Context, culture, compensation

Three basic concepts in translation studies[1]

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Introduction

The last decades have witnessed the burgeoning of contextual cultural and cognitive issues in translation studies (TS). TS has come to realise that it shares much with experts in other fields of linguistic and extralinguistic research and that the findings of their seminal work can be usefully integrated into an interdisciplinary (or rather multidisciplinary) conceptual framework. Hence, TS has felt the need to look beyond the confines of a predominantly text-linguistic methodology and seek new dimensions for its research by combining contextual, socio-cultural and cognitive perspectives of the translation process and the translation result.

Although there is, to my knowledge, no universally accepted list of properties of translator behaviour, there is a number of such properties that are widely accepted by consensus as components of human cognitive functioning of which translation is a particularly good case in point. We all agree, e.g., that translation is a goal-directed activity which basically consists of a decoding and an encoding phase, a dichotomy which can be substituted by decomposition /recomposition, comprehension/reconstruction or. in a more mysterious way of expression, deverbalization/ reverbalization. I call deverbalization/reverbalization mysterious because actually nobody seems to know and to explain in a plausible manner what is meant by the two processes and because the think-aloud method has shown, or is trying to show, that going from source text (ST) to target text (TT) is not a speechless procedure.

If we take a closer look at the decoding/encoding dichotomy, we find that both universal and individual, or for that matter, objective and subjective factors can be detected which can be reduced to three facets, context, culture, and compensation, determining the concept of translation as purposive behaviour.

Hence, what I am striving for is a specification of translational information-processing factors that are instrumental in
1. learning how to behave intelligently when one is confronted with a novel or a familiar transfer situation,
2. planning what operations have to be executed in a specific environmental context,
3. executing them on the basis of a repertoire of knowledge and skills which shows that behaviour-in-context is practically always the result of the organized functioning of both problem-solving and routine processes.

Since individuals tend to selectively engage different aspects of their translational environment according to their personal interests, predilections, and capabilities, no quick answers to our questions are available or expectable. Rather, we shall have to proceed in a heuristic, trial-and-error fashion, trying to develop a frame of reference which can be successfully applied to the assessment of translation work as a kind of intelligent linguistic behaviour.

Context

The first problem we have to discuss is how narrowly or broadly one should define the concept of context. I suspect that here is a disquieting trade-off. If we prefer a more specific definition of context, we can probably make a fairly good prediction on the scope and volume of cognitive activities required for the adequate mastering of such a translation situation, but such a prediction is a far cry from even a low degree of transsituational generality. To a contextualist, translator behaviour is not an enumeration of a person's translational abilities per se, but a description of a person's mental performance in a particular translation situation. In view of the fact that contextual approaches are inherently and invariably situation-relative, they often appear vague and unstable over time, task specifications, and sociocultural settings, thereby somewhat lacking in empirical verification and stringent generalization.

Nonetheless, contextual sensitivity should be regarded as one of the highest criteria of assessment of intelligent translational behaviour. In the absence of a universally valid context criterion, TS must resort to the use of a wide-spectred ensemble of criteria, none of which is fully adequate and comprehensive in itself, but the combination of which is at least useful in exploring translator behaviour and accounting for translation problems.

The contextual approach is further complicated by the fact the individual translator often draws upon different skills and strategies in order to solve his problems. A translator may have brilliant ideas, but they may be difficult or impossible for other translators to follow through upon. Nevertheless, context can hardly be overestimated in TS. It is an overriding component in the attempt to set up a proper framework for the study of translator behaviour, despite the fact it is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, influenced and modified by a large number of situational perspectives.

Culture

Culture has been defined as the man-made part of the environment. Its investigation is a mainstream of social psychology which is an important feature of TS. Even if one is confronted only casually with a foreign culture, one immediately realises that the members of different linguistic and cultural communities differ in their social behaviour. No special training in the observation of a foreign culture or the painstaking analysis of culturally determined discourse is required to note that there are considerable differences in daily routines ranging from outward appearance to customs of social behaviour. e.g. in interpersonal relationships which may be affected by factors such as sex, age, race, religion, place of residence, professional activities and their underlying attitudes, norms, values, intentions, strategies for risk management or what have you.

A culture-oriented approach to translation is, of course, nothing new, and the views presented here draw upon and are compatible with many others who have chosen to view translation in a cultural perspective. However, this statement must be relativized: Concerning translation, culture-oriented views, like many others, are subject to considerable differences in assessment. I shall come back to this point immediately.

Culture-oriented approaches to translation vary in the degree to which they view translation as a cultural entity. At one extreme one can posit the view of radical linguo-cultural relativism.

If one does not go so far as to infer from this relativism the postulate of principle untranslatability, one must define the possibilities and limitations of translation in a way that is appropriate in the environment in which the people of each particular culture reside.

As far as I can see, nobody in TS endorses this radical version of linguo-cultural relativism. Of course, there have been advocates of untranslatability, e.g. Weisgerber, von Humboldt (in a wishy-washy fashion) or the representatives of the linguistic relativity hypothesis (Sapir/Whorf). But since their time a good deal of research has been conducted, which has attempted to obtain insights into how the various members of the TS research community conceive of, define, and express notion of translation. There has also been a good deal of attention paid to the evaluation of the linguo-cultural context in which translator behaviour is nurtured.

The main point to be taken from their work is, in my view, that, as just indicated, no exclusively culturally-related concept of translation has been identified anywhere in the world. In addition, there is no unanimity about what is considered linguo-cultural relativism (or its nearest conceptual equivalent); transcultural dimensions, particularly those involving epistemic knowledge and practical daily activity, are frequently incorporated in translation concepts. What we need are comprehensive studies on various language, culture, and communication communities, and, above all, the development of systematic frameworks for making comparisons between various cultural settings. Such investigations would, no doubt, reveal that cultural features of texts-to-be-translated are of practical concern in the execution of translation tasks. This means that translators must employ their translation skills in ways which are communicatively effective and appropriate. Therefore, the study of cultural functions of language has taken on an increasingly important role in TS. This has entailed a movement away from a narrow linguistic perspective and a look at the broader implications of considering the ST author, the translator, and the TT reader(ship) as social beings and to operate within a frame of reference which is at the same time individual, conceptual, and inter-personal, and is embedded in contextual and cultural reality.

The concept of translation as being cross-culturally determined linguistic behaviour ties in with the concept of translation as a sequence of inter-related strategies and techniques designed to establish a functional balance between ST and TT. In presenting translation as a manifestation of cross-cultural activity, we cannot argue in model-theoretic terms, hoping to arrive at a quantifiable or formalizable model of task performance. More to point is the development of a repertoire of knowledge and skills which shows that behaviour in a specific cultural setting is invariably the result of the organized and cognitive functioning of the translator's mind.

In a simplified fashion, one can say that translation, as a specimen of socioculturally determined linguistic behaviour, contains both culture-specific and culture-universal components. Mental mechanisms which are related to translator performance, i.e. ST decoding, transfer and TT encoding, are observable in all cultures, no matter how close to each other or how distant from each other they may be. But in order to obtain in the culture the same level of impact and appeal as the original text has had in the source culture, the translator may have to adopt, at least in certain translational environments such as bible translation, rather intricate and sophisticated roundabout or adaptive strategies.

Compensation

One need not go to exotic language and culture communities to find hosts of examples which show that compensatory strategies are absolutely imperative for shaping the text-to-be-translated in such a way as to achieve at least a minimum of functional equivalence between ST and TT. Whenever attempts at straightforward direct transfer on the basis of one-to-one linguistic correspondences fail, the translator has to engage in restructuring operations to guarantee an optimal between ST and TT. In such cases, the translator cannot and must not be satisfied with merely trying to simplify take over what is to be found in the ST.

An important aspect of compensation is that there may be not just one set of compensatory behaviour for everyone, because individual translators can adjust the environment to the TT environment in different ways. Whereas the general procedural components in translator behaviour are to all intents and purposes universal, their concrete manifestations in the build-up of textually appropriate transfer strategies, methods, and techniques are likely to vary from one person to another. What does seem to be common among translators trying to master their task is the ability to compensate for inter-lingual and inter-cultural differences. Normally a translator, especially if he is an in-house translator, cannot select his textual environment. Hence, he will be successful in his job only if he is able to adapt well to the environment he is in so as to minimise the unavoidable qualitative cline between the ST and the emergent TT. What compensatory skills consist of may differ, at least to some degree, both across translators and across translational situations. So compensatory performance is not quite the same thing for different translators and in different environments. The awareness for the need of compensation may be the same, but how compensation is achieved largely depends on the adaptive skills the translator is able to capitalize upon.

There is one question to be asked in this regard: At what point, or according to which criteria, do we conclude that a translator's adaptive strategies are sufficient in a particular translation situation? A general answer is difficult, and even more so is the answer to the question of how and ot what degree compensatory strategies can be made operational. The important point is that understanding the degree to which compensation is in fact successful requires a great deal of textual specificity and evaluative effort. Only if we find ways and means for a better understanding of the processes in the acquisition of compensatory strategies can we assess the appropriateness of compensatory strategies in the sociocultural and environmental settings in which these strategies are supposed to function efficiently.

In dealing with compensatory strategies, we must not forget, however, that the concept of compensation, as it has been used so far in TS, has been rather vague and inconsistent (as is the case with practically all complex concepts). It is, of course, tempting to look at translation in terms of compensatory behaviour, but it is, as indicated, not clear at the linguistic and procedural level what the yardsticks for compensatory strategies are. There is the danger of falling into a conformist trap: The better a translator adjusts himself to the TT environment, the more successful he is in his job. This goes counter, e.g. in literary translation, to the fact that the ST is an autonomous factor on which the translation process is ultimately based in all its perspectives. There can simply be no translation without a ST.

This is not to say that there is no such thing as individual decision-making in the translation process, but if we think of translator behaviour in sociocultural terms, we are left with the problem of explaining how the adjustment of the translator to the respective translational

environment evolves as the consequence of compensatory pressure exerted by the text-to-be-translated. This seems to be a major problem of a theory of translation and one which translation theory has dealt with not even in a heuristic context, and it might offer an explanation of the rather deplorable fact that even within linguistic circles the results of translation theory have often been disregarded, unappreciated and misrepresented.

The broadness of the concept of compensation has both salutary and unfortunate consequences:

On the positive side, it suggests an openness and richness of perspectives among the concept of translational creativity deserves to be rated higher than has been the case so far. Compensation is indeed one of the core principles of translation theory, because it is in one way or another manifest in all intelligent translator performance, but one must not forget that the number of performance components employed in the execution of a translational task is fairly large.

On the negative side, I am worried by the possibility that if all these diverse phenomena were to be subsumed under the category of compensation, it would be unavoidable to equate compensation with virtually all cognitive activities in translation and thereby (over)simplify - or complicate for that matter - the concept of compensatory strategies.

Therefore, it would be helpful to have further elaboration of what is meant by compensation. Is it a high-priority concept in reaching self-defines or other-directed targets? Is it a kind of knowledge about what compensatory strategies have what textual consequences, or is it a kind of knowledge about what strategies are needed to reach a specific translational goal, e.g. in the field, of literary or biblical translation? Surely it would be useful to relate the concept of compensation to a strictly behaviouristic framework that does not require that sort of information-processing that is characteristic of analytical translation work. Here I am thinking of responses that the translator elicits habitually on the basis of more or less internalized configurations on the morphological and/or syntactic level. The routinier in translation may look at a specific textual component for a very short time and then select a translational move without analyzing his approach and considering possible consequences of his behaviour. The speed of the response can be so great as to make analytical information-processing rather unlikely.

I believe that the concept of compensation becomes clearer if we distinguish two types of translational activity which we may call originality of approach and automatization. Against the background of intelligence research, one can argue that translational intelligence is best measured in the context of tasks that are "nonentrenched" in the sense of requiring information-processing of kinds outside people's everyday experience. It is almost trivial to state that a translator's competence is not best shown in run-of-the-mill situations that are encountered by him in his daily practice, but in extraordinary situations that challenge his ability to cope with new textual environments to which he must adapt in order to achieve a qualitatively acceptable result in the notoriously short period of time allowed to cope with a usually intricate and demanding translational job.

The novelty of a translational situation is apparent both in the phase of ST comprehension and the phase of TT production. Whether it is the ST decoding phase or the TT encoding phase which requires more innovative energy presumable depends in many cases on the text-type to

which the text-to-be translated belongs, or to the breadth and depth of linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge which the respective translator disposes of.

The notion that translational competence is particularly aptly assessed in situations that require at least some degree of compensation to master new and challenging textual demands leads us straight to the two Piagetan concepts of assimilation and accomodation. Piaget calls situations assimilatory which enable the person involved to perform well when confronted with tasks that are presented in a familiar milieu. Or there may be situations which compel the person involved to engage in some sort of mentally more demanding accommodatory processes, with the result that he performs well when confronted with tasks presented in an unfamiliar milieu. In general, a translator can predictably do an adequate job with comparatively little cognitive input under textual circumstances that are favourable to the routine handling of translational tasks. When the textual environment is less standardized and, as such, less supportive, the efficacy of translational work is either greatly reduced or the situation may force the translator to invest more time and mental input to achieve a result which he can defend before the ST author, the TT recipient, and, last but not least, before himself.

It is obvious that too much novelty can render a translational situation nondiagnostic and unmanageable. Hence, if a translational situation is too novel, the translator, if he is a novice, is most likely to fail to bring cognitive structures to bear on it, and as a consequence, the respective task will inevitably be simply outside the range of his translation competence. Translators who can deal with translation problems in a routine fashion are at an advantage in doing their job, because their ability to fully exploit processing resources makes it relatively easy for them to fall back upon problem-solving strategies in what translators regard as novel translational situations. In contrast, novices in the field of translation – as in any field that requires intelligent behaviour – are overwhelmed by most translational situations. As a result, they must engage in methodically controlled step-by-step procedures so frequently that speedy ST accessability and speedy TT production are to all intents and purposes impossible.

This is a challenge to translation pedagogy. It shows that translator performance involves one or both of the following sets of translation skills, namely compensation and routine rendering. In either case, speed is an important criterion for efficient translator behaviour. The concept that "fast is smart" permeates the whole translation world. Every person who makes a living by translation is aware of the fact that rapid performance, rapid learning, rapid parallel-text research and rapid decision-making are properties that are absolutely imperative if one tries to keep one's head above water and to efficiently cope with a translation task under the prescribed situational conditions. Among these conditions, speedy delivery (nowadays even at the cost of quality), is a must, above all in the field of software translation. It is rare, if not impossible, to find a translational situation that does not force the translator who works under time pressure, often exceeding his mental resource, thereby conjuring up the necessity to put up with a piece of work that would have been better had the translator been allowed the appropriate amount of time.

Translators who process information slowly or haltingly, are compelled to probe deeply into textual matter which the experienced translator con handle smoothly and (almost) automatically. slow translators are blocked from options that are easily accessible to the swift. In the course of their training, translator-trainees must learn to assess the trade-off between speed and quality in information-processing and to establish an equilibrium between ST author intentions and TT reader expectations.

We are all aware of the fact that modern society pays reverence to speed; it is almost speed-obsessed. The most highly appreciated quality of the computer is its (alleged) fastness. Modern society is therefore prepared to invest more capital and human resources in speed. This is the most natural explanation of the revival of machine translation and machine-aided translation in the last two decades. This revival is motivated by the belief that the machine can perform faster (and hopefully with a higher degree of accuracy and consistency) than the human translator. Perhaps this is unfair to the latter and, what is more, grossly counter-productive, but this is the sort of contemporary reality which the translation profession must put up with, trying to show that, in the last analysis, speed of processing information is only worth discussing, if it is associated with superior overall task performance. Here, the emphasis lies on "overall", because in praising the speed of the computer, the fact is almost invariably forgotten or intentionally ignored that preparing the machine to translate and to post-edit its low-quality output takes up such a lot of time that, if all is said and done, the human translator does a better job than the machine has been able to show so far – and will be able to show in the future, no matter how sophisticated the programmes for computer translation will ever be.

Conclusion

We all know that the translator's life is an unending quest for knowledge presumably embodying three salient aspects, knowledge why/for whom, knowledge that, and knowledge how. In translation-teaching, this three-facet issue is probably not totally intractable, but is still in the pilot phase. It will necessitate deeper consideration of epistemic/epistemological issues in translator performance, thus opening a vista for the empirically based multi-level concept of translation pedagogy.

In my view, there has never been a euphoria concerning the efficacy of translation-teaching. The problems involved simply dwarf our understanding, our knowledge, and our ability to respond to translation problems prudently. Put in simple words, the basic formula for translation-teaching is: the comprehension and facilitation of the development from ignorance to knowledge-oriented behaviour, from novicehood to expertise.

[1] Note: This article is based on my book *Knowledge and Skills in Translator Behavior*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins 1996.

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