# RELEVANCE THEORY AND TRANSLATION

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### Abstract

Linguistic theory and translation theory both deal with language; however, they rarely meet or use each other's results in order to advance their individual areas of research. Linguists often seem to look at translation as either trade or art rather than science, and translators show cynicism about linguistic inquiry ignoring real language data. This paper focuses on one particular area of concern in both linguistics and translation: how to incorporate pragmatics into an explanation of which translation or interpretation is best for a given linguistic expression in a given linguistic and extra-linguistic context?

Students in practical translation classes do not appreciate explanations along the lines "this is simply how you would say it in language X" or "this is what the speakers of X would say in this situation". Speakers of X are balancing their knowledge of rules and conventions of language use with pragmatic know-how; they are making choices that translators — both human and machine — are supposed to imitate in the target language context. We present several examples and discuss how Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory could claim translational explanatory adequacy in its handling of the "division of labour" between codal knowledge and inferencing.

## 1. LINGUISTIC THEORY, PRAGMATICS AND TRANSLATION THEORY

The last two decades have seen Translation Theory (TT) studies grow exponentially in both phenomena addressed and the disciplines addressing them, but problems continue to outnumber solutions.[1] One promising tack is to see whether Linguistic Theory (LT) alone could handle at least some translation difficulties. Pragmatic challenges especially have near-parallels in LT and TT, e.g., ambiguity resolution involves essentially the same tasks, regardless of whether one is dealing with a single language or a language pair (with the amount of time available as a possible difference). We should also recall the synthesis proposed in Jakobson (1959) of translation and paraphrasing as both being instances of semiotic transfer, i.e., paraphrasing is tantamount to inter-language translation. A corollary of this principle is

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[1]For a sampling of the vast literature on TT, the reader is referred to Catford (1965), Nida (1964), Robinson (2003), and Veruti (1995).

that equivalence between source- and target-language is rare, at least with respect
to translation units, the level beyond the word. One implication of this caveat is that
a thorough pragmatic analysis of the source text will be of immense help in solving
problems that arise in the actual process of translation.

What of the place of pragmatics in LT? Linguists have long been divided on
this question, the positions ranging from the autonomy of the pragmatic component
(Cole 1981; Searle 1980) to the view of Mey (1993) that pragmatics is ill-defined, a
can of worms which seep into morpho-syntax and semantics. Sperber and Wilson's
Relevance Theory, a cognitive pragmatic theory, defines relevance as maximized
cognitive effects obtained for a minimum of processing effort. Cognitive effects
are enhancements to an individual's knowledge, whether via adding new assump-
tions that strengthen existing ones, discarding assumptions that conflict with and
are weaker than existing ones, or combining an input stimulus with an existing as-
sumption to yield a new cognitive effect called a contextual implication. As to the
mental architecture of their theory, Sperber and Wilson propose the co-existence of
a rule-based linguistic code and an inferencing mechanism that takes the code as in-
put in order to arrive at a full interpretation of an utterance. Understanding involves
the formation of explicatures — inferences that spell out the additional information
required for determining propositional truth value — and implicatures, inferences
that enrich the interpretation via additional propositions. The formation of both ex-
plicatures and implicatures depends on two principles of relevance: cognitive and
communicative. The cognitive principle states that our brains are hard-wired to
favour relevant stimuli, thoughts, and reasoning, i.e., those producing maximum
cognitive effects for the least effort. According to the communicative principle, ev-
ery ostensive stimulus creates an expectation that it is the optimally relevant one
in terms of its producer's preferences and abilities. It is important to note the lim-
itation entailed by the qualifier "abilities" because one's communicative intention
does not always match the communicative tool produced, the ostensive stimulus, as
in the case of people communicating under constraints, whether socially imposed
or internal.[2]

What is the possible connection with translation? Sperber and Wilson view
interpretation as the relation between a thought and a representation of it. Interpre-
tive use of language includes phenomena as disparate as indirect discourse, irony,
parody, and, according to Gutt (1990), translation. Since these phenomena com-
prise representations of representations of thoughts, they are metarepresentations.
Gutt argues that translation can virtually dispense with translation theory, since it is
generally reducible to one kind of interpretive use: the translated text interpretively
*resembles* another representation, rather than being a direct description of some
state of affairs. Moreover, the resemblance will depend on the translator's assess-
ment of how relevant each aspect of the content is for the interpreter of the output

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[2]We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the distinction between communica-
tive intention and the means of conveying it.

text, so that the interpreter's background knowledge and motivation for reading the text play a crucial role in determining the finer points of the translation. Gutt's position essentially echoes Jakobson's view that translation is just another semiotic transposition, not fundamentally different from paraphrase.[3]

## 2. THE DATA

### 2.1. Translation of *I'm sorry*

Our first example concerns how to translate *I'm sorry* into French, German, and Polish.

For Ladmiral (1979: 17), to translate *Je m'excuse* into English is a mundane task, an automatic transposition to *I'm sorry*. This solution is simplistic because an accurate translation requires at the very least a speech-act analysis: is the illocutionary force of a given token of *I'm sorry* an apology or an expression of sympathy? There are of course other possibilities, but these two are the most common.

Relevance Theory claims that the correct speech-act can be inferred from context, and the correct interpretation would elicit more positive cognitive effects for the same processing effort than an incorrect one. Sperber and Wilson's theory simply treats speech acts as another form of metarepresentation or explicature. Yet, regardless of whether or not one views speech-acts as theoretical primes, the results are the same (ex. 1).

(1)   a.  I'm sorry. (apology)
          → French: *Excuse-moi/(Je suis) désolé/Pardon.*
             Polish: *Przepraszam.*

      b.  I'm sorry. (expression of sympathy)
          → French: *(Je suis) désolé.*
             Polish: *Przykro mi.*

A mistranslation, for example, French *Excuse-moi*, chosen to convey sympathy in a context of bereavement, would result in a *non sequitur* because it would fail to generate an appropriate set of representations. Polish *Przykro mi*, on the other hand, could possibly be used to convey an apology, but only if accompanied by affected intonation. Even as an expression of sympathy, *Przykro mi* on its own, without any further lexical elaboration, appears inappropriate and may be perceived as arrogant, depending on the context. Thus, translational equivalence between the French and Polish expressions cannot be achieved without additional lexical or prosodic information.

### 2.2. An interpreter's gaffe

We will now consider a case in which a similar lack of attention to pragmatics resulted in a serious interpretation error. The Polish phrase *Co się stało?* translates

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[3]For another attempt at applying Relevance Theory to translation, see Alves and Gonçalves (2003).

directly into English "What happened?" However, when it was used repeatedly by a man in response to a police officer's announcement that his wife had died, it landed the man in custody for murder. The police officer's interpretation was that the man must have killed his wife, for he never asked how she had died. While the Polish phrase *Co się stało?* indeed means 'What happened?', it has a different distribution and therefore allows for more than one interpretation. In English, one would probably follow up with questions about details, e.g., "How did she die?" or "What was the cause of her death?". In Polish these questions would sound detached and professional, and would only be asked by a coroner or a fellow officer — certainly not by an intimate. Therefore, *Co się stało* is the only pragmatically appropriate question and triggers a cognitive procedure: "construct a set of representations to enrich the speaker's knowledge about the event".[4]

Since the English translation of the question lacks, in its lexical represenation, such procedural information, repeating it would not be an effective communicative strategy when speaking with the police or a judge or jury.

### 2.3. Political rhetoric: *Progressive*

*Progressive* is a word that may be deceptively easy to translate but will yield different interpretations in different political and social contexts. The definition of the word progressive appears to depend on a co-compositional relationship with the noun it is associated with. While the most general definition states that *progressive* means 'moving forward, proceeding step by step or cumulatively', there are several additional meanings (2):

(2) *Progressive*:

  - 'favouring or implementing rapid progress or social reform' when applied to a government or party
  - 'holding liberal views, modern' when applied to individuals, groups or institutions
  - 'modern, experimental, avant-garde' when applied to music, or art in general
  - 'increasing in severity or extent' when applied to disease
  - 'at rates increasing with the sum taxed', when talking about taxation
  - 'expressing an action in progress', when applied to a grammatical tense form
  - 'informal and without strict discipline, stressing individual needs', when used as an attribute of 'education'.

However, even these specialized definitions are specific to the "social" context of the utterance.[5] For a speaker who grew up in a centrally planned economy in Eastern Europe, "progressive" meant 'following the party line', which, in practice, was almost the opposite of 'favouring or implementing rapid progress or social reform'.

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[4]This example is mentioned in Stroińska (2001: 13), in the context of translatability of worldviews.

[5]"Social" is another weasel word, according to Hayek (1988: 109).

## 2.4. Reptiles and kittens

In the final stages of the 2003 Ontario provincial election, the campaign took a surreal turn when an official press release from the Tory election team stated that Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty was "an evil reptilian kitten-eater from another planet", Conservative Leader Ernie Eves blamed the release on a staff member who apparently "had too much coffee this morning … too much time", as reported in the *Globe and Mail* of September 12, 2003. Mr. McGuinty smiled broadly when asked to confirm or deny that he eats small pets and comes from outer space. "I love kittens, and I like puppies too," he said, acknowledging the literal interpretation of the accusation. The statement critiquing Premier McGuinty would present a challenge for the translator. Polish, for instance, does not really form an adjective from "reptile", other than 'characteristic for a reptile', which sounds like it was taken from a zoology textbook. "Reptile" itself means many things, depending on the referent.

Relevance Theory would treat the translation of "reptilian" just as it would any other metaphor: the first task is to specify the appropriate contextually-salient representations which this epithet in the source text generates. The translation task would then be to find a Polish source-domain expression matching those representations as closely as possible. A translation that seems to match these conditions could be *podły* 'mean', 'vile', 'contemptible', which, however, is very much like a repetition of "evil" (Polish *zły* or *nikczemy*). *Podły* itself is ambiguous as it could also be interpreted as 'abominable' and 'shabby', thus multiplying the number of potential meanings. However, when combined with the contextually-appropriate noun phrase, all of these adjectives sound out of place and the entire invective becomes even odder than its English original.

"Kitten-eater" poses a similar challenge, but with one further complication. An ingenious, original combination, it could arguably be translated directly into Polish. After all, kittens in both anglophone and Polish-speaking communities connote cuteness, vulnerability, helplessness, etc. However, the Polish for 'kitten', *kociak*, can also mean 'young girl', an ambiguity that a political spokesman would strive to avoid at all costs. It turns out that *kurczak* (Polish for 'chick') serves the purpose because, unlike its English counterpart, it is devoid of any infelicitous polysemy.

The difficulty of the task of translating this political insult is compounded by the fact that media reports necessarily change direct speech (*oratio recta*) of the infamous Tory party staff member into reported speech (*oratio obliqua*). As Dobrzyńska (2001: 56) points out, reported speech is "a kind of translation, a transposition that necessarily takes into account two different cognitive perspectives: the point of view of the person whose utterance is being reported, and that of a speaker who is actually reporting that utterance." When metaphorical expressions (and the kitten-eater insult has to be treated as such) are rendered in reported speech, they are subject to specific rules that go beyond simple grammatical transformation. Once again, we see that the translation process relies on the complex cognitive task of matching procedural knowledge triggers in both linguistic systems. Unless meta-

phorical express ons are presented as direct quotations, they are most often para-
phrased in reported speech even within the same language. If such reported speech
is to be further translated into a different linguistic code, the reader of the trans-
lated text will need to recover these multiple perspectives, usually without access
to the original metaphor. Even if the metaphor were to be provided as a direct quo-
tation, the question of finding the semantically- and pragmatically-accurate transla-
tion would remain a challenge. This may be particularly relevant in politics, where
governments rely on translated statements that summarize what leaders of other
countries have said.

## 2.5. Deliberate ambiguity

We will conclude our examples with one that calls into doubt Sperber and Wilson's
claim (1995: 16?) that if more than one interpretation satisfies the Principle of
Relevance, the result is communication failure. Consider the following scenario.
A and B have just been introduced at a party; example (3) is the start of their
conversation.

(3)  A: My boyfriend just had a vasectomy.
     B: How interesting!

We maintain that B's reply could be deliberately ambiguous, and likely is, given
that the two just met. Suppose that B doesn't want A, whom she hardly knows, to
feel put down by an obviously ironic remark, even though she feels that A's com-
ment is indiscreet and merits just such a mocking reply. B's strategy is to respond in
a deliberately equivocal fashion, with an expression that often does signal irony, but
in this context could also be construed as sincere. Contrary to Sperber and Wilson's
hypothesis, B's reply admits at least two seemingly incompatible interpretations.
We stipulate *seemingly* because, just as metaphor's connotational penumbra allows
for literal and figurative readings to coexist, this ambiguity too lets both possibili-
ties emerge as equally relevant, as opposed to, say, "Thank you for sharing that with
me", which would be likely ironic. The ramifications for translation are clear. A di-
rect, literal translation may not give the same effect of deliberate ambiguity. The
challenge is to find a corresponding expression with the same capacity for allowing
two apparently contradictory illocutionary forces to be equally strong candidates.

This is a serious challenge for Relevance Theory because such equivocation
is widespread, rather than confined to pragmatically marked data like puns. Diplo-
matic language, for example, appears to aim at dual interpretations such as "We
agree but ..." where the propositions on either side of 'but' would in other con-
texts come across as mutually exclusive. Even everyday attempts at accommodation
between acquaintances manifest this lack of commitment to a single obvious read-
ing, on face-saving grounds similar to diplomatic exchanges. Sperber and Wilson
(1987) claim that puns and deliberate equivocations can be explained as layering,
i.e., at first reading, the failure to find relevance is in itself an ostensive stimulus
which leads to further searching at another level. In analyzing Mozart's deliber-

ately ambiguous remark to Salieri in *Amadeus,* "I never thought music like that was possible", they claim the two-stage layering process leads to a single optimally relevant interpretation of distancing. With puns, the double sense likewise can involve a step-by-step determination, i.e., the initially perceived meaning is added to, rather than replaced by, the subsequently grasped sense. With intentional equivocations, however, it is not necessary that the two readings be produced serially or that a single final reading emerge as the result of layering. In our example involving a vasectomy, it is possible that A could immediately be left wondering whether her interlocutor is sincere in her expression of interest, i.e., A retains two contradictory interpretations of "how interesting", at least until further comments from B may steer her toward the sincere or ironic reading. Unlike the *Amadeus* example, there need not be an immediate resolution of the equivocation.

## 3. IN SUM

These examples point to the crucial role of pragmatics in developing a theory of translation. Whether translation theory turns out to be autonomous from linguistic theory or a sub-branch of it involving largely contrastive analyses, scholars have to consider the kinds of culture-, text- and situation-dependent phenomena with which professional translators must routinely grapple. Such sensitivity is a sine qua non even when working within a single language, in which regional variation requires both description and explanation. Relevance Theory has shown promise in explaining numerous pragmatic phenomena as consequences of an overriding principle, and once it resolves the issue of deliberate equivocation, it may well prove to be the most reliable tool for handling the interpretive richness evinced by real-life data.

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