

Ljiljana Bibović

A REPLY TO DR. MAGNER'S COMMENT ON ERRORS IN TRANSLATION

A friendly comment by Dr. Magner, Professor at the Slavic Department at Pennsylvania State, on my paper on students' errors in translation from Serbo-Croatian into English, published in »Strani jezici«¹ has reached me. First and foremost, I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Magner for pointing out things that I did not emphasize strongly enough having assumed that they were obvious from the text; since it turns out that they are not I would like to make use of this opportunity and make them sufficiently clear to the reader.

According to Noam Chomsky the greatest mystery of linguistic capacity consists in the fact that a mature speaker can produce a new sentence of his language *on the appropriate occasion* (italicized by Lj. B.) and that other speakers can understand it immediately, though it is equally new to them.² I refer the reader also to what John Lyons wrote on communicative competence in Chapter 14 of his book *Semantics* (Vol. 2)³ where most factors which can influence linguistic competence are given, though I think that for our purposes Chomsky's notion "on the appropriate occasion" will suffice as it probably subsumes all of these.

I will now turn to Dr. Magner's objections.

(1) Dr. Magner's comment: *our country* is O. K. (*our country* has been marked as an error in the paper)

An Englishman or an American will always refer to Great Britain and U.S.A. respectively, when they are not abroad, as "this country", whereas a Yugoslav in his own country usually says "naša zemlja" (our country) referring to Yugoslavia, although each of the alternative expressions is possible in both languages (*ova zemlja, our country*). The alternative expressions can also be used and this depends on "the appropriateness of the occasion"; this choice can be equally affected by emotive undertones of the intended utterance. For example, an Englishman in Greece cannot refer to Britain as "this country" and a Yugoslav might use "ova zemlja" when he or she chooses to be critical (e. g. *javašluk u ovoj zemlji*).

(2) Dr. Magner's comment: *the common man* is O. K.

(the translation equivalent given as correct in the paper is *the man in the street* and *the common man* marked as an error)

¹ Ljiljana Bibović, »Analiza grešaka u prevođenju sa srpskohrvatskog na engleski jezik«, *Strani jezici*, God. VI, broj 3-4, Zagreb, str. 129-139, 1977.

² Noam Chomsky, *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, Mouton, str. 7, 1969.

³ John Lyons, *Semantics* (Vol. 2), Cambridge University Press, 1977.

As far as I know "the common man" means "the ordinary or average citizen". *The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* gives the example *The common man in every country wants peace*. But "običan čovjek", which was wrongly translated into English as "the common man", is ambiguous in Serbo-Croatian: it may mean "the common man", but it also means "the man in the street" in the sense of "layman" (synonyms: *laik, nestručnjak*). I am aware of the fact that "the man in the street" may also mean "the common man"; it was the former sense that was required in the text.

Let me add that "običan čovjek" (as well as "the common man") in the sense of "the ordinary, average citizen" is a fiction: if we look at each human being as a representative of the human species he or she is endowed with qualities that differentiate him or her from animals and automata; being a linguist, I will argue for language as the most striking distinguishing characteristics of human beings. According to Descartes and Chomsky "language is a species-specific human possession" and "even at low levels of intelligence, at pathological levels, we find a command of language that is totally unattainable by ape". In this sense each human being is creative in view of the fact that he or she produces language; "being average" and "being creative" are incompatible notions. The withering away of state, on the other hand, as predicted by the theorists of socialism, will do away with those distinctions of individuals which pertain to their respective social positions (whence, on the whole, results the notion of "ordinary",) though, I am quite sure, distinctions will still be made in respect of the ethical qualities of human beings and their compliance with the common ideal. This, of course, has nothing to do with the problems of translation; I merely note in passing that the same kind of prejudice is expressed linguistically both in English and Serbo-Croatian.

(3) Dr. Magner's comment: "socialistic" and "socialist" are both O. K., but used in different ways

Again, I may not have made it sufficiently clear that "socialistic" was wrong as the proposed translation equivalent of the adjective "socijalistički" when it is collocated with the noun "zemlja" (country). "Socialistic" is appropriate in the sense "tending towards socialism".

(4) Dr. Magner's comment: "forenoon" is O. K., but not as frequent as "morning"

"Forenoon" sounds to me poetical, but it is probably used in U.S.A. even in everyday speech, at least in some parts of the country. Neither of the two American dictionaries I possess (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language — Second College Edition* and *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language — New College Edition*) gives an example of its use in addition to its dictionary definition "part of the day between sunrise and noon" and I never heard it used by native speakers during my stay in California last academic year. It is well known that in American English some of the older forms of the language have survived — I was once addressed as "lady" by the bus driver and, although I was aware that the bus driver was cross with me for not getting on the bus on time I had no idea that the term was derogatory and to me it sounded poetical because I first grew familiar with "lady" as a way of addressing women after I had

read Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" in the original; as a "naive" non-native speaker I did not only take offence but I felt that I was brought back to the grace of the age of Shakespeare by the linguistic time machine. OED gives equally scant information on "forenoon", but it gives the year 1506 as the date of its first occurrence.

(5) Dr. Magner's comment: "this is true for" is O. K. e. g. ("This is true for all values in this formula")

("this is true for" is marked as an error in the paper and "this is true of" recommended)

The linguistic environments which require "for" and "of" are structurally different; since in Serbo-Croatian only the preposition *za* (corresponding to *for*) is possible in the equivalent expression (*ovo važi za*), students do not make the necessary distinction. For example, if someone said "In U.S.A. novels are more popular with the general reader than poetry", it would be wrong to say "This is true for Yugoslavia also" — the preposition *of* must be used. (This is true of Yugoslavia also). "True of" is associated with a predication, or, to use a more current term, with a proposition. Dr. Magner's example can be paraphrased as

This is true for each x

where x is not a proposition.

(6) Dr. Magner's comment: "on the whole" is O. K.

("on the whole" has been judged as the wrong translation equivalent of "u celini, potpuno" in my paper)

"On the whole" does not correspond to "u celini, potpuno" which is equivalent to "entirely, wholly". "On the whole" can be paraphrased as "considering everything, in general, as a rule", which is rendered by the Serbo-Croatian "uopšte uzev, uglavnom".

(7) Dr. Magner's comment: "the people of Yugoslavia" is O.K., unless you are trying to stress diversity as in "peoples".

Dr. Magner is absolutely right; and I wish to offer an additional explanation: we usually talk of "narodni Jugoslavije"⁴ stressing both the diversity by using the plural noun (*narodi* = *peoples*) and the unity by having one common name for one multinational country, *Yugoslavia*, which does not contain any reference to the republics of which Yugoslavia consists. It is true, though — let me digress a little — that the name *Yugoslavia* refers to the South Slavs and does not cover those peoples which are not of Slavic origin (e.g. the Hungarians and the Albanians), and my comment as a linguist is that the cognitive meaning of "Jugoslavija" is wider than what can be inferred from its linguistic sign: Yugoslavia is no longer only "the country of the South Slavs", but of all the peoples that live on its territory no matter what their ethnic origin may be. To be exact, I should add that "Yugoslavia" as "the country of the South Slavs" excludes the Bulgarians who are also South Slavs and who live in a separate country. Thus the name of "Yugoslavia" comprises more and less at the same time; it is linguistically interesting that — by virtue of the fact that in addition to the South Slavs it refers to

⁴ We also speak of »narodnosti«, which is equivalent to the American term »ethnic group«.

peoples of non-Slavic origin, too — the name is no longer fully motivated as it was when it first came into existence.

To go back to “the people of Yugoslavia” — this is, undoubtedly, also possible, but not as an equivalent to “narodi Jugoslavije”. The linguistic convention⁵ requires that we speak of “jugoslovenski narod” and this is what corresponds to “the people of Yugoslavia”. It would be possible to say “narod Jugoslavije”, too, but “jugoslovenski narod” seems to be more of a single semantic unit; similarly, “srpski narod”, “hrvatski narod”, “makedonski narod” etc.

(8) Dr. Magner’s comment: “unmercifully” is O. K.

Thanks to Dr. Magner for pointing this out! *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* does not record it, and to me it certainly sounded a made-up word, since “mercilessly” already exists. After having looked it up in *Webster’s New World Dictionary* I am aware now that it exists in American English, and it is just another little proof that redundancy in language is no obstacle to the productivity in word formation.

I thank the editor for allowing me space for these additional comments.

⁵One of the American linguists who has done good work on convention is Jerry Morgan.