

A Probe into Translation Strategies from Relevance Perspective—Direct Translation and Indirect Translation

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on Gutt's notion of relevance-theoretic account of translation. Through the examination of a number of cases of literary translation, it aims to clarify some of the misunderstandings about relevance theory and prove this theory can provide an adequate interpretation of translation as cross-cultural and interlingual communication.

Key words: Relevance theory; Processing cost; Contextual effect; Direct translation; Indirect translation

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INTRODUCTION

With the development of translation theory, studying translation from a pragmatic prospect is widely accepted. Relevance theory was developed by Sperber and Wilson in *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (2001). Sperber and Wilson (2001) defined relevance theory as “a new approach to the study of human communication” (p. 24). Although complicated and sophisticated, relevance theory inspires works in many other disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and especially translation. According to Gutt (1991), Wilss once claimed that “The relevance theory is not... a theory of translation, but it offers new perspectives to translation studies in that translation today is widely accepted as a modern means of communication” (p. 26).

Gutt's achievement is noteworthy in regard to all of the efforts made in applying relevance theory to translation. In his book *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (1991), he declared “... The great contributions of relevance theory to the practice work of translation, with the understanding and coordinating communication, is the search for optimal relevance...” (p. 199). To achieve optimal relevance basically means to enable the audience to understand the meaning intended by the communicator without unnecessary effort and the audience can be provided with enough benefits from the translation. According to relevance theory, those efforts are called processing efforts and the benefits are called contextual effects.

Gutt holds firmly that translation is the process of pursuing optimal relevance. The relevance-theoretic account of translation is focused on retaining optimal relevance in the target text. That means translators should seek relevance from the original communicator and keep the optimal relevance in their translated version. He further declares that translation principles can be summarized as “do[ing] what is consistent with the search for optimal relevance” (Gutt, 1991, p. 124).

CLARIFICATION OF MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT RELEVANCE-THEORETIC ACCOUNT OF TRANSLATION

Misunderstanding About Gutt's Relevance-Theoretic Account of Translation

Relevance theory has brought about a new perspective for translation studies. However disappointingly, in China, there are misunderstandings about this relevance-based translation theory in some academic papers, which fall short of thorough and systematic study of this

theory, therefore missing some of its crucial notions. The representative fallacies in those papers are as follows.

Wang Jianguo claims that “relevance theory fails to give an adequate interpretation of translation, and the limitation of the application of relevance theory to translation study should be noted.” He argues that, “if an assumption is more relevant, only a smaller processing effort is required to achieve greater contextual effect, and other things being equal, the higher the relevance, the greater the contextual effect.” To further illustrate his viewpoint, Wang Jianguo says, “in order to achieve greater contextual effect, the translator should spare no effort to optimize the relevance to the target text and the target reader.” Basing his idea upon the above comments, Wang Jianguo criticizes Gutt’s theory by suggesting the fallacy that “Gutt’s theory is for free translation, and according to this theory, those utterances in the source text that require more processing efforts should be explicated in the target text. In addition, the translator should offer to the target readers as much background information as possible so that ‘only smaller processing effort is required’ and the translated text may be more relevant to the target readers.”

However, Wang Jianguo’s criticism does not hold water. In translation circle, many scholars, not infrequently, reject Wang’s fallacy.

Pen Na, in her paper published in *Journal of Guang Dong University of Foreign Studies*, points out that “Wang Jianguo’s criticism on Gutt’s relevance-theoretic account of translation is unacceptable, and Wang lacks thorough understanding of this theory.”

Zhao Yanchun published his paper *Relevance Theory and the Nature of Translation*, maintaining that Wang Jianguo’s claim distorts the function of relevance-theoretic framework of translation and Zhao Yanchun firmly insists that “relevance theory is compatible with translation, and the former can well explain the latter.”

More importantly, Professor Zhang Chunbai, in his paper *Direct Translation: A Crucial Notion in Relevance-Theory Account of Translation*, depicts that “Wang’s fallacy arises from the misunderstanding about Gutt’s notion of ‘minimum processing effort.’” Professor Zhang argues, “The pursuing of ‘minimum processing effort’ doesn’t require the translator to explicate whatever is implicit in the original text in order to reduce processing effort and achieve greater contextual effect.” Zhang Chunbai further proves his point by the following quotation from Gutt.

“If a communicator uses a stimulus that manifestly requires more processing effort than some other stimulus equally achievable to him, the hearer can expect that the benefits of this stimulus will **outweigh** the increase in processing cost – otherwise, the communicator would have failed to achieve optimal relevance.” (Gutt, 2001)

Therefore, what Gutt expresses here is that, if there should be increase in processing effort, the reader’s

benefits ought to outweigh such increase in processing effort.

Finally, Professor Zhang Chunbai suggests that, in order to clarify Wang’s misunderstanding, two translation strategies, direct translation and indirect translation proposed by Gutt, deserve great attention and systematic study.

Clarification of the Misunderstanding – Direct Translation and Indirect Translation

Example of Direct Translation and Indirect Translation

In order to make the abstract concepts of direct & indirect translation strategies simple, the author quotes from Gutt a comparison of a translation of Matthew 9:6 into Ifugao language, with its rendering in the Revised Standard Version (RSV) offered as well. This passage is about the incident with a man who is paralyzed, and Jesus is challenged about his right to heal that man.

Example (1)

| RSV | Ifugao |
|---|---|
| “But that you may know | “But I will prove my speech to you. You know that it is God alone who removes sickness. You also know that it is God alone who forgive sin. And so, if I remove the sickness of this person and he walks, that is the proof |
| that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sin.” | that I, the Elder Sibling of all people, I also have the ability to forgive sin.” |
| He then said to the paralytic | Jesus turned toward the paralytic and said, |
| “Rise, take up your bed and go home.” | “Get up, take your stretcher and go to your (pl) house!” |

The rendering of the Revised Standard Version can be taken here as an instance of direct translation, which is not easy to understand, but most resembles the original. In this case, the direct translation relies on the audience to supply the contextual information necessary for understanding this passage.

The translation of Ifugao language, however, follows the rules of indirect translation. This translation explicates a number of implicatures – mostly implicated assumptions, for easier understanding of the passage.

Direct Translation – A Crucial Notion of Relevance-Theoretic Account of Translation

To clarify Wang Jianguo’s fallacy, the following sections will mainly devote to a systematic exploration of direct translation from three angles, namely, the indeterminacy and open-endedness of meaning, transmitting of the original author’s intention and preservation of communicative clues.

Indeterminacy and Open-Endedness of Meaning

A communicator signals and a hearer interprets the implied meaning by implicature, which Sperber and Wilson used to refer to what the communicator means or implies rather than what he literally says. Gutt depicts that “not all the meaning of the text is explicately expressed.”

According to Wang Jianguo, Gutt’s theory requires translators to explicate what is originally implicit, and therefore the processing cost is reduced and the target reader may feel more relevant to the translated text. However, the relevance theory holds that implicit information has a number of rather special characteristics the translator should carefully consider before taking such a step.

The communication of ideas varies with the degree of strength. The communicator can bring to the audience the attention to a range of ideas, without necessarily affirming any one of them in particular. In general, the less evidence the communicator gives that he intended the audience to supply a particular thought, the weaker the communication of that thought. This illustrates the **indeterminacy** feature of implicatures.

Furthermore, the varying degrees of strength with which implicatures can be communicated are closely linked to the range of ideas they can communicate. In communication sometimes, a number of different ideas and thoughts derive because the communicator does not supply strong evidence. And this is the demonstration of the **open-endedness** feature of implicature.

Example (2)

枯藤老树昏鸦，小桥流水人家，古道西风瘦马。
夕阳西下，断肠人在天涯。（马致远，[天净沙] 秋思）

English version 1:

Autumn

Crows hovering over rugged trees wreathed with rotted vine – the day is about to done. Yonder is a tiny bridge over a sparkling stream, and on the far bank, a pretty little village. But the traveler has to go on down this ancient road, the west wind moaning, his bony horse groaning, trudging towards the sinking sun, farther and farther away from home. (by Weng Xianliang)

English version 2:

Tune to “sand and sky”

– Autumn Thought

Dry vine, old tree, crows at dusk,

Low bridge, stream running, cottages,

Ancient road, west wind, lean nag,

The sun westering

And one with breaking heart at the sky’s edge. (by Schlepp)

As far as Chinese poetry is concerned, attention should be paid to the way the two versions deal with the images. In the first version the action of the crow is described as “hovering over”, and the state of the tree as “wreathed with the vine.” What is more the translator adds the clause

“the day is about done.” And the translator is emotionally involved in the poem for he uses “sparkling” to modify the stream. The location of the “pretty little cottage” is also been described as “on the far bank.” In the second part of the version, “the west wind” modified by the word “moaning”, and the words “groaning” and “trudging” stating the action of the horse again indicate the emotional involvement of the translator. Finally the important image of “断肠人” is explicated as “a traveler going farther and farther away from home.” Compared with the original, we see that: the original is static and the target text is dynamic; the original mainly consists of noun phrases, the target text is made up of sentence, clause or verb phrases that manifest actions; most importantly, the target text adds some descriptions that do not exist in the original at all.

Now the second version is in our consideration. Generally speaking, this version is a typical case of direct translation, and the translator renders the poem literally. The noun phrases in the first sentence of the original are all translated word for word according to the “modifier-plus-head” structure. The second sentence of the original is also rendered with noun phrase. And the image of “断肠人” here is represented directly with “one with broken heart.” On the whole, this is a faithful version by direct translation.

With the above comparative analysis of the Chinese original and its English versions, it is clear that different translators deal differently with the same image, especially when the image has some indeterminate features. To deal with implicatures is no easy task in translation; however, poems are greatly enriched with the features of indeterminacy and open-endedness. Nids Bohr said, “the poem is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as with creating images, it is, in a literary sense, a play of images.” Thus poems are always open to imaginations and interpretations. In handling the implicatures in translation, the explication is undesirable and “unacceptable by many audiences.” (Gutt, 2001)

Transmitting of the Original Author’s Intention

According to the relevance theory, intentionality is the characteristic of communication. (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) Communicators intend to have an intention to communicate certain thoughts or ideas. Gutt puts it in a vivid way that “they [the writers] are not contented with putting black marks on paper that will somehow entertain the audience or show conformity to some structural scheme of the culture. The audience, too, seems to start on the assumption that communicators are not just making noises of producing structural objects but that they intend to communicate something by them. Intentions... in real life ... have a pretty robust existence.” (Gutt, 2001)

“...it does not therefore follow that translation proper must be marked ...in an explicit way. The relevance theoretic definition of translation implies that the translator communicates his/her interpretive intention, but it does not necessarily require that it be communicated explicately; depending on the situation, it may

be communicated just as well by implicature.”(Gutt, 2001)

To deepen our understanding, an example from *Hong Lou Meng (A Dream of Red Mansion)* is cited here.

Example (3)

“宝玉，宝玉，你好……”（曹雪芹，《红楼梦》）

This example is from the 98th chapter of *A Dream of Red Mansion*. Taiyu shouted out these words when she was dying. This utterance is rich in implicatures. The possible assumptions are listed as follows.

- A. Pao-yu, how cold-hearted you are...
- B. Pao-yu, how much I miss you...
- C. Pao-yu, how cruel you are...

In such a case, it is impossible for the translator to offer a satisfactory rendering by choosing any one of these assumptions. The reason for this is easily captured if we take the writer's intention into consideration. Here, the writer does not incline to convey any cognitive effects; rather, what the writer conveys is aesthetic effects, as well as, the freedom of imagination. And these factors exist in the fuzziness of the writer's intention, which arouses reader's interest to explore the indeterminacy and to imagine the possible assumption. Thus, as a translator, he might mislead the reader by unduly explicating the implicature. Undoubtedly, in this case any explication of the writer's fuzzy intention would ruin the reader's enjoyment of reading, and limit the reader's assumption. Therefore, the rich implicature will lose its aesthetic effects and the translator will be inevitably blamed for improper explication.

Yang Xianyi translates this sentence like this:

The translated version:

“Pao-yu, Pao-yu! **How...**” (Yang Xianyi & Dai Naidie Trans.)

This rendering is appreciated because of its rich implicatures and its conformity with the original writer's intention. The single word “how” allows many assumptions, and therefore, the richness of implicatures can be equally enjoyed by the original readers as well as the target readers.

Preservation of Communicative Clue

Gutt (1998) says that a text is a verbal stimulus designed by the communicator in such a way that the audience can infer from it what the communicator intends to communicate. In other words, the communicator builds properties into his text that will lead the audience to the intended interpretation. Those original textual properties are referred to as “communicative clues.” Direct translation of some original utterance in the source language needs to share all the “communicative clues” of that original.

Example (4)

I had no communication by letter, or message with the outer world. **School** rules, **school** duties **and** notions,

and voices, **and** faces, **and** phrases, **and** costumes, **and** preferences **and** antipathies: such as I know of existence.

(Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*)

In this example, the repetition of words and structures are employed. The most striking and notable feature is the repetition of the words “school” and “and”, which shows the deviation of formal. From the poetics point of view, the redundancy of words expresses a kind of depressed feelings. It may be argued that the words' repetition proves to be unnecessary in grammar given the function of conveying information; what is more, such redundancy requires the audience more processing effort. However, it is hard to deny that the repetition of the word ‘school’ expresses the boredom that Jane Eyre felt for the place where she lived and studied; and the long list of ‘and’ undoubtedly conveys the information that the heroine was not satisfied with her state of existence. Though such redundancy needs more processing effort, the deviation of the abnormal form is rich in implicatures. By exploring the implicatures, the audience arrives at the poetic effect that the writer intends to transmit in her text.

Zhu Qingying's translation of the above passage is quoted here.

我和外面的世界不通信息。学校的规章，学校的职责，学校的习惯，还有见解，声音，脸容，习语，服装，偏爱，恶感；对于生活，我就只知道这些。(Zhu Qingying Trans.)

The target text has paid attention to the repeated word “school”. However, disappointingly, the repeated word “and” has been neglected. As we have analyzed, the author employed repetition to draw the audience's attention to such communicative clues, thus representing the boredom and disgust Jane Eyre felt for the school. Zhu's rendering is a clear case of indirect translation, and as the implicit information, that the writer intends to convey more contextual effect, has been explicated and replaced by the translator with informative language, the target reader reads it with less effort than the original text reader does. And since the reader gains less new information, less contextual effects yield in the target text than in the original one. Apparently, the form of the text that conveys the implicature intended by the author vanishes, so does the poetic effect. Gutt claims that such explication falls outside the scope of a translation concerned with the preservation of communicative clues.

For literary works, important communicative clues are often contained in styles. Although the “structural complexity of the stimulus costs more processing effort”, during the exploring process, “the benefits of this stimulus will outweigh the increase in processing cost.” (Gutt, 2001) The “precision” of syntactic structure will often be found to inhabit poetic effects: it reduces rather than extends the range of possible interpretations. Thus according to relevance theory, the practice of explicating the originally implicit meaning is not always acceptable.

THE PROPER APPLICATION OF DIRECT TRANSLATION AND INDIRECT TRANSLATION

Gutt (1991) holds that translation is the process of searching for optimal relevance. The translator is supposed to establish the optimal relevance between the writer and reader so as to guarantee the success of communication.

Besides optimal relevance, another primary aspect of translation has to do with context. If the original text cannot be made sufficiently relevant to the receptor language audience, relevance should be increased. For example, the translator can provide further background information, that is, by making accessible to them enough of the context of the original for them to appreciate its relevance. As Gutt points out “translators are motivated by the assumption that certain implicatures of the original are highly relevant to the audience, but cannot be derived by them from the semantic contents alone, due to contextual differences. Therefore the translator attempts to communicate these assumptions to the receptors as explicatures.” (Gutt, 2001) Thus the translator is supposed to widen the contextual knowledge of the target audience by the strategy of **indirect translation**.

Alternatively, in the case of **direct translation**, which is dependent on a relationship of complete interpretative resemblance between the original and its translation, the translator will aim to design the target language utterances that they will lead to the same interpretation. To achieve the complete interpretative resemblance between the original and its translation, the target text should be processed in the originally intended context. Gutt emphasizes this point by saying that interpretive resemblance is a “graded notion that has complete resemblance as its limiting case: indirect translation covers most of the continuum, and direct translation picks out the limiting case.” (Gutt, 2001)

Indirect Translation Consistent with Optimal Relevance

Cultural difference is the great obstacle of translation as interlingual communication. Cultural default elements are often culture-specific, and what are transparent or self-evident to the native human being can always create a vacuum of sense for the foreigner belonging to the different language-culture and a potential discontinuity in their interpretation. With the assessment of the target reader’s cognitive environment, if the translator concludes that the target readers need necessary cultural compensation for the correct comprehension, indirect translation approach should be adopted.

Example (5)

The original:

鸿案相庄廿有三年，年愈久而情愈深。

Translated version:

We remained courteous to each other for twenty-three years of our married life like Liang Huang and Meng Kuang [of the east Han Dynasty], and the longer we stayed together, the more passionately attached we become to each other.

“鸿案相庄”, the cultural-specific expression, comes from the Chinese allusion “举案齐眉”, which is recorded in 《后汉书》: “梁鸿为人凭春, 每归, 妻为具食, 不敢于鸿前仰视, 举案齐眉。” The allusion later refers to the husband and wife respecting each other. From the context, Chinese readers can easily conclude that “I” and “Yun” are deeply in love and respect each other, while it is of little possibility for the English readers to understand such implicit cultural information. Therefore, Lin Yutang adopted indirect translation to offer more background information of Liang Huang and Meng Kuang, which may guide the target readers to the originally intended interpretation.

Direct Translation Consistent with Optimal Relevance

Direct translation is preferred mainly because it is likely to come nearer to the stylistic features of the original, which provides communicative clues that guide the audience to the interpretation intended by the original communicator. However, the translator should be cautious, for all the use of direct translation must have the success of communication as its precondition. Direct translation can achieve the originally intended interpretation only in the context envisaged by the original communicator.

Example (6)

The original:

余曰: “卿果中道相舍, 断无再续之理。况‘曾经沧海难为水, 除却巫山不是云’耳!”

The translated version:

“Even if you should leave me half-way like this,” I said, “I shall never marry again. Besides, it is difficult to be water for one who has seen the great seas, and difficult to be clouds for one who has seen the Yangtze Gorges!”

“曾经沧海难为水, 除却巫山不是云” is from the poem 《离思》 by Yuan Zhen (元稹), a poet in Tang Dynasty. In this poem, the poet compared his deceased wife to the clouds that were transformed by the goddess, and his deep sorrow as well as his nostalgia to the vast seas, which surpassed any waters or clouds in the world. In Lin Yutang’s translation, those images are well maintained and by direct translation the target readers may be deeply impressed by such vividness and the novel expressions.

The above examples consist of typical cases of indirect translation and direct translation, which perfectly prove that the two translation approaches can wonderfully coexist in the relevance-theoretic framework. And it should be emphasized again that, during the process of

translation, the principle of relevance is what the translator should abide by in choosing translating strategies. The extent to which direct translation and indirect translation is used is determined by the correct assessment of the target reader's cognitive environment, thus achieving optimal relevance.

CONCLUSION

The present thesis represents the author's preliminary study of the application of the relevance theory to translation. By detailed exploration of Gutt's theory and its application to literary translation, this paper holds that both direct translation and indirect translation are approaches to realizing the goal of optimal resemblance to the source text and to the target reader, the two strategies can perfectly co-exist within the framework of the relevance theory, and relevance theory can provide an adequate account of translation as cross-culture and interlingual communication.

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