

Translation: Nature and Issues

COGS 200

September 23, 2014

Interesting talk

- What: Dr. Lisa Matthewson's Inaugural Professorial Lecture
- When: 3:30, Friday, September 26
- Where: Lillooet Room, Irving K. Barber Learning Centre

"From Frege to fieldwork: Adventures of a cross-linguistic semanticist"

ABSTRACT. Any speaker of a language can understand a potentially infinite number of utterances in that language. A formal semanticist's goal is to explain this ability: how do our finite cognitive resources enable us to understand any novel utterance? As cognitive scientists we must explain this ability not just for well-studied languages like English, but for any human language a child might be exposed to. We must therefore undertake cross-linguistic semantic research, and we need to do it urgently given the threat of imminent mass language extinction. In this talk I present some core results from my career-in-progress as a cross-linguistic semanticist. I summarize what we have found out so far about semantic uniformity and diversity across languages, and address the current debate about methodological best practices. I conclude with a manifesto for where the field of formal semantics needs to go next.

Learning goals

- Translation
 - Why?
 - What constitutes translation
 - Translating style
 - Translating meaning
- Some aspects of meaning
 - Denotation, connotation
 - Implicature
 - Other ways to look at defining meaning
 - Meaning and context
- Meaning and translation

The need for translation

- Diversification of language
 - Geographical
 - Cultural
- Responses to diversification
 - **Learn** lots of languages: 9 languages will enable you to communicate with 90% of the world's population
 - **Unify**: Latin, English, Esperanto
 - **Isolate**: Edo period Japan, Albania
 - **Translate**



Back in the day...

“Now, it is the fashion of the time to heap contempt and scorn upon [the study of human reason]; and the matron mourns, forlorn and forsaken, like Hecuba:

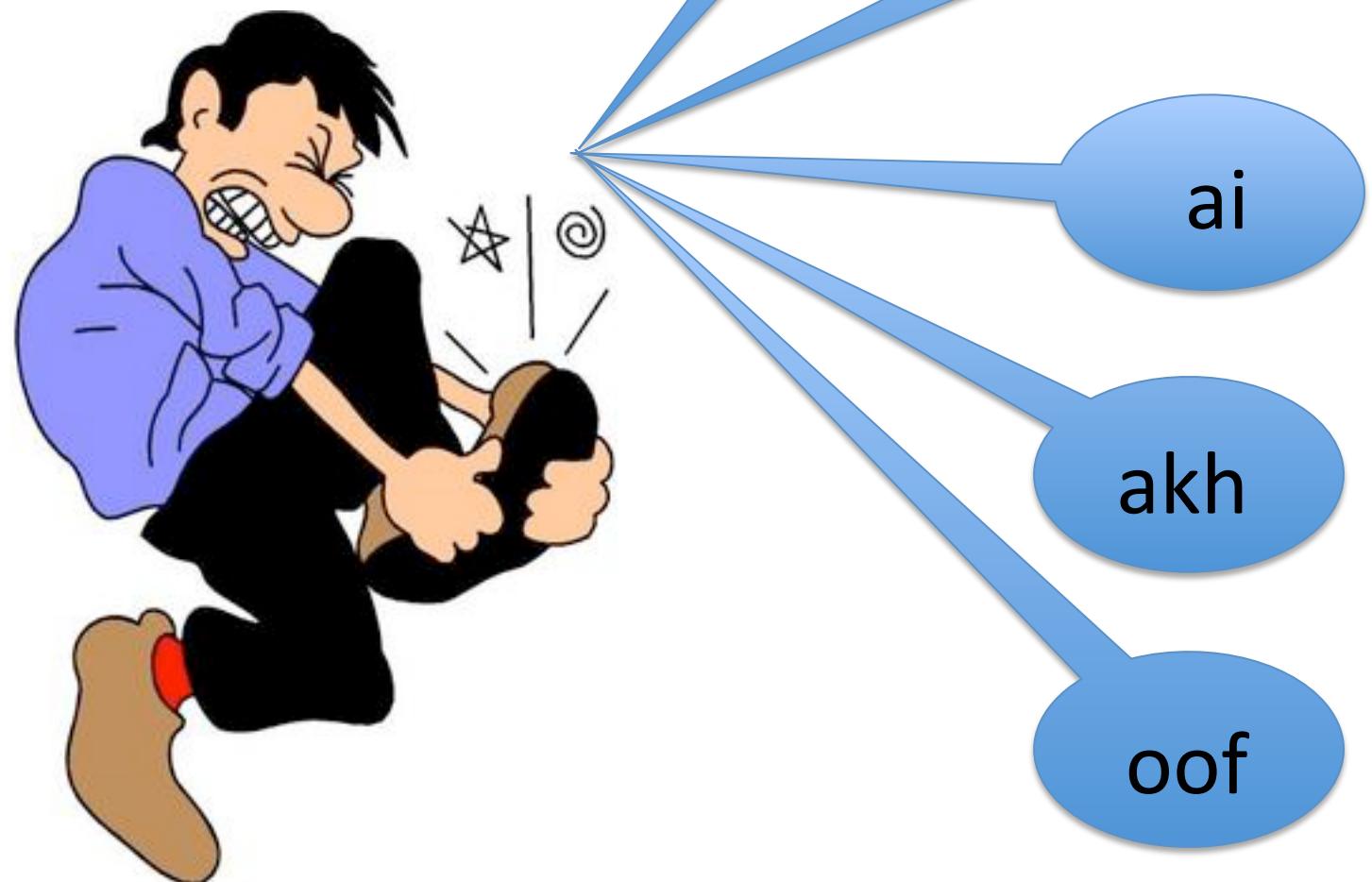
Modo maxima rerum,
Tot generis, natisque potens ...
Nunc trahor exul, inops.

— Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. xiii”

Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)

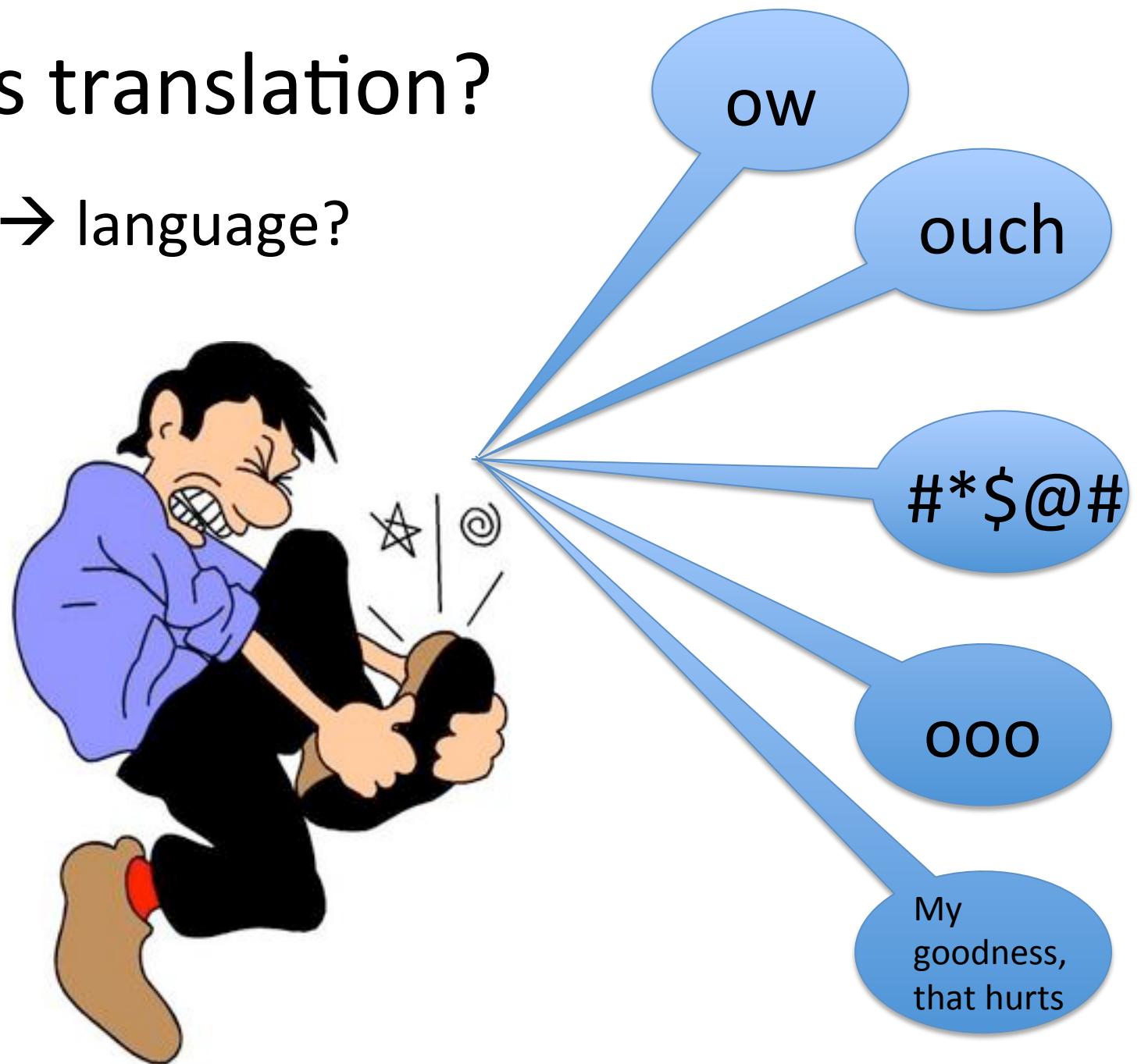
What is translation?

- Emotion → language?



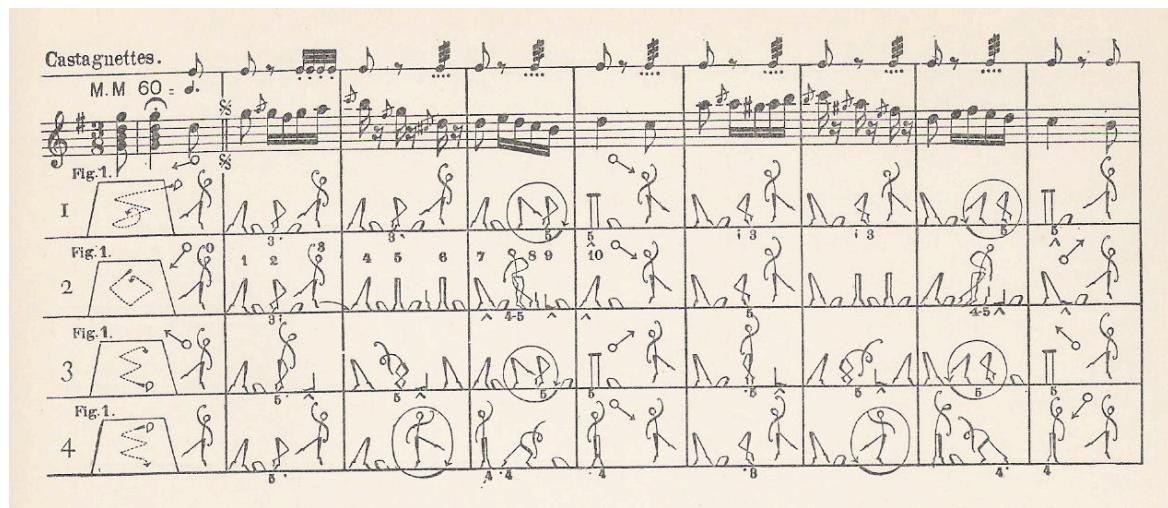
What is translation?

- Emotion → language?



What is translation?

- Emotion → language?
- Choreography → dance?



"Today's choreographers do not always say exactly what they want something to look like. You need the most fluent facility to be able to express those big ideas." - Emily Molnar (artistic director of Ballet BC), *Dance Magazine*

What is translation?

- Emotion → language?
- Choreography → dance?
- Rembrandt's *Night Watch* → Kind Crimson's *Night Watch*

Shine, shine, the light of good works shine
The watch before the city gates depicted in their prime
That golden light all grimy now
Three hundred years have passed
The worthy Captain and his squad of troopers standing fast

The artist knew their faces well
The husbands of his lady friends
His creditors and councilors
In armor bright, the merchant men...



What is translation?

- Emotion → language?
- Choreography → dance?
- Rembrandt's *Night Watch* → *Kind Crimson's Night Watch*
- *Schneewittchen* by the Brothers Grimm → *Snow White* by Walt Disney; *Snow White and the Huntsman*; *Mirror, Mirror*



What is translation?

- Garden variety
 - I want to read Plato, but I don't know Greek.
 - I've manufactured a washing machine in the US, but I want to sell it in France.
 - There is important information that needs to be conveyed to people who might not speak my language.

What is translation?

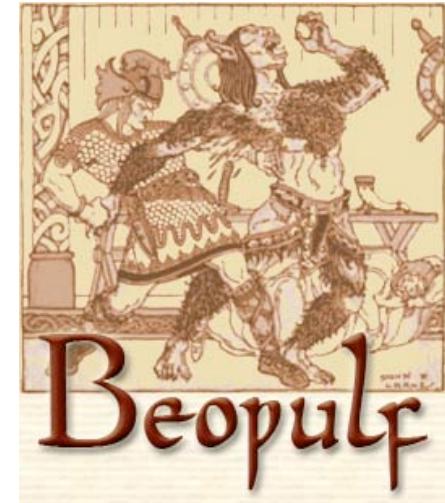
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What gets translated? *Beowulf* and “style”

Old English:

Gewat ða neosian, syþðan niht becom,
hean huses, hu hit Hring-Dene
æfter beorþege gebun hæfdon.



“Poetry is what gets lost in translation.” --Robert Frost



Old English:

Gewat ða neosian, syþðan niht becom,
hean huses, hu hit Hring-Dene
æfter beorþege gebun hæfdon.

Gummere:

Went he forth to find at fall of night
that haughty house, and heed wherever
the Ring-Danes, outrevelled, to rest had gone.

Alexander:

With the coming of night came Grendel also,
sought the great house and how the Ring-Danes
held their hall when the horn had gone round.

Rebsamen:

Then Grendel prowled, palled in darkness,
the sleep-warm hall to see how the Ring-Danes
after beer and feasting bedded down for rest

Heaney:

So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
for the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes
were settling into it after their drink,

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were settling into it after their drink,

Controversy!

Hwæt! Wé Gárdena in géardagum
þéodcyninga þrym gefrúnon

➤ Jakob Grimm: “pure interjection”

- *What ho!*
- *Lo!*
- *Attend!*
- *Indeed!*

Listen! We of the Spear-Danes in the days of yore
of those clan-kings heard of their glory.

Controversy!

Hwæt! Wé Gárdena in géardagum
þéodcyninga þrym gefrúnon

- Dr. George Walkden: “interrogative pronoun” (like *what*)
 - Anglo-Saxons were a more appreciative audience than previously thought

How we have heard of the might of kings

Controversy!

Hwæt! Wé Gárdena in géardagum
þéodcyninga þrym gefrúnon

- Seamus Heaney's translation

*So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage
and greatness.*

Enough about style! I just want to know what it says...

- Word-for-word translation (“glossing”)
 - *Katzensprung zur Kiesgrube*
 - *Cat-jump to-the gravel-pit*
- Being true to the source
 - *Take off as quick as a cat can jump, to the quarry for a fun swim on a hot afternoon!*
- Capturing the “style”
 - *Have a picnic!*
- Translating the meaning

Meaning

- The relationship between a sign (word) and what it signifies (stands for)
- Take, for example, *dog*

Meaning

- The relationship between a sign (word) and what it signifies (stands for), denotation
- Take, for example, *dog*



- *Dog* could be used to mean any of these three animals.

dog

- And *dog* could mean the category DOG of which these three animals are members



- As well as this one



dog

- And *dog* could mean the category DOG of which these three animals are members



- As well as this one



Oops, not actually.
This one is a Mexican **wolf**.

dog

- But it certainly wouldn't mean this:



- And probably not this:
- Because it looks more like a *hyena*:



dog

- But it certainly wouldn't mean these:



- And probably not these:

• Wrong



X

dog

✓



X



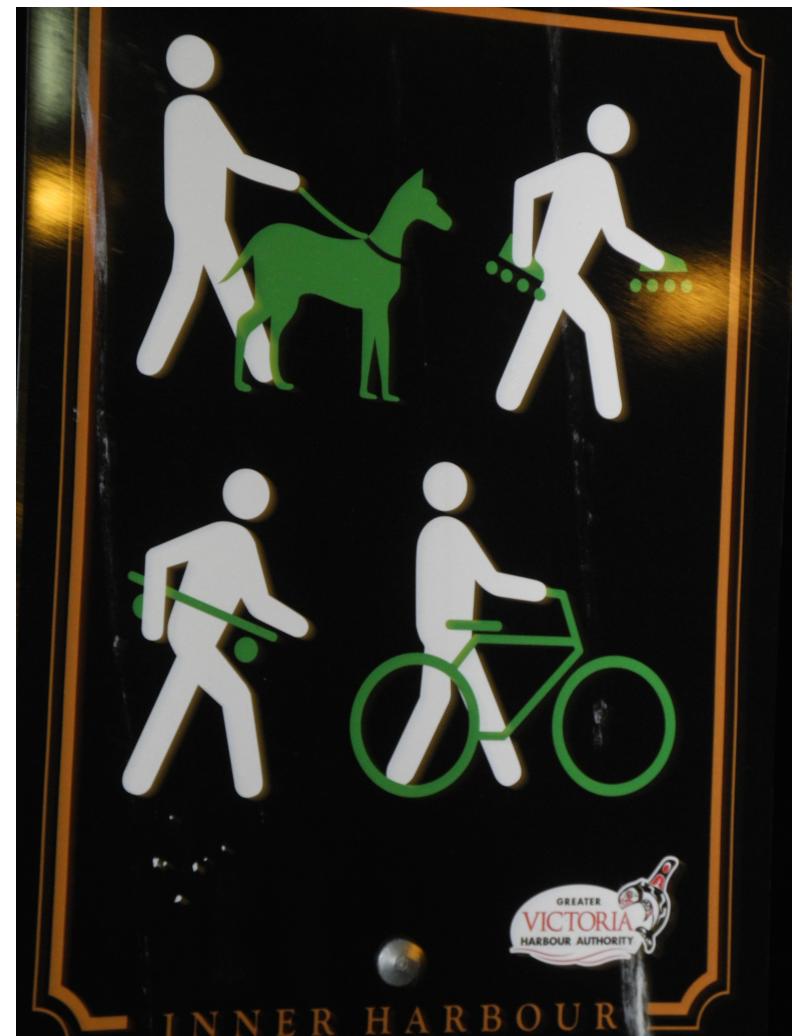
X

✓



Defining meanings as categories
can be problematic.

Meaning as prototype





Sense and reference

Connotation and denotation



1. *The morning star is Venus.*
 - If we are only concerned with denotation, then (1) says the exact same thing as (2):
2. *The morning star is the morning star.*
 - But it doesn't.
 - The meaning of *the morning star* and the meaning of *Venus* are different.
 - So, there must be something more to meaning than just what the word refers to.

Sense and reference

- “What the sign signifies”
 - Denotation
 - Reference
 - *Dog* means 
- Other meaning that the sign carries
 - Connotation
 - Sense
 - Implicatures
- *pup*
- *puppy*
- *cur*
- *doggy*
- *hound*
- *mongrel*
- *mutt*
- *pooch*
- *stray*
- *flea bag*
- *man's best friend*
- *tail-wagger*

Sense and reference à la V. Woolf

- Denotation
 - ...is words' “useful meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the train, the meaning which makes us pass examinations.”
- Connotation
 - ...the meaning you get when “the police [are] off duty” and “the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow...”

The political uses of connotation:
How to mean *war*, but not say *war*, and
sound like you aren't talking about war,
but you are

- *Any necessary means*
- *Regime change*
- *Ultimate defense*
- *Humanitarian intervention*
- *Grave consequences*
- *All options being on the table*
- *Military action*

Formal ways to look at meaning

- Meaning is the set of **truth conditions** for a word/expression/sentence
 - What has to be true in order to say “dog”
means ?

 - Answer:  has to be a dog.
 - But, what about *beauty*, *hello*, or *Is that your dog?*, or *Please pass the salt?* or *Look at the dog!* → 
- Logical positivism: meaning is the set of conditions in the world that **verify** a term or statement

Meaning as usage

- Speaker's meaning vs. a word's meaning; meaning as usage
 - Fine if I use *dog* for  ; that usage (partly) defines *dog* for me
- Word means what speaker intends
 - Searle (again!) and speech acts
 - What does *I now pronounce you married* mean?
- No one way of thinking about meaning is “correct” and complete.

Implicature: *the*

 ★★★★★ Rockem Sockem Robots Game \$19.99 <small>Ship-To-Home Free Store Pickup</small>	 ★★★★★ Hexbug Aquabot Robotic Shark - Red \$9.99 <small>Ship-To-Home Free Store Pickup</small>	 ★★★★★ LEGO Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Baxter Robot Rampage (79105) \$44.99 \$39.98 <small>Ship-To-Home Free Store Pickup Today</small>	 ★★★★★ Imaginarium Robot Claw \$4.99 <small>Ship-To-Home Free Store Pickup Today</small>
 Ships Free with a purchase of \$49 or more!**	Ships Free with a purchase of \$49 or more!**	Ships Free with a purchase of \$49 or more!**	Ships Free with a purchase of \$49 or more!**
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Implicature: *the*

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The Award Winning Reconnaissance Robot.


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The Emotive Robotic Avatar.

Meaning and context

- Imagine trying to describe “walking” with one general definition. You would have to include walking...
 - Upstairs, downstairs, at all different riser heights, including uneven ones
 - Uphill, downhill, at a whole continuum of slopes
 - On: ice, smooth gravel, bumpy gravel, shag carpet, rubber mats, Astroturf, grass (tall, short, soft, spiky...)
 - By children, toddlers, adults, heavy, tall, thin, athletic, tired, happy, excited, depressed, ballerinas, hackers...
- How walking is done depends on the context.

Saying *It's cold...*

...at this temperature	is appropriate for...	is not appropriate for...
-35°	Nearly everything	Helium
-5°	Ice skating, frozen food	Winter in Alberta
5°	Classroom, planting a garden	Ice skating, frozen food
15°	Classroom	Planting a garden
20°	Going swimming	Classroom
25°	Summer in Saudi Arabia, Japan, Thailand...	Summer in Vancouver

Meaning is context-dependent.

Meaning and translation

- So, you just want to translate the sentence *I love my dog.*
- *Love*: notoriously hard
 - Does the target language word include non-humans? In fact, dogs? Is it an appropriate emotion for dogs? **Is** there a target language word?
- *My*
 - Does the target culture have the concept of ownership of an animal? (cf. *my daughter, my shoes*)
- *Dog*
 - Are dogs an appropriate object of affection (they might be dirty, or work animals, or not exist in the target culture)
- Meaning is not easy!

Meaning and translation

- Style: e.g., rhythm, alliteration, puns
- Cultural idioms
- Fuzzy/culturally different category boundaries
- Differing connotations
- No concrete referent (*truth*)
- Implications (*the*)
- Context
- Ulterior motives (*war example*)

Accuracy: Back translation

- Mark Twain, *The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*
- “He has not translated it at all; he has simply mixed it all up; it is no more like the Jumping Frog when he gets through with it than I am like a meridian of longitude.”
- “I cannot speak the French language, but I can translate very well, though not fast, I being self-educated.”

Accuracy: Back translation

- Original
 - “Well, there was a feller here once by the name of *Jim Smiley*, in the winter of ‘49—or may be it was the spring of ‘50—I don’t recollect exactly somehow...”
- French translation
 - “Il y avait une fois ici un individu connu sous le nom de Jim Smiley: c’était dans l’hiver de 49, peut-être bien au printemps de 50, je ne me rappelle pas exactement.”
- Mark Twain’s back translation
 - “It there was one time here an individual known under the name of Jim Smiley: it was in the winter of ‘49, possibly well at the spring of ‘50, I no me recollect not exactly.”

Learning goals

- Translation
 - Necessary for accessing linguistic (and other?) products of other cultures
 - Translating style: paying attention to literary conventions
 - Translating meaning: harder than it looks
- Some aspects of meaning
 - Meaning is both denotation and connotation
 - Implicature is inherent in all meaning
 - There are many ways to define meaning, none of them perfect
 - Meaning is context-dependent
- Meaning and translation
 - Even when we “just want to translate the meaning,” we can run into difficulty