

Coherence in Translation

Laith S. Hadla (Corresponding author)
Faculty of Arts / Zarqa University, Zarqa - Jordan
laith_salman2003@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Coherence is the trait that makes the text easily understandable to a reader. One can help create coherence in his text by creating logical and verbal bridges.

Coherence is a product of many different factors, which combine to make every paragraph, sentence, and phrase contribute to the meaning of the whole piece. Coherence in translation is much more difficult to sustain than coherence in the original language simply because translators have less clues to inform them if their message is as clear as it was originally intended or not. Therefore, translators must make their patterns of coherence much more explicit and carefully planned. Coherence itself is the product of two factors – paragraph unity and sentence cohesion.

Keywords: Translation, coherence, connection, transition.

Introduction

Unless properly connected, the most convincing ideas in the world, expressed in the most beautiful sentences, will move no one. If readers cannot move easily from one thought to another, they will surely look for something else to read or turn on the television.

Understanding utterances is not simply a matter of knowing the meaning of the words uttered and the way in which they are combined. It also involves drawing inferences on the basis of non-linguistic information and the assumption that the speaker/writer has aimed to meet certain general standards of communication.

Translation has focused on the problems of syntax and semantics at the sentence level, but the real goal of translation is to translate texts. There is a crucial difference between a text and a set of unrelated sentences, and one must avoid destroying the former by translating it into the latter. It is the coherence of the text in particular that we address here.

Providing transitions between ideas is largely a matter of attitude. One must never assume that the readers know what he knows. In fact, it's a good idea to assume not only that the readers need all the information that one has and need to know how one arrived at the point he's at, but also that they are not quite as quick as he is.

What is coherence?

Although there is an undeniable and very important link between semantics and translation, the one dealing with meaning, the other with transfer of meaning, some say that semantic theory and translation theory are not closely connected, and often translation specialists are even bothered rather than helped by semantic theory. Nevertheless, some of the prominent translation experts and theorists might disagree with that, like Nida (1964: 30) who believes that the manner of expressing the meaning is essential to discuss translation as language is used as a means to communicate that meaning, and thus it would be important to know the elements that construct the language, the way they work together, and the way they are related to other languages.

Beaugrande (1980: 19) argues that coherence subsumes the procedures whereby elements of knowledge are activated such that their conceptual connectivity is maintained and made recoverable. He suggested three means of coherence; logical relations, knowledge of the world, and the will to expand human experience.

To Beaugrande (Ibid: 99) the coherence of the text should not be considered in total isolation because it is just a continuation of prior knowledge of the world, which works in a way that is not apparent in the text, added to the presented knowledge. Without such interaction, processing would be explosive, requiring as unmanageable number of alternatives to be considered.

Brown and Yule (1983: 63) say that if the reader is armed with the assumptions of analogy (things that stay as they used to be) and local interpretation (the change, if there is one, would be very little), which are the basis of coherence in the experience of life in general, for the reader then would carry on with confidence as he as he hold in his expectations the possibility of interpreting anything in terms of his own knowledge of the world.

Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 84) say that if meaning is used to designate the potential of a language expression (or other sign) for representing and conveying knowledge (i.e. virtual meaning), then we can use senses (which could easily be interpreted as coherence) to designate the knowledge that actually is conveyed by expressions occurring in a text.

They argue that a lot of expressions have several, sometimes different, meanings, but under normal conditions, only one of them would be sensible in a certain text, and if it is not immediately comprehensible or clear, it might lead to ambiguity, assuming that it is not intended.

Henry Schogt (1992: 193) assumes that there are three problems of the semantic theory; the relation of language to thought and reality, the relation of the elements of the language, and the communication among users of the same language.

The first problem, seeming wide, general, and not related to any specific language, has important implications for the translator. For if there is a link between language, thought and reality, then different realities appear in different languages, or different languages shape different realities.

The second problem of semantic theory is analyzing the elements of the language to define them in relation to each other at the same level in language.

If the semantic or lexical field study deals with one language, individual variations are not considered and the constructed field would thus be representative for common usage.

However, comparisons between fields in two or more languages are based on the same assumption of general validity of each field within its own speech community. By adhering to the principle of construction and generalization of the linguistic sign, the semantic field studies stay in the realm of langue, or competence. Anyway, translators work with texts, and operate at the level of parole, or performance.

For the third point it would not make any difference whether they are called speaker and hearer, sender and receiver, or encoder and decoder, the communication model presupposes someone who forms a message and someone who receives that message and interprets it.

If both persons follow the same grammatical rules, and have the same lexical inventory, the message gets across without change, and the communication is successful. This exaggerated situation does not take into account all the complexities that have been investigated by speech act description and pragmatics. So, Bell (1991:164) argues that the text is constructed by sequences of meaning that lexically and semantically binds the text through cohesion and coherence. He also argues that the manner and nature of meaning would determine the deference.

Coherence consists of the arrangement and sequencing of the concepts and relations of the textual world which underlie and are realized by the surface text; the propositional structure.

Techniques for Coherence

When sentences, ideas, and details fit together clearly, readers can follow along easily, and the text is coherent. The ideas tie together smoothly and clearly. To establish the links that readers need, one can use the methods listed here.

Repetition of a Key Term or Phrase:

This helps to focus the ideas and to keep the reader on track. The ability to connect ideas by means of repetition of key words and phrases sometimes meets a natural resistance based on the fear of being repetitive. We've been trained to reject redundancy. Now we must learn that catching a word or phrase that's important to a reader's comprehension of a piece and replaying that word or phrase creates a musical pattern in that reader's head. Unless it is overworked and obtrusive, repetition lends itself to a sense of coherence (or at least to the illusion of coherence).

Example: *You can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.*

Synonyms:

Synonyms are words that essentially have the same meaning, and they provide some variety in the word choices, helping the reader to stay focused on the idea being discussed.

Example: *Myths* narrate sacred histories and explain sacred origins. *These traditional narratives* are, in short, a set of beliefs that are a very real force in the lives of the people who tell them.

Pronouns:

Pronouns quite naturally connect the ideas because pronouns almost always refer the reader to something earlier in the text.

This, that, these, those, he, she, it, they, and we are useful pronouns for referring back to something previously mentioned. But the referent should always be clear.

Example: When *scientific experiments* do not work out as expected, *they* are often considered failures until some other scientist tries *them* again. *Those* that work out better the second time around are the ones that promise the most rewards.

Transitional words:

There are many words in the language that cue the readers to relationships between sentences, joining sentences together.

Example: I like autumn, *and yet* autumn is a sad time of the year, too. The leaves turn bright shades of red and the weather is mild, *but* I can't help thinking ahead to the winter and the ice storms that will surely blow through here. *In addition*, that will be the season of chapped faces, too many layers of clothes to put on, and days when I'll have to shovel heaps of snow from my car's windshield.

Sentences patterns:

Sometimes, repeated or parallel sentence patterns can help the reader follow along and keep ideas tied together.

Example: (from a speech by President John F. Kennedy) "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country".

Coherence and translation

Understanding meaning between participants of a natural discourse is based on the process of linking interactions in a coherent way. This does not mean that utterances must be related in a textually overt way. The interpretation is based on a certain shared knowledge between participants to specify the nature of the utterance. Shushane Blum-Kulka (1986) defines coherence as '*a covert potential meaning relationship among parts of a text, made overt by the reader or listener through processes of interpretation,*' and as opposed to it, she defines cohesion as '*an overt relationship holding between parts of the text, expressed by language specific markers.*'

As translation is considered to be a communication act, the process of translation, she assumes, necessarily entails shifts in cohesion and coherence, as cohesion might be due to different linguistic constraints of both source language and target language.

Nevertheless, we are more interested in this paper in the shift of coherence. We must define a way to detect coherence in the source language first to be able to detect the shift of coherence.

In her considering shifts of coherence through translation, Blum-Kulka (1986: 23-4) examined the possibility that texts may change or lose their meaning potentials through translation. She argued three points; that there are two types of shift of coherence the first is reader-focused and the second is text focused, and that the first is less avoidable than the second; that the first is related to the receiver of the translation and the second is related to the process of translation itself; and that both can somehow be studied through psycholinguistics of text processing.

Translation works on two opposing levels, the first is concern for the reader, which gives the license to restructure the source language text in the target language. And the second is remaining as faithful as possible to the source language, which imposes constraints on that license.

Halliday and Hassan (1976), in their attempt to tackle the subject of coherence, looked at the text as a semantic unit: a unit not of form but of meaning. They say that a text has a 'texture', by which they mean coherence, and that this characteristic distinguishes it from anything that is not a text. The text derives the texture from the fact that it functions as a unity with respect to its environment, which means that they defined coherence through cohesion by considering the former as variant and the latter as constant, when the opposite is true.

That's why their approach cannot be relied on in this paper, because lack of connectives in a text does not necessarily damage comprehension when readers are usually able to make bridging inferences.

Textual cohesion represents only a potential which can be fully realized only when the reader appropriately identifies the schema underlying a text. If the reader does not have, or fails to understand, that schema, no matter how cohesive the text is, it would never be coherent to him.

Brown and Yule (1983) say that the syntactic structure and lexical items are not the sole operators in a linguistic message to give an interpretation, for a writer may produce perfectly grammatical sentences, which might not be claimed to be understandable, just because they need more supplementary information. The novelist leads his reader to read on and find out what more that first sentence, though literally complete, has to say. They say that in addition to the knowledge of sentential structure, there is also knowledge of other standard formats to convey knowledge. People bring coherence to the interpretation of linguistic messages, i.e. the reader makes an effort to arrive at the writer's intended meaning in producing a linguistic message.

In addition to coherence, there are also the principles of analogy, local interpretation, general features of context, regularities of discourse structure, regular features of information structure organization, and conventional socio-cultural knowledge. Brown and Yule (1983: 225) isolated three aspects of the process of interpreting a writer's intended meaning in producing discourse, the way the message is received, world knowledge and facts, and deciding which meaning is to be considered.

In computing the communicative function, the way the message is received, it is assumed that speakers convey both social and propositional meanings when they produce particular utterance forms in particular contexts. Understanding is based on the assumption that a reason is being expressed for an action performed in speaking. The action and the reason are to be identified by virtue of their location within a conventional structure of interaction.

The socio-cultural knowledge includes language, and the general knowledge of the world determines out interpretation of discourse, and of every aspect of experience.

Brown and Yule suggest that processing of discourse includes two activities. In the first, the meanings are worked out of the words and structure of a sentence and build up a composite meaning for sentences. This activity is called (bottom-up processing).

In the second, prediction of what the next sentence is most likely to mean is based on the context and the composite meaning of the sentences already processed, this activity is called (top-down processing).

It is a feature of background knowledge representations that they are organized in a fixed way as a complete unit of stereotypic knowledge in memory. Understanding discourse is, therefore, mainly a process of retrieving stored information from memory and relating it to the encountered discourse.

Knowledge is proposed to be stored in the memory as frames, scripts, scenarios (bigger than scripts), and schemas. And there are types of inferences on the reader's part arrive at an interpretation; inferences as missing links, inferences as non-automatic connections (logical inferences), and inferences as filling in gaps or discontinuities in interpretation.

Van Dijk (1977) analyzed some properties of the semantic structure of discourse, which determines its coherence. The basis for his theory is that coherence is a semantic property of discourses, based on the interpretation of each individual sentence, relative to the interpretation of other sentences. And sentences or propositions in a discourse may form a coherent discourse even if they are not all connected to every other sentences of proposition.

He emphasized that the referential identity between individuals, and also that when some fact holds in the same possible world, at that same place and /or at the time, this would involve identity.

A coherent discourse will also have relations of difference and change. New individuals may be introduced into the universe of discourse, or assign new properties or relations to individuals, which have already been introduced.

Any newly introduced individual should be related in one way or another to an individual that is already present. The same goes for properties. Change of world or situation is constrained by accessibility relations to those already established. So, changes must somehow be homogeneous.

Changes of individuals, properties, or relations are to be operated with the ones already given. The relation between old and new can be represented in the simplified schema: $\{(a, b), (b, c), (c, d) \dots\}$ or $\{(a, b), (a, c), (a, d) \dots\}$. These relations are called linear or segmental coherence, i.e. the coherence relations holding between propositions expressed by compositions expressed by composite sentences and sequences of sentences.

The relations between individual propositions do not characterize the semantic structures of a more global nature. This is done though sets of propositions, whole sequences and certain operations on sets and sequences of propositions of a discourse.

The macro-structures determine the global or overall coherence of discourse and are themselves determined by the linear coherence of sequences.

Coherence in a translated text

A translated text is chosen here to measure the degree of coherence in translation. The text is by *Ghasan Kanafani* and the translation is by *Hilery Kilpatrick*:

أم سعد، المرأة التي عاشت مع أهلي في "الغيبسية" سنوات لا يحصيها العد والتي عاشت بعدها في مخيمات التمزق سنوات لا قبل لأحد بحملها على كتفيه، ما تزال تأتي لدارنا كل يوم ثلاثاء: تنتظر الى الأشياء شاعرة حتى اعماقها بحصتها فيها، تنتظر الي كما لأبنها، تفتح امام أذني قصة تعاستها وقصة فرحها وقصة تعبها. ولكنها أبداً لا تشكو.

انها سيدة في الأربعين، كما يبدو لي، قوية كما لا يستطيع الصخر، صبورة كما لا يستطيع الصبر، تقطع أيام الأسبوع جينة وذهاباً، تعيش عمرها عشر مرات في التعب والعمل كي تنزع لقمتهما النظيفة ولقم الأدهاز.

أعرفها منذ سنوات، تشكل في مسيرة أيامي شيئاً لا غنى عنه، حين تدق باب البيت وتضع أشياءها الفقيرة في المدخل تقوح في رأسي رائحة المخيمات بتعاستها وصمودها العريق، وبيوسها وآمالها، ترند الى لساني المرارة التي علكتها حتى الدوار سنة وراء سنة.

Um Saad lived for countless years with my family in al-Ghabasiya, and since then she had lived for a crushing load of years in the torment of the camps. She still comes to our house every Tuesday. She looks at things, conscious of her part in them to the morrow of her bones, and she looks on me as a son, pouring into my ear the tales of her misery, her joy, and her troubles. But never once does she complain.

She is a woman of about forty, I think, with a strength greater than rock and a patience more than endurance itself. She spends every day of her week coming and going, living her life ten times over in toil to snatch for herself and her children an honest bite to eat.

I have known her for years. She represents something in my life which I cannot do without, when she knocks on the door and puts her belongings down in the hall, I am enveloped in the smell of the camps, in their misery and deep-rooted steadfastness, their poverty and hopes. Again my mouth is filled with the bitterness which I have tasted years after years until it has sickened me.

Van Dijk's model is considered in this paper to measure the degree of coherence of translation. This is so because of its straightforwardness, simplicity, and feasibility for this paper.

A first determinant seems to be the individual = identity in the model sequence: (Um Saad/أم سعد) = (She/المرأة/تاء)، (a women of forty/الأربعين)، (my family/أهلي)، (our house/دارنا)، are related in a less direct way, other examples like this are: (Ghabasiya/الغيبسية)، (camps/مخيمات)، (rock/الصخر)، (misery/تعاستها)، (steadfastness/صمودها)، (poverty/بيوسها)، (bitterness/مرارة)، and also (years/سنوات)، (every Tuesday/كل يوم ثلاثاء)، (forty/الأربعين)، (everyday of her week/أيام الأسبوع)، (my life/مسيرة أيامي)، (years after years/سنة وراء سنة). Another one would be (on me/الي)، (as a son/أبنها)، and (her children/أولادها)، (mouth/لساني).

The relations involved are those of inclusion, membership part-whole, and possession. Ghabasiya and camps include houses, things, and belongings seem to be possessions of a human individual. Thus a set of individuals are related by identity or partiality. Those successive models are called a series.

In some sentences, series are related by verbs, for example: (lived/عاشت)، (comes/تأتي)، (looked/تنتظر)، and (complain/تشكو). The predicates in the successive sentences should also be related in order for the passage to be coherent, e.g.:

Lived with family	عاشت مع أهلي
Lived in camps	عاشت في مخيمات
Comes to our house	تأتي لدارنا
Looks at things	تنتظر الى الأشياء

Looks at me تنظر الي

Pouring into my ear تفتح أمام انني

Predicate relations, however, need only exist between predicates assigned to the same individual or to the individuals of one series. Here the predicates are related because they denote a sequence of activities, bodily states and mental (emotional) states for the woman series.

Conclusions

The text is ordered, normally, with respect to the activity sequence, finally, the text is coherent due to time/period and place identity with the activity sequence.

Coherence in translation is as important, if not more, as it is in the original text, for a translator, in his attempt to be as faithful as possible to the intention of the author of the original text, the original text itself, or his audience, might slip into concentrating on the aspect of cohesion in the translation and overlooks coherence resulting in a translation poorer than the original text.

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