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Translating as risk management

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Abstract

Risk analysis can be applied to translation in several ways. One application concerns the specificity of translation, where risk is the probability of losing a translation-specific kind of credibility; it concerns relations between people and can be called 'credibility risk'. A second kind of risk ensues from the translator's uncertainty when making decisions about how to render an item; it involves cognitive processes and can be called 'uncertainty risk'. A third kind of risk then has to do with the way texts are interpreted and used in contexts, where some elements are high-risk because they are key to communicative success, while others are low-risk; this kind of risk applies to the different parts of texts and can be called 'communicative risk'. This third sense of risk then allows for a rationalist model of translators' decisions and effort distributions, positing that high effort should be invested in text items with high communicative risk. Although the differences between these levels of analysis can be confusing and require some careful definitions, the interactions between them offer a rich, non-essentialist view of translation as a social relation, as a product, and as a teachable mode of decision-making.

Keywords: Translation; Risk management; Risk analysis; Speech events; Communicative success; Cooperation

Twentieth-century Western theories of translation (which here includes spoken, written and audiovisual modes) can be seen in terms of a struggle between essentialist or Lockean views of meaning transfer, where one and the same thing is ideally uttered in different languages, and non-essentialist or deconstructionist views, where translation necessarily involves transformation of the thing uttered. Although various compatibilist positions have been envisaged, notably within the frame of relevance theory, no stable consensus has emerged around a unified view of translation. I propose that some of the theoretical tensions and occasional deadlocks can be resolved by drawing on the rich array of ideas offered by risk analysis, particularly when the translator's decision-making is seen in terms of risk management.

Risk analysis can be applied to translation in several quite different ways, and jumps between the levels can quickly become confusing. In proposing the framework for a general approach, I will attempt to keep the applications initially apart by focusing on three distinct questions: 1. What is the specificity of translation as a speech event? 2. How can different parts of a text become high-risk or low-risk when interpreted in specific contexts? and 3. How can a translator distribute effort in order to manage risk rationally when translating?

When those three broad questions are dealt with together, the resulting account of translation might be able to displace the central roles played elsewhere by concepts of equivalence, adequacy or fidelity, which have in the past done the work of identifying not only the specificity of translation, but also its ethical calling and guiding pedagogies.

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1. Credibility risk: defining the specificity of translation

A pragmatic approach to translation has relatively little trouble locating and naming the various discursive levels and relationships involved. Translation, in very broad terms, is just another speech event, and the general stock of terms and concepts developed in pragmatics can be used. What remains problematic, however, is the level at which translation manifests specificity within the general run of speech events.

The pragmatics of translation has provided fertile ground for speculative inquiry. Several theorists have argued that translation can be analyzed as a specific mode of reported speech (Bigelow, 1978; Mossop, 1983, 1987; Folkart, 1991; Pym, 1992), while others have investigated its status in terms of performatives (e.g. Pym, 1993; Robinson, 2003). Since those initiatives, it has become commonplace to assert that translation is a speech event, albeit described in various ways: a speech act, a text act, a performance, a situated utterance designed to have a communicative effect, an enactment of intercultural agency, a struggle with and against power, a transformation of language intended to bring about change in relations between cultures, and so on (for some of these see Tymoczko and Gentzler, 2002; Tymoczko, 2010; Morini, 2013; Venuti, 2013). Those views are well-intentioned and fine, yet they potentially concern *all* speech events, without any formal arguments identifying particular applicability to translation. What still remains problematic is the specificity of translation. After all, communication across languages can take place via reported speech as such, with as many additions, truncations, and explanations as you like, and much the same could be said of most kinds of multilingual conversations. Reported speech *becomes* translation at some point, and defining that point is not easy.

A traditional definition of that specificity, inherited from discourses of fidelity, relies on the concept of equivalence: the start[1] and target texts are held to maintain some relation of equal value on some level, and the work of several generations of translation scholars has been to identify the nature of that value (formal, semantic, functional, etc.). The paradigms of equivalence have nevertheless consistently conflicted with the inherent indeterminacy of translation, as manifested in the simultaneous viability of several different and equally valid renditions for the one start text (Quine, 1960/2013:27). When that indeterminacy is seen in terms of deconstruction, the various proposed definitions of translation are shown to suffer from essentialist assumptions, be they based on stable value (in equivalence theories) or an accessible purpose (in theories that assume there is just one aim or *Skopos* at stake) (see Pym, 2009/2014:86–109). The application of relevance theory (notably in Gutt, 1991/2000) does incorporate significant indeterminism in its view of language as offering no more than ''communicative clues'', yet it allows essentialist suppositions to creep in through the back door by assuming that the start text offers the translator clues about a determinate ''intention''. In the same vein, attempts to introduce the notion of ''similarity'' (especially in Chesterman, 1996, 2005), ostensibly relaxing the criterion of equal value so that some degree of transformation is allowed for or indeed condoned, must still assume an essentialist equivalence in order to measure similarity. It is not an entirely satisfactory solution to the problem of how to define the specificity of translation while allowing for translative indeterminacy.

In sum, the various attempts to identify what is specific to translation have struggled to come to terms with the inherent contradiction between translation as repetition of utterance (defined by the assumption of equivalence) and translation as transformation of utterance (which reveals the assumed equivalence to be an illusion). To name the paradox as ''equivalence in difference'' (Jakobson, 1959/2000:114) by no means solves the problem; to name the illusion as a ''presumption of complete interpretative resemblance'' (Gutt, 1991/2000:196) does much better – I want to build on it – but has little to say about the indeterminacy that spawns the illusion.

Within the analytical approaches that *have* actively recognized the indeterminacy of translation, the resulting recommendations similarly do not really rise above the level of homespun morality: Davidson (e.g. 1973/1984) broadly claimed we use 'charity' or 'rational accommodation' (give the other the benefit of the doubt; understand what you think they should have said; assume they are self-consistent), while a later Quine (1990:42, and especially 1995) preferred 'empathy' (given that the other may be evil or a learner, or otherwise possibly unlike us, we should merely try to see the world from their perspective). One can take or leave such platitudes; they do not constitute a consistent theoretical solution to the problem of specificity.

So how might we attempt to replace equivalence and yet retain translation?

1.1. Assumptions about translation

In previous work on this problem (e.g. Pym, 1992/2010:67) I have broadly posited, like Gutt, that equivalence should be treated as an operational social fiction, a belief structure. I see this illusion as a convenient shared assumption, much in

[1] I prefer the term 'start text' rather than 'source text' for technical reasons that have little to do with the current topic. These days translators work not just from a single text but also from glossaries, translation memories, and machine translation output, and any one of those resources could provide the 'source' for a solution. The role of the initial text is thus relativized; it is no more than the starting point for the translation process. Hence 'start text', which is, after all, what is regularly said in neighboring languages: *Ausgangstext*, *texte de départ*, *texto de partida*, *testo di partenza* (see also Pym, 2011:92).