The central role of relevance in translation – ‘communicative clues’

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Outline

1. Introduction: The problem
2. Some fundamentals
3. ‘Communicative property’
4. ‘Communicative clue’
5. Conclusion
Which features of the source text should a good translation reflect?
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, ...

(Charles Dickens *A tale of two cities*; opening paragraph)

“There is an almost poetic cadence in this excerpt. The sound symmetry conveys its ironic tone extremely well.” (Chukovskii1984, p. 144)
The problem

Backtranslation of a Russian translation:

It was the best and worst of times, it was the age of wisdom and of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief and incredulity, it was the season of light and darkness, it was the spring of hope and winter of despair, ...

(S.P. Bobrov and M.P. Bogolovskaja 1957 *Povest’ o dvukh gorodakh*, Sobranie sochinenii, Moscow, vol. XXII, p. 6)

“[The translators] did not catch the author’s intonations and thus robbed his work of the dynamism stemming from the rhythm.” (Chukovskii1984, p. 144)
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times …
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times …

Conjunction reduction:

It was the best and worst of times
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was
the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was
the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was
the season of light and darkness, it was the spring of hope
and winter of despair, ...

Was this adjustment inappropriate?

Is there an objective basis for making that kind of a judgment?

It was the best and worst of times, it was the age of
wisdom and of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief
incredulity, it was the season of light and darkness, it
was the spring of hope and winter of despair, ...
Verbal communication

Some fundamentals

“mind reading”

discover the thoughts to be communicated

communicator
You need to stop working and get ready for the concert now.

Time: 6.45 p.m.
Our mind carries out a special comprehension procedure.

The procedure is carried out automatically and subconsciously most of the time – we only become aware of its existence when problems arise!
Our mind tries to make sense of things.
It looks for ways to inferentially integrate new information with what we already know (our cognitive environment).
When it succeeds in establishing such a relationship, it experiences this information as relevant.
Cognitive effects

- Contextual implications
- Strengthening of assumptions
- Erasure of assumptions (via contradiction)

NB: “assumption”: relevance-theoretic term for ‘a thought assumed to be true’
a) *Mother*: What’s your new teacher like?

b) *Daughter*: He rides to school on a motorbike.

The daughter finds men cool who ride motorbikes.

*Answer*: She likes the teacher.

*Reason*: She likes him because he rides a motorbike.
Premise 1: The new teacher rides to school on a motorbike.

Premise 2: The daughter likes men who ride motorbikes.

Conclusion: The daughter likes the new teacher.
Effort

- structural complexity of utterance
- accessibility of contextual information in our mind
- complexity of thought processes required
- etc.

Cost!
Optimal relevance:

- Adequate cognitive effects –
- without unnecessary processing effort
The relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure:

- follow a path of least effort in search of cognitive effects.
- when expectations of relevance are satisfied stop and assume that the interpretation arrived at is the intended one.

[Adapted from Sperber and Wilson 2002, ‘Pragmatics, modularity and mind-reading’]
The relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure:

- follow a path of least effort in search of cognitive effects.
- when expectations of relevance are satisfied, stop and assume that the interpretation arrived at is the intended one.

[Adapted from Sperber and Wilson 2002, ‘Pragmatics, modularity and mind-reading’]
Mr Veneranda …
At the decorator’s...
“How can I help?” the decorator asked Mr. Veneranda.

“I would like to have my dining room wallpapered,” Mr. Veneranda said. “the horse can’t do it.”

“Pardon?” the shop owner asked, thinking he had misheard something.

“I said,” Mr. Veneranda repeated, “that I want to have my dining room wallpapered.”

“But you added, ‘The horse can’t do it’, the decorator stammered. “Perhaps I did not understand you correctly.”
The horse can’t do it. So what?

Not enough to understand what is said ...

... we need to know why we are told this!
Some fundamentals

Comprehension procedure

A highly dynamic, interactive process

utterance

Comprehension procedure

intended interpretation

cognitive environment
An act of ostensive-inferential communication

- thoughts to communicate
- mutual cognitive environment
- thoughts understood
- stimulus
- communicator
- inference
- audience

Mutually understood
Communicative properties

How utterances influence the interpretation

- Recognisable properties that play a role for the intended interpretation
  - lexical contents
  - grammatical structure
  - other

- Recognisable properties that play no role for the intended interpretation
  - individual voice quality
  - speech impediments
  - other
Communicative properties

How utterances influence the interpretation

The thundergod went for a ride
upon his favourite filly.
“I’m Thor!” he cried.
The horse replied,
“You have forgotten your thaddle thilly!”
(unknown author)
Communicative properties

How utterances influence the interpretation

- Recognisable properties that play a role for the intended interpretation
  - lexical contents
  - grammatical structure
  - other

- Properties that play no role for the intended interpretation
  - individual voice quality
  - speech impediments
  - other
Communicative properties

Dynamic interdependence

uttterance

Comprehension procedure

intended interpretation

cognitive environment
Communicative properties

Confirmation by relevance

"I’m Thor!"

lisp

"I’m sore!"

complaint of soreness

missing saddle
Communicative properties are utterance dependent.
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, ...

After conjunction reduction:

It was the best and worst of times, it was the age of wisdom and of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief in incredulity, it was the season of light and darkness, it was the spring of hope and the winter of despair, ...

Was this adjustment inappropriate?

Is there an objective basis for making that kind of a judgment?

Can a comparison of communicative properties provide such a basis?
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, ...
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, ...

After conjunction reduction:

It was the best and worst of times, it was the age of wisdom and of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief incredulity, it was the season of light and darkness, it was the spring of hope and winter of despair, ...

... did Dickens fail?
How does irony arise?

- Representation of what someone said or thought ("echoing")
- With a dissociative attitude
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair — in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.
It was the best and worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom and of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief and incredulity,
it was the season of light and darkness,
it was the spring of hope and winter of despair —
in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

...?
Is there some objective help for deciding which features of the source text a good translation should reflect?
Communicative properties

Taking stock

Comprehension procedure

Utterance

Cognitive environment

Intended interpretation
Ironic properties
Taking stock

Ironic:

dissociative ‘echo’ of someone’s opinion
Separate sentences:
- opinions of different people
- communicative property
- to be reflected in the translation
Processing effort

‘unnecessary’ effort can be a telltale sign of missed intended meaning
Communicative properties

Taking stock

Why adequate translation presupposes understanding:

The communicative properties of an utterance cannot be determined apart from its intended interpretation.
Communicative clues

Different languages = different properties

... but the receptor language is different – has different properties!
Communicative clues

Literal gloss:

the earth is a disk
and environment-protection is superfluous
The earth is flat

And protection of the environment is unnecessary
Communicative clues

Dynamic interdependence

- utterance
- cognitive environment

Comprehension procedure

intended interpretation
Communicative clues

Current attitudes:
- naïve
- outdated
- ridiculous etc.

Reader’s cognitive environment
Communicative clues

"claiming today that the environment doesn’t need to be protected is as false, outdated, ridiculous and so forth as claiming that the earth is flat."

relevant
Communicative clues

German: Scheibe

Reader’s cognitive environment

- Current attitudes:
  - naïve
  - outdated
  - ridiculous etc.
English: *disk*
Communicative clues

English: flat (earth)

disk

more processing effort
Die Erde ist eine Scheibe...

The earth is flat...

communicative properties different
Communicative clues
A matter of influence

Why is the difference in communicative properties ok?
It leads to the same interpretation as the source text

… influences the interpretation in the same way

… provides the same communicative clue
Die Erde ist eine Scheibe...

The earth is flat...

provide same communicative clues
Communicative clues

Usefulness for translators

- helps in sorting out conflicting intuitions about meaning
- helps when receptor language lacks communicative property in source text:
  - abstracting away from the communicative property to the communicative clue …
- can lead to good translation solutions
Communicative clues

Example from an Ethiopian language

English:
- The DEALER stole the money.
  Background assumption: someone stole the money
- The dealer STOLE the money.
  Background assumption: the dealer did something to the money

Amharic:
- gänzäbun yäsärräqäw, näggadew näw.
  the-money he-who-stole, the-dealer it-is
- näggadew yadärrägäw, gänzäbun mäsräq näw.
  the-dealer what-he-did, the-money steal it-is

Communicative clues

Usefulness for translators

- helps in sorting out conflicting intuitions about meaning
- helps when receptor language lacks communicative property in source text:
  - abstracting away from the communicative property to the communicative clue …
- can lead to good translation solutions
- complementary strategy for translation checking
Communicative clues

Caveats

These notions ...

- are not a panacea
- do not address or resolve differences in cognitive environment
- may require re-analysis of familiar linguistic features
- do not have a theoretical status of their own
Communicative clues
Conclusion

Summing up ...
The central role of cognition and relevance in translation – ‘communicative clues’

Thank you!
Appendix
Interpretive processes in translation...
Where translation can go wrong

... (1)
Where translation can go wrong

... (2)
Where translation can go wrong

... (3)
Translation is successful when

... the interpretation arrived at by the receptors resembles the original interpretation in the expected ways.