater influence of verbs than of adjectives was observed on the kinematics of the action. In a similar vein, work by Gary Lupyan (2006) and associates (Lupyan et al. 2007) shows that the availability of verbal labels helps humans acquire or use category information.

These experimental findings underscore earlier claims by linguists such as Edward Sapir, Benjamin Whorf, and Dwight Bolinger:

[...] seeing of like and unlike, of putting together and classifying apart, is more than a casual though daily occurrence. It is the mechanism through which reality is organized and the whole construct of language is built, in all its forms, rules, and applications. The world is a vast elaborated METAPHOR. (Bolinger 1980:141)

Different languages provide speakers with different sets of form-meaning pairs, or metaphors we live by (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), through which we deal with reality. Let me quote again from Bolinger (1980:67): “Meanings demand forms to represent them, but forms equally reach out to meanings. In large degree we find in the world outside us what our language leads us to expect to find.”

Thus, the Dutch propensity to use diminutives—far more than in closely related German<sup>2</sup>—has produced the lexical form *sprookje* to which my granddaughter attached the meaning ‘small story’, which was then corrected by further input from the conventionalized language of her grandfather.

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<sup>2</sup>For example, a Dutch speaker can ask: *bier-tje* [beer-DIMINUTIVE]? as equivalent to ‘Do you want a beer?’; we even have the diminutive on adverbs, such as *even-tje-s* [briefly-DIMINUTIVE-PLURAL].

### 3 Propositional and metaphorical language

Given that we use language to represent what we understand of reality and to inform each other about what we think (in the broadest terms: our understanding of our environment, our feelings and intentions), it is not difficult to see why Bolinger (1973) could claim that “Truth is a linguistic question.” In that article, and in a much more elaborated presentation in his book *Language, the loaded weapon* (1980), he is on a crusade against forms of language used to manipulate or deceive people. “Truth is that quality of language by which we inform ourselves” (Bolinger 1973:542), which is opposed to both unconscious and deliberate falsehood, a contrast rather akin to what Eve Danziger (2006:261-262) claims to be the basic philosophy of the Mopan Maya, tied to the meaning of *tus*. This word does not just cover English ‘lie’, but any perceived discrepancy between someone’s words and the actual state of affairs, such as simple ‘errors’. Danziger’s account of Mopan *tus* suggests to me a high degree of similarity with the meaning of Tok Pisin *giaman*, which in turn translates easily both the Usan noun *qetopur* ‘lie’ and adverb *gag*, ‘jokingly’. But truth is not necessarily or only conveyed by what we call literal or propositional expressions. In fact, Bolinger claims that “the most insidious of all concepts of truth is that of literalness,” as, for example, in the advertising slogan of the oil industry ‘no heating costs less than oil heat’, which must be true, because no heating costs nothing at all!

He goes on to show how certain constructions in English, such as passive and nominalization, can be exploited to hide who is responsible for a particular event. Politicians in particular are prone to use such devices. It would be interesting to find out exactly how speakers of languages with no passive and much less propensity to form abstract nouns can play around with alternative constructions to express degrees of control or responsibility.

To give just two examples, Usan allows suppression of responsible source of information by means of a switch reference chain in which one of the participants is only indexed by a third person, different subject marker, as in the sequences *qamarari igonei* ‘you have heard them say’ and *gab qamarari iguminei* ‘we have heard them say (that) they had seen’ in an excerpt of a discussion (1):

- (1) Ne        dar-ab            qamar-ari        ig-onei        qi?  
 2SG    come.down-SS    say-2/3PL.DS    hear-2SG.FP    QUEST  
 ‘Have you heard them say it (when/after) they came down?’

In    iro        bai-a            qamb        namanimun    qas        gum-at  
 1PL   across   take-3SG.DS    say.SS        letter            only        write-SS  
       big-a            g-ab        qamar-ari        ig-uminei  
       put-2/3SG.DS    see-SS    say -2/3PL.DS    hear-1PL.FP  
 ‘We have only heard (them) say that they had seen that he had written and sent a letter saying he had taken (=married) over there.’

A very nice example of how Folopa speakers (Gulf Province, PNG) can exploit the distinction between ergative and absolutive pronouns is provided in (2) and (3) from Neil Anderson and Martha Wade (1988:7).

- (2) No-ó            kale naaꝔ o    make    ɛ            di-ale-pó.  
 brother-VOC the    your sago young 1SG.ABS cut.down-PAST-INDICATIVE  
 ‘Brother, I (mistakenly) cut down your young sago tree.’
- (3) No-ó            kale naaꝔ o    make    yaꝔo        di-ale-pó.  
 brother-VOC the    your sago young 1SG.ERG cut.down-PAST-INDICATIVE  
 ‘Brother, I (intentionally) cut down your young sago tree.’

When discussing these examples, R. M. W. Dixon (1994:32) suggests that the labels of ergative versus absolutive seem inappropriate for a language with semantically based marking, and that here the term ergative may be better replaced by ‘controller’ for the ergative. Thus, a Folopa speaker can indicate that a controllable event did come about without his intention and thus avoid the dire consequences of retribution.

Because any language is but a limited medium in which to express the rich world of all aspects of external states of affairs and all the nuances of our inner feelings and thoughts, speakers have to press certain forms into various services, yielding polysemous and metaphorical expressions. Foreshadowing George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s work (1980), Benjamin Whorf (1956:205) discusses the basic metaphor TIME = SPACE in English and other Standard Average European languages. He claims that this metaphor is largely absent in Hopi, except for a few traces of space-related items used to indicate temporal concepts, because the language has abundant lexical and morphological means to express temporal concepts as such.

Another example of how the language we speak presents a footprint of the culture as conventionalized by previous generations of speakers as they categorized and conceptualized the physical environment in which they lived is provided by the Usan verbs used for ‘entering a house’ (Reesink 1987:6). As in many other (Papuan) languages, the spatial orientation system has lexicalized elevational distinctions in many ways. Motion verbs are mono-morphemic forms expressing elevational information and direction, as given in (4) with forms used for ‘Same Subject following’.

(4) Spatial orientation in Usan verbs for ‘enter’

	UP	DOWN	ACROSS
<b>go</b> away from Deictic Center	ir-ab	is-ub	qi-b
<b>come</b> towards Deictic Center	di-ab	dar-ab	yar-ab

Most modern houses, *munai*, are built on stilts. The ‘inside’ of a house or other enclosures is expressed by the form *mor*, most likely derived from *mon* ‘nest’, which is the base for the term *munai* ‘house’ (*ai* is ‘ground’). Thus, it seems strange at first to learn that going into a house is *mor isub* ‘inside going down’. When one is inside a house, however, one may invite someone to come in by saying *mor di*

‘inside come up.IMPERATIVE’, which seems to make more sense. But these two verbs are not the direct opposites we would expect from the array given.

This discrepancy can be explained when we consider the traditional houses that the Usan speakers used to build. They were rectangular structures built directly on the ground. The door opening contained a low fence with steps leading up to the threshold and down to the dirt floor inside. From the outside one had to go up first in order to enter, so the person functioning as deictic center first saw someone coming up. To actually enter a house, one had to ‘descend’, *mor isub*.

## 4 Translatability

The article I quoted in the introduction, Ross (1982), presents a beautiful Dutch poem and shows how the poetess exploits sound, rhyme, and semantic collocations to convey her sense of being born with a purpose. For his English speaking audience, Ross had to give a translation and explain in addition the special effects that make the poem so powerful in Dutch. My guess is that he and the audience did get a feel for the poetic message, but not the same as a native speaker does. What’s more, my experience with Dutch poetry and Dutch native speakers has taught me that no two native speakers get the same understanding of any poem.

To what extent can poetry be translated from one language into another? I would like to illustrate this problem in (5) by comparing Dutch and English versions of the same poem, *Psalmen en andere gedichten*, by a highly esteemed Dutch poet Leo Vroman (1999) who, as a biochemist, has lived and worked in the USA for more than 50 years.<sup>3</sup>

The poem is labelled a Psalm, but the Jewish poet has no need of a personal god. His work as a haematologist has given him a deep understanding of our biological nature, and he seems to hold a view of nature close to the concept developed by the Dutch philosopher Spinoza, some three hundred years ago.<sup>4</sup> Although the English version is a good poem in and of itself, and the general gist is similar to the Dutch version, there are significant differences in the imagery and hence the conveyed meaning.

### (5) Comparison of a poem in Dutch with its English equivalent

	Psalm 1
Systeem! Gij spitst geen oog of baard	System! Thou showest eye nor beard,
en draagt geen slepend kleed; hij die in U een man ontwaart misvormt U naar zijn eigen aard waar hij ook niets van weet	cold cloth or golden throne, and he who claims You have appeared an image of his own distorts Thee equally unknown just as unjustly feared

<sup>3</sup>With kind permission from the publisher, Querido, and Leo Vroman.

<sup>4</sup>For a very readable overview of Spinoza’s life and ideas, see Nadler (1999).



Systeem, ik noem U dus geen God  
geen Heer of ander Woord  
waarvan men gave en gebod  
en wraak verwacht en tot wiens genot  
men volkeren vermoordt.

Systeem! Lijf dat op niets gelijkt,  
Aard van ons hier en nu,  
ik voel mij diep door U bereikt  
en als daardoor mijn tijd verstrijkt  
ben ik nog meer van U  
Vroman (1999:7)

System, I dare not call Thee Lord  
God, or by some such Name  
for which men begged You to afford  
the slaughter of some heathen horde  
that loved Thee all the same.

System! Your body must exist  
in me unknown to mine.  
I sense Its Harbor like a Fist  
fading into a Final Mist  
once all this will be Thine.  
Vroman (1999:137)

Firstly, the last three lines of the first stanza in the Dutch poem in my opinion express more powerfully, aided by meter and rhyme, the pitfall of attempting to form an image of the overall system we belong to, even if personified by the vocative. A more literal translation reads: “he, who discerns in you a man, distorts you after his own nature, of which he also knows nothing.” Secondly, the second stanza conveys not only the concept of a god dictating ethnocide, but also characteristics of the Old Testament figure: “from whom one expects gift and commandment and revenge, and for whose pleasure one murders nations.” Finally, the third stanza in Dutch achieves a more satisfying connection between the timelessness of Nature and our fleeting existence as part of it: “System! Body that resembles nothing, nature of our here-and-now, I feel myself deeply touched by you, and if thereby my time passes on, I am even more (part) of you.”

Obviously, my more literal translation is only a weak attempt to convey the richness and depth of the Dutch poem. The poet himself has created a related poem in his second language, with a similar—dare I say ‘the same’?—theme, which no doubt has a different impact on a native speaker of English than it has on me.

A Dutch theologian responding to this poem pointed out that Vroman does address the impersonal System, but clearly this does not imply that this concept is even close to what Christians mean when they address or refer to God. The meaning of a word or construction is inextricably linked to the network of meanings that make up one’s language.

In 2007 a Dutch Catholic bishop made an attempt to bridge the widening rift between factions in Dutch society, after a xenophobic member of parliament expressed his intent to move a ban on the Koran. The bishop suggested replacing the word ‘God’ in Dutch by the word ‘Allah’. His reasoning was that a unified name for the Supreme Being would bring Christians and Muslims closer, and during his years in Indonesia he was used to referring to his God by the name of *Allah*. In fact, it is a common usage in Indonesia, and a requirement of the Indonesian Bible Society that any Bible translation in a vernacular employs this term for the biblical God. This unorthodox proposal made all the press. It was clearly well-meant, and was a far more positive approach to the Dutch Muslims than the hostile rhetoric of the mentioned parliamentarian. But obviously, *Allah* in Dutch means something completely different than it does in Indonesian.

Even within the same language, it is clear that the same word does not mean the same thing to all members of the speech community. Recently, Klaas Hendrikse, a Dutch pastor of the newly amalgamated reformed churches, wrote a book with the title *Geloven in een God die niet bestaat, manifest van een atheïstische dominee* (2007) ‘Believing in a God who does not exist, manifest of an atheist pastor’. This seems to contain a glaring oxymoron. To really understand what Hendrikse means one must read the book. Here is a small passage that may give a glimpse of his reasoning. It is headed by a quote from an American author (Muriel Rukeyser 1913-1980):

The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.

What God means to you is part of your life story. Thus God is not just a word by itself, but part of a story that unfolds during your whole life and travels with you. Your story is never just yours, others are co-authors to it, and it wants to be told to others. You only become human when you come to yourself [here, a Dutch idiom is used that lacks an English parallel: *op verhaal komen* is literally ‘come onto story’ and it expresses the English ‘come round, recuperate, catch one’s breath’], when you tell yourself to others. (Hendrikse 2007:120 )

In other words, Hendrikse uses ‘story’ as a metaphor for our life, intertwined with people we meet on the way, who in a sense are co-authors. In that story, he claims, some events take place for which we, because we happen to have grown up in the Netherlands, coin the word and concept of GOD, even though this God does not exist, like, say, an apple-cake. In other cultures, people use different concepts and words to make sense of life’s vagaries.

Given all that, is translation possible at all?

Doug Hofstadter, in his delightful book *Le ton beau de Marot* (1997), would seem to make a strong case for a positive answer. The noun phrase *ton beau* ‘beautiful tone’, because of the assimilation of the alveolar nasal to a bilabial [m] preceding the bilabial stop [b], is homophonous with the noun *tombeau* ‘tomb’ on which a witty love poem is written. It is this French poem that he and other writers translate in a number of English versions, maintaining meter and rhyme schemes. A remarkable performance!

George Grace writes:

There is a long history of denials that translation is really possible, of assertions that it is impossible to separate what is being said from the way it is said. The best proof that translation is possible is that it is being done constantly. And surely it works; a vast number of transactions are accomplished in the world every day which would not have been possible without translation. (1981:37)

After he has asserted that we can separate what we say from the way we say things, because we do remember semantic content even if we can’t repeat the exact form, Grace does admit that there is some merit to the opposing case. Indeed, Hofstadter (1997:427; 450) asserts that “each language inhabits a world slightly different from all other languages, and so it has certain special terms whose meanings cannot be expressed concisely in other languages.” Thus he agrees with Bolinger (1980:69) in admitting that it is impossible to distinguish “the WHAT she said [...from] the WAY she said it.”

Hofstadter's conclusion is that translation may not capture the fine grained subtleties embedded in single words or expressions, but that a larger chunk of text is able to convey an efficient transmission of experience and attitude. I think, in this sense, Vroman's English poem may qualify as a translation or close paraphrase of the Dutch psalm.

## 5 Conclusion: the enigma of mutual understanding

In the preceding sections I have given examples of single lexical items, morphosyntactic constructions, and a small discourse in the form of a poem that can only truly be understood within the larger system to which they belong, known as LANGUAGE. In my view the process of translation from one language to another is similar to, and only quantitatively different from, the process of transmission of information between any two members of the same speech community. Any language, including the zillions of idiolects, is a coherent system of form-meaning composites, what Pike has called the EMIC level as opposed to ETIC variations which may be random or conditioned. When no two emic systems are exactly the same, how is it that we humans can transfer meaning to one another, that translation of various bodies of text (oral or written) has gone on since the first diversification of human speech in separate dialects and languages?

I may sound like an extreme linguistic relativist; in fact, I think I am one. But I am not sure what this phrase means to every reader of this essay (if there are any). To me, it means that I will have to account for the enigma of mutual understanding and effective translation. As Grace said, it happens all the time. Yes, but as Lazard warns, misunderstandings also happen all the time. The solution lies in what Hofstadter said about the levels of granularity and what Pike (1982:131) said about the common experiences of all human beings. We share our basic cognitive faculty with all conspecifics in that we are social beings, able to acquire a symbolic system with which we communicate. Our biologically given Theory of Mind allows us to adapt the form-meaning pairs we hear into very similar form-meaning pairings as part of our own individual emic system. Although occasionally we notice a mismatch between our understanding and that of our speech partner, the many conventions of either our native or our acquired culture enable us to overcome such gaps with sufficient success.

In this process all of us need not just a basic intelligence, but a more encompassing wisdom (see Sternberg 2007). The word *wise* is etymologically related to Gothic *wītan*, Old Indic *veda* 'I know'; the same stem is found in Latin *videre* 'see' and Greek *οἶδα* 'know'. The adjectives for 'wise' in Indo-European languages are

in the majority of cases connected with words of intellectual force as 'know, think, understand, mind', yet have come to mean something more than mere 'knowing', etc., that is, they usually imply also good sense, sound judgment, etc. (Buck 1988:1213)

It is not strange then that equivalents for 'wisdom' in Papuan languages are likewise connected to 'knowing' or 'seeing', even if these words or expressions have slightly different positions in the topology of different emic systems.

Words, languages, they do make a difference to our understanding of reality, including who we are, since we are part of Vroman's system or Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*. In our social context it is important to (i) have the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, (ii) the courage to change what we can, and (iii) the wisdom to know the difference (Reinhold Niebuhr). It is through wisdom that minor misunderstandings and major conflicts can be resolved, that different emic systems can be linked to mutual understanding.

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