

## THE TRANSPARENCY OF WORDS: A POLANYIAN EXPLANATION FOR THE PROCESS OF TRANSLATION

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to relate Polanyi's philosophy to Translation Studies. It is suggested that Polanyi's description of communication as a triad of triads be extended to translation, which can then be described as a sequence of five tacit integrations. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that Polanyi's concepts can provide a theoretical underpinning to some empirical findings of research on translation.

In this paper I will attempt to establish a link between Polanyi's theory of sense-giving and sense-reading within the structure of tacit knowing, on the one hand and the so called *théorie du sens*, on the other. This French term refers to a school of thought within Translation Studies, which is a relatively new interdisciplinary field on the border of linguistics, discourse analysis, literary studies, and cultural studies, among others. I am an applied linguist, a translation scholar, and a translator of various texts by Michael Polanyi. As a linguist, I fully agree with Chris Goodman's claim about Polanyi: "In the area of linguistics his work, as in so many other areas, foreshadowed the direction of future inquiry" (Goodman 2003: 149).

Nevertheless, apart from a few sporadic references to his theory of personal knowledge or *The Tacit Dimension*, Polanyi's work is virtually unknown among theoretical and applied linguists. This ignorance and ignoring of Polanyi by linguists is all the more peculiar when we consider the fact that in his Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading, Polanyi set out to "[o]utline the total structure of language, comprising both its formal patterns successfully established by modern linguistics and its informal semantic structure, studied so far mainly by philosophy" (Polanyi 1969: 181).

One explanation for the lack of interest in Polanyi on the part of the followers of Saussure and Chomsky can be found in the fact that the realm of inquiry for theoretical linguists has always been the abstract *language*, while Polanyi was concerned with *discourse*, i.e. with actual language use. Polanyi was well aware of the peculiarities of modern linguistics when he wrote: "The brilliant advances of modern linguistics in phonology and generative grammar have cast no new light on the strange fact that language means something" (Polanyi 1969: 192). Or: "The fact that language is nothing unless it has conscious meaning was set aside as a temporary difficulty for modern, strictly empirical linguistics" (Polanyi 1969: 195).

Indeed, Polanyi's view of language was markedly different from many of his contemporaries, linguists and philosophers alike. However, it was akin to Peirce's, the late Wittgenstein's, and to Austin's. As I have found no reference in Polanyi's writings to Austin, I assume that he was not familiar with the ideas of the founder of speech act theory, which has by now infiltrated into discourse analysis, a relatively new field of linguistics. Philosopher of language, John Austin (1911–1960) was Polanyi's contemporary, whose influential speech act theory was first made public in the William James lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955 (accidentally in the same place and in the same year as Chomsky delivered his lectures on *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*), but his seminal book *How to Do Things with Words* was not published until 1962. As Polanyi's theory of language took shape earlier, already in Chapter 5 of *Personal Knowledge*, this may give an explanation to his being oblivious of Austin's theory.

Differently from Chomsky and similarly to Polanyi, Austin was concerned with actual language use: with utterances and not abstract sentences. Austin's work triggered the emergence of a new discipline, pragmatics, which studies the purposes for which sentences are used and attends to the real world conditions under which a sentence is used as an utterance. In this view, the message of an utterance has three aspects: a *sense* or reference to events, persons or objects; a *force*, which expresses what the speaker does by saying something; and an *effect*, which is the possible consequence of what has been said. Similarly to Polanyi, Austin is not concerned with semantic reference – i.e. *meaning* as a simple appendage of a word –, or Saussure's view of the word as an arbitrary sign whose meaning derives from its relationship with other signs. Instead, he focuses on what Kripke (1977) calls *speaker's reference*. Semantic reference or *meaning* belongs to the language system while sense or *speaker's reference* is related to actual language use.

Translation is also concerned with sense and not with abstract meaning, with discourse and not language. While a word in the dictionary may have several meanings, in actual language use words are seldom polysemic. Similarly, a text to be translated is a piece of discourse, which is interpreted unambiguously by the translator. The sense of the words is created by the translator's tacit integration.

In Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading, which was first published in 1967 and then became the 12th chapter of *Knowing and Being* in 1969, Polanyi describes the process of a person's reporting their experiences to a friend in a letter as a triad of triads,

[a] sequence of three integrations. The *first* is an intelligent understanding of sights and events, the *second* the composing of a verbal account of this experience, and the *third* the interpretation of this verbal account with a view to reproducing the experience which is reported. (Polanyi 1969: 186)

Here Polanyi provides an insight into a situation with two protagonists sharing a common language. By adding another person and two further triads, Polanyi's

description of monolingual communication can be extended to translation, i.e. interlingual communication. Supposing the letter was written in English to a Hungarian friend whose wife does not understand English, her husband will translate the letter to her into Hungarian. Now the husband has two intertwined roles (similarly to the writer of the original letter): he will be both a sense-reader and a sense-giver. What he communicates to his wife in Hungarian is how he has interpreted the letter, which is not necessarily the same as what the writer of the letter experienced or not even what he intended to communicate. When the wife reads the letter of her husband's English friend in Hungarian translation, the Englishman's experiences will reach her after several conversions: first the writer of the letter converted his experiences into words, then the translator converted his interpretation of the report on experiences into the words of another language, and now the reader of the translated letter is trying to understand what her husband's English traveller friend experienced. *Quod erat demonstrandum*: translation is a sequence of five tacit integrations, of five triads.

Despite the fact, however, that the process of translation can be described with Polanyi's concepts, Translation Studies, the discipline which investigates the process and product of translation, has not drawn on the theory of tacit integration. To my knowledge, mine is the first attempt to relate Polanyi's philosophy to Translation Studies. Although many translation theorists lean on philosophical discourses, Polanyi's work has so far been unknown to them.

The relationship between Translation Studies and philosophy is extensively discussed by an influential translation scholar, Anthony Pym, who establishes three ways of it:

1. Philosophers of various kinds have used translation as a case study or metaphor for issues of more general application.
2. Translation theorists and practitioners have referred to philosophical discourses for support and authority for their ideas.
3. Philosophers, scholars and translators have commented on the translation of philosophical discourses. (Pym 2002: 1)

When discussing philosophy as authority for the theorization about translation under point 2, Pym mentions the *théorie du sens* as a counter-example:

[s]ome translation theories have managed to flourish without reference to any philosophical authority at all. The *théorie du sens* developed by Danica Seleskovich (*sic!*) in Paris claims that one translates 'sense', not words. The exact nature of this 'sense', however, remains virtually untheorized. (Pym 2002: 13)

Seleskovitch (1968) was the first to do large scale experiments on consecutive interpreting, and her work was continued by Marianne Lederer (1981), who investigated simultaneous interpreting. The long interpreting and teaching experience

of both of them and the observation of a large corpus of speeches in different languages followed by their interpretations give considerable validity to their findings. This is how Lederer has summed up the results recently: “The most noticeable phenomenon in interpreting is that sounds disappear but sense remains, there must therefore be a ‘deverbalization’ phase between understanding and reformulation” (Lederer 2005: 1).

It is not only Pym, who expresses a need for a theoretical underpinning of the phenomenon of ‘deverbalization’, but one of Seleskovitch’s followers, García-Landa, also claims that besides describing ‘deverbalization’, a theoretical explanation would be required as well. García-Landa was the one to coin the expression *théorie du sens*, and he himself explains that

It is not a ‘theory’, that is, an *explicatio*, but exactly the opposite, an *explicandum*. It is not a theory, it is a fact, the monumental fact of translation [...] and of language, the essential phenomenon, what the theory has to explain. For it to be a theory, it would have to explain or make understandable what the *sens* (meaning meant) is, whether it is a mental representation or a perception or what. (García-Landa 1995: 390)

I am firmly convinced that the proponents of the *théorie du sens* would have leaned on Polanyi’s philosophy if it had been known to them. As a matter of fact, Polanyi’s theory of tacit integration could be the *explicatio* for the *théorie du sens*. In view of what we have learnt from Polanyi, it is the producer or the receiver of the text who establishes the relation between the signifier and the signified by switching the focus of their attention *from* the word *to* what it denotes. According to a Polanyian explanation, what Seleskovitch and Lederer call ‘deverbalization’ with the words disappearing and only the sense remaining is rather a process of the interpreter’s attending *from* a subsidiary *to* a focus on which the subsidiary is brought to bear. The words of a text do not disappear when we understand them before translating the (spoken or written) text into another language, they only become transparent. Tacit integration “deprives the word of its existence as an observed body and makes it in a way transparent” (Polanyi 1969: 192).

García-Landa mentions it in his paper that in the 1950s he studied philosophy of language in Germany. Then from 1976, he became a PhD student in Translation Studies on the Sorbonne. In his paper, he makes references to a great number of philosophers ranging from Ayer to Wittgenstein. He must have been familiar with all the major works within the humanities that mattered in Germany and France in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Michael Polanyi’s works were not among them. We can only hope that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century more and more scholars will discover that “Polanyi’s theory of meaning ... is a rich, virtually untapped resource for contemporary thought” (Gulick 1992–93: 8). It seems very probable that the newly emerging cognitive linguistics, which strives to link syntax and semantics while assigning a

central role to meaning in the investigation of language will sooner or later discover Polanyi for linguistics.

In this paper I have made an attempt to tap this rich resource and to find the conceptual pattern in Polanyi's theory of sense-giving and sense-reading to explain what the followers of the *théorie du sens* discovered and described.\*

\* An earlier version of this paper was read at the conference Reconsidering Polanyi, Budapest, June 2008.

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