



Explorations into the Essence of English—Chinese and Chinese—English Translation Based on Relevance Theory

Richa Hu

English Department

Foreign Languages College, Inner Mongolia University

Huhhot 010021, China

E-mail: huricha@sina.com

Abstract

The relevance theory is a cognitive pragmatic theory considerably influential in the West in recent years, though its impacts have gone far beyond the limits of pragmatics. Translation ranks among the disciplines most influenced by relevance theory, which has drawn attention of Chinese scholars in the past decades. However, the impacts of relevance theory on translation in China are far from being strong with inadequate relevant documents. Relevance theory has not only revealed the essence of translation and the subjects of translation study, but also falsified the untranslatability and the principle of equivalence; relevance theory can also help translators to accurately understand and convey the intentions of the source communicators and cater for the cognitive context of the recipients of translation.

Keywords: Relevance theory, Translation, Essence, Cognitive context

Forewords

The relevance theory is a comparatively new theory in pragmatic study which attempts not only to answer philosophical questions related to communications but also to supply explanations of psychological phenomenon in the process of understanding of listeners. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, D. Sperber and D. Wilson put forward the relevance theory in a systematic manner and defined the relevance principle as the general principle of human communicative activities in their *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (1995). The relevance theory deems verbal communication as a suggestion-inference process and proposes from the prospective of cognitive linguistics that communication is cognitive activity conducted in accordance with certain laws of inferential reasoning (Miao Xingwei, 1997). As translation is a process of inferential reasoning involving the mechanism of the brain and thus a form of verbal communicating behavior (E. A. Gutt, 2004), the relevance theory can be employed to interpret and guide translating activities and therefore put an end to the never-ending controversies among various schools over translation theories and principles.

1. Fundamental concepts of relevance theory and translation

1.1 Relevance theory

The relevance theory was first proposed by French linguist D. Sperber and British linguist D. Wilson in 1986, which can be defined as is the relationship between proposition and context, the fundamental feature of proposition and the proposition as it is related to context. This definition can be understood with two implications: first, congregation of contexts refers to a conceptual paragraph with definite theme of which relevance is a chain of meaning; second, a proposition itself is relevant and serves as a section of the chain of meaning.

1.2 Translation theory

Translation in essence is the translation of meaning. “Translation means translating meaning.” (E. A. Nida) Translation aims at conveying faithfully the ideas, emotions, styles etc expressed in one language with another language. Despite the tremendous impacts of the criteria of “faithfulness, fluency and elegance” proposed by Yan Fu on the modern translation practices and theoretical study in China, a deep and thorough examination reveals that such criteria prove inadequate in providing specific and practical guidelines. Therefore, the criteria of “faithfulness, expressiveness and closeness” proposed by Prof. Liu Chongde are gaining acceptance in recent years, by which the translators should strive for closeness in verve of the source text and simultaneously endeavor to achieve closeness in translating words, sentences and paragraphs, so as to make the translated work and the source text alike both in form and in style. How then, can translation meet the above criteria? What is the interrelation between the relevance theory and translation?

2. Exploration into the interrelation between relevance theory and translation

Before the birth of relevance theory, theories on translation were numerous, though none of them seem to have caught a complete glimpse of translation, and the definitions accordingly presented are invariably one-sided to certain extents, some even inconsistent in their arguments, and the various concepts on translation were like blind people feeling an elephant, each holding a separate part without understanding the whole. The relevance theory, by contrast, provides a unified theoretical mode to translation and supplies a unified interpretation of various translating activities without causing self-contradictory inconsistency.

2.1 *Revealing the essence of translation*

The relevance theory regards translation as a two-round communicating process of ostension-inference jointly participated by three parties, namely, the writer of the source text, the translator and recipient of the target text. In this two-round communicating process the translator plays a dual role as the relayor of message. In the first round, the writer of the source text is the communicator and the translator is the recipient. The translator is supposed to fully understand the source text so as to deconstruct the source text in the process of ostension-inference with the writer of the source text. In the second round, the translator is the communicator and the reader of the target text is the recipient. In this process the translator conveys the message of the original communicator to the recipient of the target text by inferring the cognitive structure and context of the recipient and selecting codes comprehensible and acceptable to the recipients. The success or failure of the tri-party communication hinges on whether the translator can find the optimal linkage between the writer of the source text and the recipient of the target text.

2.2 *Revealing the objects of study in translation*

The objects of study in translation have always been an issue much debated in the academic field. Early translators focused mainly on the “outcome”, i.e. the translated text by analyzing the source text and the target text, finding the similarities and deviations between the two, making comparisons and finally evaluating the translated work. This is a static object. E. A. Gutt argued that understanding in this way has severed the integrity of translating process. If a thorough study is to be made on translation theory, the process of translation will have to be analyzed, and the complicated psychological process of the translator be explored in the course of his translating work. Between the source text and the target text, the translator is faced with numerous options of equivalence in his translating process and has to go through an immensely complicated process of inference in which the brain mechanism and psychological factors play a vital role. Gutt insists on studying translation with relevance theory. The relevance theory looks upon communication from the perspective of capacity rather than from conduct and attempts to illustrate the role played by information-processing mechanism in human brain in interpersonal communications. Therefore, relevance theory emphasizes definitely on the study of the process of translating activities. The process in which the translator finds the optimal relevance is equivalent to the process of translating activities.

2.3 *Resolving the problem of untranslatability*

Translation concept based on relevance theory holds that translation is a subordinate concept and a variety of verbal communicating activity. The success or failure of communication hinges on whether or not the message and intention of one party of the communication is recognized and accepted by the other. As is mentioned before, translation in essence is a two-round communicating process of ostension-inference in which codes, proactively selected by communicators, are merely an instrument for conveying messages. In other words, different wordings can be employed to express the same intentions and achieve the same communicating effects. The messages possible to be conveyed by the graphic feature of scripts do not matter too much as they merely illustrates the basis of word-formation and do not affect the generally recognized connotations they stand for, or, in other words, codes of whatever categories are characterized with the same instrumental functions. Based on this, we can safely conclude that nothing is untranslatable, and anything can be translated in certain aspects, to certain extents and in certain manners. Such a concept of translation has undoubtedly provided solid theoretical ground for the translation of strong cultural contexts, particularly the translation of poetry.

2.4 *Discarding the principle of binary equivalence*

As the achievement of study in contemporary Western linguistic fields, the principle of equivalence has been regarded as the central concept of translation theory and the criterion in judging quality of translated texts. However, be it formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, semantic equivalence, communicating equivalence, dominant equivalence, recessive equivalence, document equivalence or instrumental equivalence, the equivalence is merely superficial, and in fact equivalence is unattainable and equivalence in the real sense is impossible. Therefore, “equivalence” is not an effective concept in translation theory. The relevance theory holds that since translation is a form of communication, the absolute equivalence in the output and understanding in verbal communications is impossible, let alone the equivalence in the second round of output and understanding in verbal communications. Ten thousand people translate *Hamlet*, and there would be ten thousand translated versions of *Hamlet*. By contrast to static descriptions in previous translation theories,

the translation theory in the framework of relevance theory has adopted a dynamic way of interpretation. In the process of translation, the cognitive structures and cognitive contexts of the communicator of the source text, the translator and the recipient are highly unstable, constituting a dynamic process. The effectiveness of translation is determined by the convergence between relevant factors. To achieve the organic integration of the effectiveness and faithfulness of translation, the translator will have to try to maximize the convergence while minimize the divergence and seek to reproduce the contexts and intention of communication of the source text.

3. Inspirations from Relevance Theory on English-Chinese and Chinese-English Translation

3.1 Understanding and conveying the intentions of the source text communicators accurately

Translation is more translation of “intention” than translation of “meaning”. “Meaning” refers to the intention of the source text communicators. From the perspective of relevance theory, the translator should not only convey the informative intention, but also convey the communicative intention of the source text in order to achieve the success of the communication of translation, and the communicative intention is to be given priority when it is not possible to succeed in conveying both. To fully comprehend the communicative intentions of the source text, a translator in the first place is expected to have a solid command of the source language, profound understanding of the differences in syntactic structure, lexical order, ways of expression, etc between the source language and the target language, and the ability to infer the communicative intentions of the writer of the source text from phonetic, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects and other clues of communications. Besides, the translator should learn the setting of communication, context, social and cultural background, etc. In case the purpose and effects of communication cannot be achieved by semantic translation, the translator may break away from the source text and be flexible enough to make pragmatic adjustments with appropriate translating strategies.

3.2 Understanding the cognitive context of the recipient of translated text

After thoroughly deconstructing the source text, the translator is supposed to select appropriate codes to reproduce the communicative intentions of the writer of the source text to the recipients of target text in accordance with the cognitive context of the recipients. Translation is a cross-cultural and cross-lingual communicative activity, and the recipients’ understanding of the translated work is subject to the difference in cognitive setting. There being unavoidable cultural conflicts or cultural schema default between the communicator and the recipient of translated text, communicative barrier is inevitable if the translator bases his understanding on his own cognitive habits. Therefore, the translator should make a correct prediction of the cognitive context of the recipients to ensure that they can correctly comprehend the informative and communicative intentions of the communicator of the source text. By addition, footnotes and other translation techniques, the translator can add up to the cultural schema default of the recipients so that they can recognize the pre-set pragmatic messages in the source text and find the best relevance of codes and contexts, thus obtaining a correct comprehension of the source text.

3.3 Abiding by the principle of cognition

Verbal communication is carried out in two models-code model and inferential model. The code model deals mainly with the meaning of sentences with the understanding that the realization of communications is subject to mutual knowledge, which is different from shared knowledge. Shared knowledge, as the term suggests, refers to the knowledge shared by both parties of the communication without impacts by contextual hypothesis and is static; mutual knowledge, however, requires both parties in the communication to update their knowledge and gain knowledge of the contextual information constantly with the changes in the contents of communications, and therefore is highly dynamic. However, in practices of verbal communications, it is practically impossible to know all the relevant messages of the other party, and thus the second model of verbal communication is called for: inferential model, which regards verbal communication as a process of mutual understanding featuring cognition-inference. “Mutual understanding” means that party A will try to convey to party B his messages as clearly as possible, and party B will understand the meaning and intentions of Party A upon hearing the words uttered by party A. Communication is successful only if mutual understanding is achieved. Based on the above, the communicative outlook of relevance theory maintains the following: verbal communication involves two models, i.e. code model and inferential model, and in a strict sense the inferential model (the mutual understanding model of cognition-inference) is the primary model whereas the code model is affiliated to the inferential model. The cognitive principle in inferential model is essential in relevance theory, which holds that “man’s cognitive inclinations are in conformity with relevance to the maximum extent”. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) As a pragmatic communicative activity, translation naturally shares the characteristics of common lingual communications, and therefore is similarly characterized by code model and inferential model. The author of the source text and the translator constitute the parties of the first-round communication, and the translator and the recipient of the translated text constitute parties of the second-round communication. Being different in their cognitive structures and cognitive contexts, they would call up different contextual assumptions from their respective cognitive contexts based on different optimal relevance for the inferences involved in the process of “mutual understanding”. Relevance theory holds that the stronger the innate relevance in the texts, the fewer efforts the readers would have to make in their

inferential attempts to achieve greater contextual effects; contrarily, the readers would have to exert more efforts of inference to achieve better contextual effects if the innate relevance of the texts were weak. However, in terms of creation and translation of texts, a good text should present the optimal, instead of the greatest innate relevance to the readers. "Optimal" implies enabling the readers to achieve the best contextual effects with insignificant efforts in inference. In fact, the strength of relevance in texts is closely related to the social function, intention of creation of the texts and personal style of the author and the translator. For example, for the practical texts with the aim of conveying messages and information, employment of accurate words and presentation of maximum relevance are the essential guarantee for the success of the communication of the texts; by contrast, for literary works with profound connotations and thought-provoking effects, e.g. poetry and fictions, the author/translator is expected to present the optimal relevance in their handling of words to convey their messages implicitly so as to provide the readers margins for adequate imagination and inference and thus create the "beauty of implicitness". Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the principle of optimal relevance and the cognitive pragmatics are effective angles to study translation theory.

4. Conclusion

Relevance theory is highly interpretive of translation, the "most complicated phenomenon in the history of the universe". By providing a unified theoretical framework to translation, relevance theory settled the disputes going on for years in the sphere of translation study, acquainted people to a thorough understanding of the essence of translation, and contributed to more scientific, rational and effective studies of translation theory. To sum up, relevance theory can effectively explain translation activity and guide translation practices, and the translator must fully comprehend the communicative intentions of the source text communicator, correctly predict the cognitive contexts of readers of translated text, and provide explanation and appropriate cognitive information in order to match the intention of the source text and the expectations of the readers of translated text and to achieve success of communications.

References

- Cai, Jinbao and Lin, Ying. (2007). On the Inspiring Effects of Relevance Theory on the Thinking Patterns of Translators, *Journal of Institute of Disaster Prevention Science and Technology*, (03).
- Cao, Xiyang. (2007). Translation of English and Chinese Proverbs as Seen from the Perspective of Relevance Theory, *Journal of Xihua University*, (03).
- Chen, Kefang and Zhao, Youhua. (2006). Relevance Theory and the Composition and Translation of Imitating Words—Examples in the Dream of the Red Mansion, *Journal of Anhui Normal University* (Humanities and Social Sciences), (06).
- Deng, Zhengjun. (2005). *Force of Explanation of Relevance Theory on Cultural Default and Restructuring in Translation*, Changchun Normal University, (01).
- Dong, Guangcai and Li, Linlin. (2005). Translation—Inter-Lingual Inferential and Interpretive Conduct—On Translation as Inter-Lingual Interpretive Use by Ernst August Gutt, *Journal of Dalian Nationalities University*, (06).
- Lin, Yujuan. (2004). Translatability of Poetry and Surpass of Translators as Seen from Locustidae, *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*, (04).
- Luo, Yinglan. (2007). On the Interpretation and Translation of Humors by Relevance Theory, *Hunan Social Sciences*, (02).
- Peng, Na. (2004). Misunderstandings in Relevance Theory Criticism—Debating with Mr. Wang Jianguo, *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*, (04).
- Shao, Yanchun. (2005). Comprehensive Comments on Relevance Theory and Practical Studies, *College English* (Academic Column), (00).
- Tang, Liling. (2007). Pragmatic Translation in the Perspective of Relevance Theory, *Journal of Adult Education of Gansu Political Science and Law Institute*, (04).