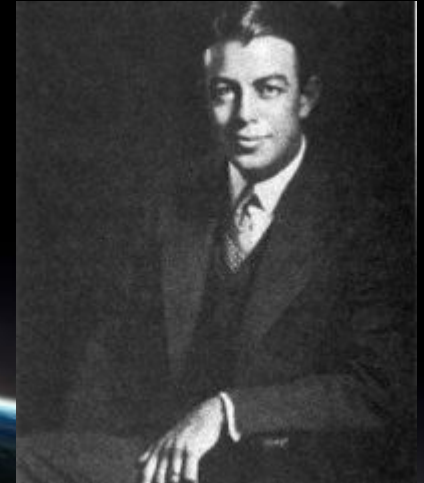# Translatability

Lecture # 6
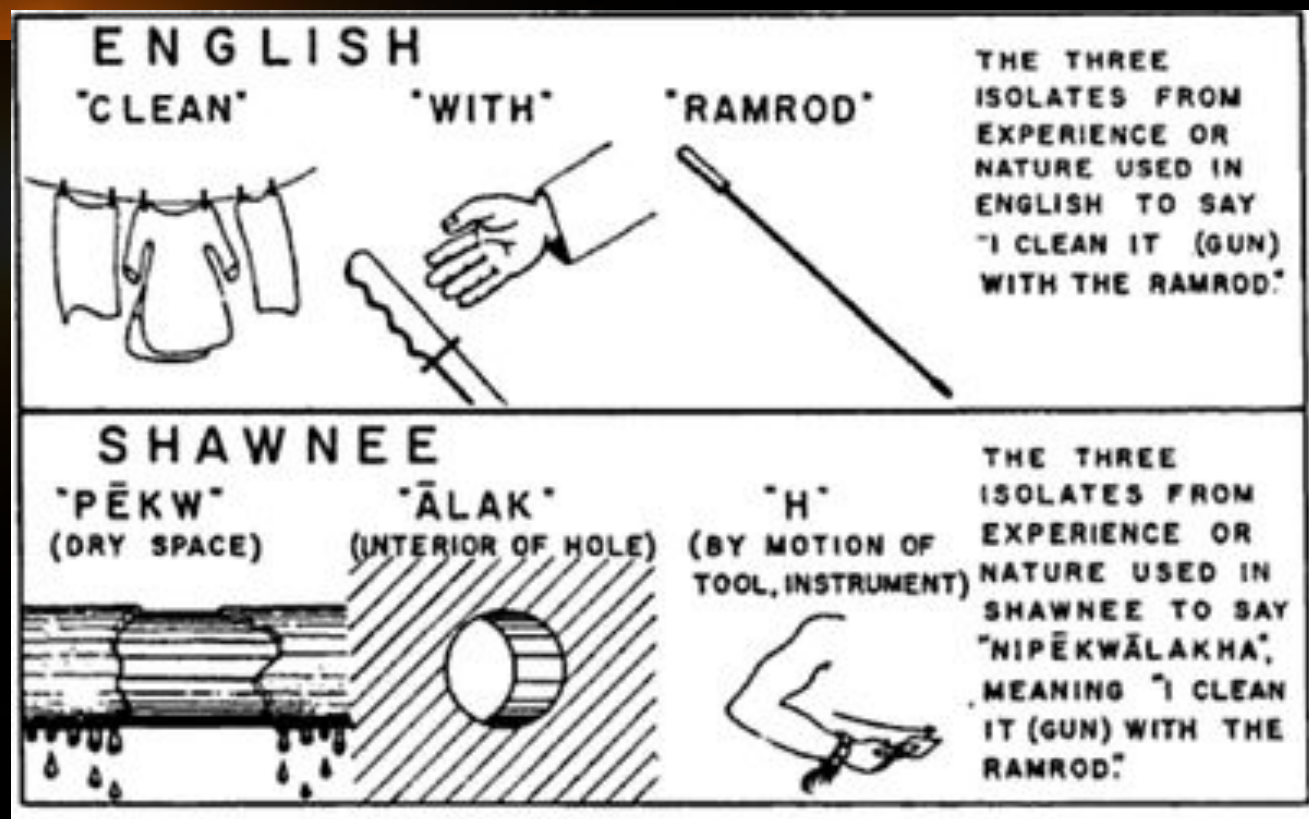
# Wilhelm von Humboldt, Leo Waisgerber, Werner Koller and Benjamin Whorf's concept of linguistic relativity

# The main idea, which unites all these scholars, is *impossibility* of adequate translation

- W. Humboldt (1767-1835) believed that adequate translation is unachievable, since behind two different languages stand two different world pictures (archetypes), different cultural connotations of meaning (Letter to K. Schlegel, 1796).

- L. Weisgerber (1899-1985) asserted that each language creates its own "intermediate world" (Zwischenwelt), and a human perceives the world through his / her mother tong; so, translation is an encounter of two worldviews, not only two code-systems.

- W. Koller (born in 1942): if each language states its own "intermediate world", and translation only transposed content of one language into another language, untranslatability becomes the universal axiom.

Benjamin Whorf (1897-1941) thought language is not so much a tool through which it is possible to express notions belonging to a culture, as it is a sort of cataloguing system, a systematization of otherwise disorderly knowledge; if two peoples or two persons speak different languages, they often have different world views, not simply different formulations for the same conceptions.



ENGLISH

"CLEAN"    "WITH"    "RAMROD"

THE THREE ISOLATES FROM EXPERIENCE OR NATURE USED IN ENGLISH TO SAY "I CLEAN IT (GUN) WITH THE RAMROD."

SHAWNEE

"PĒKW"         "ĀLAK"              "H"
(DRY SPACE)   (INTERIOR OF HOLE)   (BY MOTION OF TOOL, INSTRUMENT)

THE THREE ISOLATES FROM EXPERIENCE OR NATURE USED IN SHAWNEE TO SAY "NIPĒKWĀLAKHA", MEANING "I CLEAN IT (GUN) WITH THE RAMROD."

Edward Sapir (1884-1939) was a mentor of Benjamin Whorf at Yale University; in his early writings Sapir held views of the relation between thought and language stemming from the Humboldtian tradition.
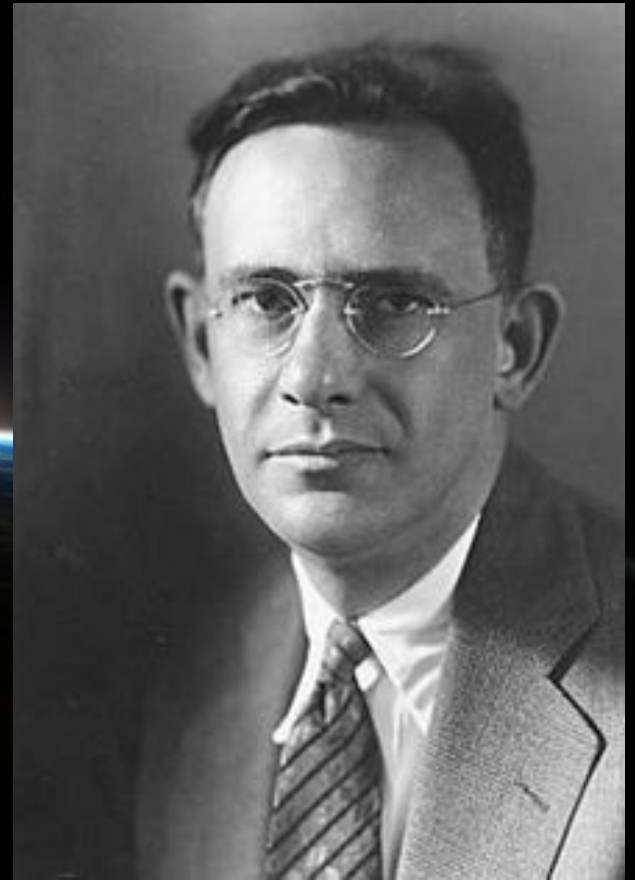
Whorf's concept of linguistic relativity was subjected to severe criticism from scholars of language, culture and psychology.

- Eric Lennenberg, Noam Chomsky, Steven Pinker have criticized Whorf for failing to be sufficiently clear in his formulation of <u>how language influences thought</u>, and for failing to provide real evidence to support his assumptions. Generally Whorf's arguments took the form of examples that were <u>anecdotal or speculative</u>, and functioned as attempts to show how "exotic" grammatical traits were connected to what were considered equally exotic worlds of thought.

# Noam Chomsky's

In Chomsky's view, every phrase, before being formulated, is conceived as a deep structure in our mind.

His theory, therefore, postulates the existence of elementary, universal conceptual constructions, common to all mankind. Interlingual translation (and intralingual translation, too) is always possible, according to Chomsky, because logical patterns underlying the natural languages are uniform constants. <u>If a speaker actualizes a deep structure in some way, it can also be expressed in another language</u>.

- P.V. Chesnokov (П.В. Чесноков) criticized the concept of linguistic relativity as "based on failure to distinguish between logic forms (logic system of thought) and semantic forms (logic system)… logic system is the same in all people, because it comes from the nature of human cognition" (1977, 56).

Semantic differences between languages do not create insurmountable barrier for interlingual communication and for translation (A. Schweizer).

If in each language everything what is implied may be expressed, so, everything what is expressed in one language may be translated into another language (W. Koller).

Peeter Torop proposes to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a book. Since a translated text, in its practical life, takes on the form of a publication, the parts that are untranslatable within the text "can be 'translated' in the commentary, in the glossary, in the preface, in the illustrations (maps, drawings, photographs) and so on" (2000, 129).

- Torop sais, that one of "translation activities is to support (ideally) the struggle <u>against cultural neutralization, leveling neutralization</u>, the cause, in many societies, on one hand, of indifference toward cultural "clues" of the author or the text (above all in multiethnic nations) and, on the other hand, to stimulate the search for national identity or cultural roots" (2000, 129-130).

# Neutralization of the linguistic context is another side of translatability

- Among contemporary translators, for instance, there would seem to be a marked tendency towards modernization and naturalization of the linguistic context, paired with a similar but less clear tendency towards in the same direction in regard to the literary intertext, but an opposing tendency towards historicizing and exoticizing in the socio-cultural situation (J.S. Holmes 1988, 49).

# Which elements of the text are *untranslatable* (or almost *untranslatable*)?

- Dialecticisms
- Play on words
- Meaning of names
- Metalinguistic elements
- Anecdotal plots with implicit variants of meaning

All these cases are *deviations* from the standard language.

# Dialecticisms

- They are used for characteristics of some groups of people.

  How to translate dialecticisms?

1. To replace the dialect elements of TL with the dialect of SL (if their literary functions coincide). For example, in some English translations of Aristophan's comedies the Dorian dialect of Greek (in contrast to the "high" Attic dialect) is substituted with the Scottish dialect of English.

2. To use the substandard speech or vocabulary in TT instead of the dialecticisms of ST. In the Russian translation of Aristophan (by A. Piotrovsky) just the substandard vocabulary is used for the Dorian dialect.

**Mark Twain in his Introduction to "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn":**
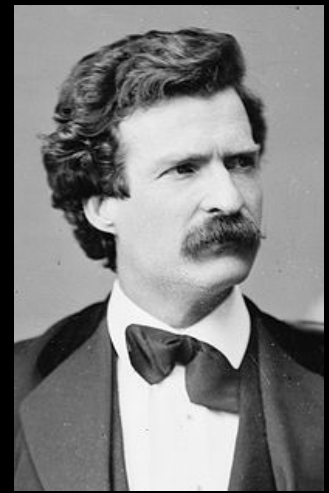


"In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri Negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods South-Western dialect; the ordinary? "Pike-County" dialect; and four modified varieties of the last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guess-work, but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech".

- In the Ukrainian translation of the novel (by Iryna Steshenko, 1898-1987) just substandard vocabulary is used for rendering of these dialectical elements.

# Play on words (pun)

In the novel of William Thackeray "Vanity Fair" the phrase of Rebecca "It is a false note!" has double meaning: she was playing a piano (*a false note* in melody) and stopped to throw out <u>a note</u> from Rawdon Crawley to a fireplace (*a false note* in relationships).

In both Ukrainian (by O. Senyuk) and Russian (by M. Diakonov) this phrase is translated as «Фальшива нота» / «Фальшивая нота», what does not render the word play and associative meaning.

Proposed translation: «Фальшива нота-нотатка» (Ukrainian bothe «нота» and «нотатка» coincide with English "note")

# Play on words in the Hebrew Bible

וַיְהִי דְּבַר-יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר מָה-אַ

שָׁקֵד אֲנִי רֹאֶה וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי הֵיטַבְתָּ לִרְאוֹת  כִּי-שֹׁקֵד אֲנִי עַל-דְּבָרִי לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ

[wayəhī dəḇār yhwh ʔēlay lēʔmōr mā ʔattā rōʔe yirməyāhū waʔōmar **maqqēl šāqēḏ** ʔǎnī rōʔe wayyōmar yhwh ʔēlay hēṭaḇtā lirʔōṯ kī **šōqēḏ** ʔǎnī ʕal-dəḇārī laʕǎŝôṯō]

The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?" "I see the branch of an almond tree," I replied. The LORD said to me, "You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled." (Jer 1:11-12 NIV)

**šāqēḏ** – 'an almond tree'

**šōqēḏ** – 'I am watching'

# Susanna and Elders (1-st cent. BC): play on words in the Greek text

νῦν οὖν ταύτην εἴπερ εἶδες εἰπόν ὑπὸ τί δένδρον εἶδες αὐτοὺς ὁμιλοῦντας ἀλλήλοις ὁ δὲ εἶπεν ὑπὸ **σχῖνον** (Sut 1:54 BGT)

Now then, if thou hast seen her, tell me, Under what tree sawest thou them companying together? Who answered, Under a **mastick tree**. (Sus 1:54 LXA)

εἶπεν δὲ Δανιηλ ὀρθῶς ἔψευσαι εἰς τὴν σεαυτοῦ κεφαλήν ἤδη γὰρ ἄγγελος τοῦ θεοῦ λαβὼν φάσιν παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ **σχίσει** σε μέσον (Sut 1:55 BGT)

And Daniel said, Very well; thou hast lied against thine own head; for even now the angel of God hath received the sentence of God to **cut thee in two**. (Sus 1:55 LXA)

νῦν οὖν λέγε μοι ὑπὸ τί δένδρον κατέλαβες αὐτοὺς ὁμιλοῦντας ἀλλήλοις ὁ δὲ εἶπεν ὑπὸ **πρῖνον** (Sut 1:58 BGT)

Now therefore tell me, Under what tree didst thou take them companying together? Who answered, Under an **holm tree**. (Sus 1:58 LXA)

εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῷ Δανιηλ ὀρθῶς ἔψευσαι καὶ σὺ εἰς τὴν σεαυτοῦ κεφαλήν μένει γὰρ ὁ ἄγγελος τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν ῥομφαίαν ἔχων **πρίσαι** σε μέσον ὅπως ἐξολεθρεύσῃ ὑμᾶς (Sut 1:59 BGT)

Then said Daniel unto him, Well; thou hast also lied against thine own head: for the angel of God waiteth with the sword to cut thee in two, that he may **destroy** you. (Sus 1:59 LXA)

# Names with special meanings and play on words

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צְחֹק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים  כָּל-הַשֹּׁמֵעַ יִצְחַק-לִי

[wattṓmer śārắ **ṣəḥṓq** ʕāśắ lī ʔĕlōhĭ́m kōl-haššōmēᵃʕ **yiṣḥáq** lī]

Sarah said, "God has made me <u>laugh</u>, and everyone who hears <u>will laugh</u> with me." (Gen 21:6 CSB)

І промовила Сарра: **Сміх** учинив мені Бог, кожен, хто почує, буде сміятися з мене. (Gen 21:6 UKR)

It is an explanation of the origin of the name of **Yiṣḥáq** – Isaac ("He will laugh")

In this case, when equivalent translation is impossible, additional elements may be used: explanations in footnotes, brackets or words in italics.

# About translation of "speaking" names S. Valakhov and S. Florin suggest to distinguish between:

1. Names which should not be translated, since it is not necessary for rendering of the content.

2. Names which should be translated, since in some context their meaning "will be lighten".

3. Names which demand a special approach: in some cases they must be nominative, in other cases they must have semantic perception.

# Untranslatable vocabulary

An example of J. Catford with the Japanese word *yukata* – literally means *bath(ing) clothes*, although their use is not limited to after-bath wear. Yukata are a common sight in Japan during the hot summer months.



"After his bath he enveloped his still-glowing body in the simple hotel **bath-robe** and went out to join his friends in the cafe down the street."