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# PARODY & PARAPHRASE : TRANSLATION AND C.K. OGDEN'S BASIC ENGLISH

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C.K. Ogden (1889-1957) is remembered particularly as the senior author of Ogden & Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), though he devoted his attention and energy almost exclusively during more than half of his career to developing and promoting Basic English as an international auxiliary language.

Basic, an acronym for British, American, scientific, international, and commercial, consists of 850 words and a set of rules for their use. It has no verbs, but substitutes a limited set of what Ogden called "operators", which combine with each other and with nouns to express actions. These operators include sixteen words which are verbs in full English, but their use and combinations are highly restricted.

Basic found both champions and detractors from the moment it was launched. The detractors delighted in producing parodies ridiculing not only the vocabulary gaps in Basic but supposedly typical paraphrases required to fill them. The opening of Hamlet's soliloquy was thus transformed into "To be or not to be, whether it is better in the mind to undergo the stone-sending cords and sharp-pointed air-going instruments of unkind chance." The saying "Charity begins at home" became "It is necessary for the first example of a tendency to give freely to be seen in the house of the one who has it" (*Punch* 26, April 1944).

These parodies achieve their comic effect by exaggerating the complex and unexpected results of translating standard English into Basic. They imply that Basic's paraphrases make bizarre results inevitable. Consider, by contrast, the text of the Gettysburg address rendered into Basic by Ogden himself :

Seven and eighty years have gone by from the day when our fathers gave to this land a new nation — a nation which came to birth in the thought that all men are free, a nation given up to the idea that all men are equal. We are now fighting in a great war among ourselves, putting it to the test if that nation, or any nation of such a birth and with such a history, is able long to keep united. (Graham 1968 : 371)

If the criticism implicit in the parodies of Basic is not always entirely legitimate, it does, nevertheless, raise interesting and pertinent points.

Full English consists of a number of sub-languages or stylistic registers such as scientific, journalistic, administrative, etc., lying side by side and partially overlapping. None of these is recognizable as such in Basic, whose definitions of scientific terms, for example, include the following for "matrix": "that inside which or round which something is formed and from which it gets its form, as a vessel in which heated metal is let get cold; a mass of substance in which smaller bodies are bedded". The simplicity of the vocabulary and the complexity of the grammar are entirely typical of Basic, entirely atypical of scientific English prose. Basic is an artificially constructed register of English. In this respect it creates a void in which its paraphrases resonate with unintended effect.

Susan Sontag's succinct definition of style as "a means of insisting on something", is a succinct reminder that Basic insists on nothing. It is, as Ogden acknowledged, at the opposite end of the spectrum of universal languages from that of James Joyce's prose, which insists on everything, and which, unlike Basic, cannot be parodied. Any attempt to parody Joyce would have to be an attempt to beat him at his own game of making the word maximally self-transcending, therefore no parody at all.

Paraphrase automatically becomes funny when it is perceived from outside its own code. Consider this example from Walter J. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word*:

The spoken expression "Don't be afraid" becomes in drum language "Bring your heart back down out of your mouth, your heart out of your mouth, get it back from up there". Or again, "Come back" is rendered on the drum "Make your feet come back the way they went, make your legs come back the way they went, plant your feet and your legs below, in the village which belongs to us". (p. 105)

Basic, like drum language, is economical as a system but not in the structure of its messages. The mechanism of paraphrase, therefore, becomes style unintentionally, becomes humorous unintentionally, becomes ripe for exploitation by the parodist. And if style insists, parody twists.

An unsigned article in the *Manchester Guardian* of 13 April 1944 reporting on a meeting of the English Association notes that a woman in attendance declared Basic to be without a sense of humor and all circumlocution, though it might do for religion. The paradoxical conclusion here is that the language of humor cannot be communicated in the international auxiliary language which Basic is intended to be. There is, further, an implication that a causal connection exists between the circumlocutions of Basic and its lack of humor.

Is paraphrase an obstacle to humor? Is paraphrase ever a vehicle of humor in full English? What happens in Basic translations if it is?

Paraphrase is certainly not a *primary* mechanism of humor. This is particularly true if we qualify the notion of paraphrase, as required by Basic English, as that of analytic re-expression. Synthesis, not analysis, is the essence of the joke-work. Analytic paraphrase, therefore, cannot be the means by which the punch-line of a joke is executed. When the structure is diffused, the joke is defused. Where paraphrases do figure into punch-lines, the joke is brought off by the stylistic discrepancy between a key word and its re-expression or by the unexpected substitution of a synonym. Basic lacks the idiom, the ambiguity, the stylistic range, and the synonyms required to render such jokes.

Paraphrases in the mouths of their characters have served Shakespeare, Racine, Ionesco, and a host of other writers to ridicule pomposity, pretentiousness, fuzzy-mindedness, and absurd linguistic reflexes. The humor achieved by the use of paraphrase in these cases is a sort of metalinguistic humor, a reflection on paraphrase (in both senses of "reflection on") more than the creation of an effect on the reader/hearer achieved directly by its use. My favorite example is a poem entitled "The Death of Roget" by George Hatch, Jr.

Said Roget:

"What's the purpose? Tell me why.

What's the reason? Specify!"

The other was silent,

speechless, mum,

close-mouthed, firm-tongued,

tight-lipped and dumb,

word-bound, curt, concise and brief:

He drew a gun, a gat, rod,  
and waved it in Roget's façade,  
his face, his mug,  
his map, his lug,  
his kisser.

"Now wait a minute!" cried Roget.

"Wait a second! Stop! Delay—!"

That's all he said; the other fired,  
shot him once, Roget expired,  
pegged out, conked out,  
kicked the bucket,  
croaked and piped. With  
Roget's luck it  
means he's dead, defunct, passed on,  
deceased, demised, lamented, gone.  
They wrapped him up in polished oak,  
a coffin, casket, wooden cloak,  
and on his grave these words bespoke:  
"Lie in peace; to God bequest...  
R.I.P. and all the rest."

(*The Writer*, January 1973, p. 28)

The self-paraphrasing structure of this poem makes it impossible to translate into Basic, which would require that the strings of synonyms, the pages of *Roget's* come to life as Roget himself faces death, the repetitions and variations in coalescence, be reduced to repetitions alone, since Basic does not admit synonyms. If this requirement were suspended for the sake of experiment and for the sake of rendering the poem's style, it would produce only a self-parody of Basic instead of a parody of *Roget's*. Once again, humor fails to survive translation from full English to Basic.

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