

## On the Translation of Etymological Statements

### Analysis: The Poison Nut

Etymological statements like “x is called A because...” are valuable sources of information, because they reveal the unique or essential defining properties of things. Translating these however present us with a problem, because in general the etymology in the object language is not the same as in the source language. We might illustrate this here with an example.

In the Dutch language there is a certain plant called “braaknoot”. It is called so because “noot” means “nut” and “braak” means “vomiting”, so it means “vomiting nut”. Its systematic Latin name is “*Strychnos nux-vomica*”, where *nux* means nut and *vomica* means that it causes vomiting. From this we have the word strychnine, which is commonly known as rat poison. A defining property of this plant is apparently that it is poisonous and when its nuts are eaten they cause vomiting. In Dutch we might produce an etymological statement like this:

*De braaknoot heet “braaknoot” omdat deze boom noten heeft die braken opwekken.*

If we translate this into English we have:

*The poison nut is called “poison nut” because this tree bears nuts that induce vomiting. [1a]*

In this English translation we deliberately overlooked the quotes and translated it word for word, leaving us with an inexact rendering. It may be acceptable because there is a clear association between poison and vomiting, but the information of the original language is lost, namely that it is called “braaknoot”. Let us call this approach type I, and the example 1a.

We could choose another English term for the *nux vomica* to illustrate how the same approach can result in an unacceptable translation:

*The poison nut is called “quaker button” because this tree bears nuts that induce vomiting. [1b]*

If we translate this into German we have:

*Die Gewöhnliche Brechnuss wird “Brechnuss” genannt weil diese Baum Nüsse trägt die brechen induzieren. [1c]*

Here the first problem is eliminated because the etymology in German happens to be analogous.

Another approach would be to leave the part between quotes untranslated:

*The poison nut is called “braaknoot” because this tree bears nuts that induce vomiting. [IIa]*

In this case we also have two minor problems. The reader may realise that the original language is Dutch, and that the word “braaknoot” must be a Dutch word, but it would be nice to add this information somewhere in a note or in the sentence. Further, the relation between the etymology of “braak” and the vomiting is lost, and therefore the explanatory ability of the sentence is lost when this information is added, for example in a note. So the problem is that it becomes unintelligible. We could call this approach type II.

A third approach would be, translating:

*The poison nut is called “poison nut” because this tree bears nuts that are poisonous. [IIIa]*

adapting the explanation to the translated term [IIIa], or vice versa [IIIb].

A worse example of IIIa would be:

*The poison nut is called “quaker button” because this tree produces seeds that were used by Quakers as buttons.*

As a translation this is generally not acceptable because the English etymology does not adequately represent what the statement is trying to convey. The essential element of vomiting is lost, changed or broadened to “being poisonous”. Besides, the original term “braaknoot” is lost. The sentence is intelligible and does have explanatory ability, but the explanation might lead to problems in subsequent parts of the text. We could call this approach type III.

So we have three types of approach, each with its own problems. We might expect that every translator has a grasp of these problems and deals with them typically by adding a footnote or adding information between parentheses or square brackets.

## **Generalisation**

If we generalise the etymological statement we could write it as

*x is called A because Y*

where Y takes the form of 1. a property of x, or 2. a property B of another thing, call it y, relating to x through relation R. We might put this type of statement into formal predicate logic as

$$\forall x, \exists y: Ax \wedge By \wedge Rxy \rightarrow \text{IsCalled}(x, A)$$

Property A should be characteristic for x to be called A, and relation R should explain why x is called A. In the context of metaphores, R is sometimes called the tertium comparationis.

Some examples:

1. Eric the Red was called so because of his red beard.

A = Eric the Red

R = he had/wore a beard that was coloured

B = red

We see here that A and B are identical. In fact A is a metalanguage rendering of B. If A and B are not identical in this sense, the statement is unintelligible:

2. Eric the Red was called so because his beard was blue.

If B is not related to Eric the statement also becomes unintelligible:

3. Eric the Red was called so because his great grandfather had a red beard.

If the relationship is not more or less uniquely identifying Eric, it also becomes unintelligible:

4. Eric the Red was called so because one of his many pairs of tennis shoes was red.

### Application

In our earlier example

$$\forall x, \exists y: Ax \wedge By \wedge Rxy \rightarrow \text{IsCalled}(x, A)$$

where

x = braaknoot

A = "braaknoot"

R = heeft

y = noten

B = (noten) die braken opwekken

we could now mark translated entities with an accent, so that A' is the translation into the object language of A, the "name" of x. The above examples result in

$$I \quad \forall x, \exists y: A'x \wedge B'y \wedge R'xy \rightarrow \text{IsCalled}(x, A')$$

A' = "poison nut"

R' = bears

B' = nuts inducing vomiting

Here we see that “being poisonous” is not equal to “inducing vomiting”. The result is comparable to:

Eric the Blue was called so because his beard was red. [while in fact he was called Eric the Red]

II  $\forall x, \exists y: A'x \wedge B'y \wedge R'xy \rightarrow IsCalled(x, A)$

A' = A = “braaknoot”

R' = bears

B' = nuts inducing vomiting

Here, “braaknoot” is apparently not related to the English vomiting, unless vomiting is translated back to the Dutch verb “braken”. To the reader the result is comparable to:

Eric the Red was called so because his beard was blue. [while in fact his beard was red]

III  $\forall x, \exists y: A'x \wedge C'y \wedge R'xy \rightarrow IsCalled(x, A')$

A' = “poison nut”

R' = bears

C' = nuts that are poisonous

In this case B' is adapted to the supposed etymology, resulting in something different (C') not corresponding to the original (B). The result is comparable to:

Eric the Blue was called so because his beard was blue. [while he was called in fact Eric the Red and was wearing a red beard]

Now we have a theoretical framework to examine some real-life translations of etymological statements.

### **When the Original is Lost**

Now another situation may be of interest to us, which is when several translations are available, while the original is lost. Returning to our poison nut example, if we find each of the cases we discussed, how can we see what is wrong with the translation and which case it is?

The original being:

*De braaknoot heet “braaknoot” omdat deze boom noten heeft die braken opwekken.*

and translation cases I-III:

I.

*The poison nut is called "poison nut" because this tree bears nuts that induce vomiting. [Ia]*

B' IS NOT identical to A', but semantically close

R'xy exists and identifies x

*The poison nut is called "quaker button" because this tree bears nuts that induce vomiting. [Ib]*

B' IS NOT identical to A', and semantically distant from A'

R'xy exists and identifies x

*Die Gewöhnliche Brechnuss wird "Brechnuss" genannt weil diese Baum Nüsse trägt die brechen induzieren. [Ic]*

B' IS identical to A'

R'xy exists and identifies x

II.

*The poison nut is called "braaknoot" because this tree bears nuts that induce vomiting.*

B' is identical to A', but A' is equal to A, the term in the original language

R'xy exists and identifies x

III.

*The poison nut is called "poison nut" because this tree bears nuts that are poisonous.*

B' IS identical to A'

R'xy exists and identifies x

Combinations when the original text is lost:

B' IS identical to A': cases Ic, II (A' = A) and III

B' IS NOT identical to A': cases Ia (close) and Ib (distant)

### **Where More than Translation Exists**

The cases Ic and III cannot be distinguished, except for example when different translations exist:

Ic.

*Die Gewöhnliche Brechnuss wird "Brechnuss" genannt weil diese Baum Nüsse trägt die brechen induzieren. [Ic]*

III.

*The poison nut is called "poison nut" because this tree bears nuts that are poisonous.*

A' and B' are different in both statements, while R is equal. In both cases the tree bears nuts, but the question is are they just poisonous or do they induce vomiting? Which translation is correct? When the semantic fields are subset and superset of each other, we may infer that the one with the superset is without a doubt incorrect. In case III the semantic field of "poison nut" fully contains (and is wider than) that of "Brechnuss" which proves that 1c must be the correct one. A "Brechnuss" is a specific kind of poisonous nut, and because it is a more specific term, it is probable that 1c is uniquely identifying x, while "poisonous nut" is only vaguely describes it. We can discard III being an inaccurate translation.

Then it should be true that the nut in question really is poisonous and that it induces vomiting (B'), just as the tree should really bear nuts (R), both facts that might be checked.

Of course other comparisons can be made between the examples leading to definite or indefinite decisions on the right translation and as a result decisions on the right interpretation of the term x and its etymology.