

THE RELEVANCE OF TRANSLATION STUDIES

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Most translation theorists today would like to see translation studies firmly established as an independent discipline which, although it draws on insights from other disciplines, should be subsumed under none, (Hatim and Mason, 1990; Snell-Hornby, 1988; Bassnett-McGuire, 1980). The discipline which the majority translation theorists draw on most heavily is linguistics – indeed many books on translation theory and/or practice take the form of expositions of their authors' favourite linguistic theories plus explanations of how translators can profitably draw on them – although most also acknowledge the need to incorporate insights from areas such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, semiotics, etc, as well.

Gutt (1991) perceives a possible conflict between the quest for independent status and the perceived need to draw on other fields. He suggests that the latter has resulted in the disintegration of translation studies rather than its unification. There is, apparently, not a single theory of translation, but many, and this multiplicity goes hand in hand with an apparent inability on the part of translation theorists to agree on what is to count as 'translation'. At a certain level of theorising, this is probably unavoidable, (compare 'literary studies'; language studies; etc). It can also be fruitful in so far as it stimulates debate. In addition, it is clearly possible to isolate a number of phenomena around which discussion tends to centre, and this seems to belie the idea that translation studies is unhealthily fragmented. Indeed it is difficult to see how Gutt could have arrived at his thesis

that both 'the range of phenomena commonly considered as translation' (p. 188) and 'the phenomena of translation' (p. 189) can be accounted for by relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986a; 1986b; 1987; Wilson and Sperber 1985; 1988a; 1988b), *unless* these phenomena had already been presented to him from within translation studies. In contrast to the common quest for independent status for translation studies, however, Gutt claims that, given relevance theory, 'there seems to be no need for a distinct general translation theory' (Gutt, 1991, preface, p. viii).

I want to examine this claim, showing that although Gutt's reformulation of some of the concerns of translation theorists in relevance theoretic terms is wholly successful, and sometimes clarifying, it does not in any way make the issues he addresses go away. More importantly, I want to suggest that his dismissal of certain topics is wholly unjustifiable.

It may be useful, at the outset, to summarise Gutt's (ibid, Ch. 2) outline of relevance theory. In relevance theory, what someone means is called their *informative intention*. Their verbal expressions are assigned *semantic representations* which are *assumption schemas* requiring enrichment before they become fully truth-conditional and achieve a *propositional form*. This enrichment is provided by the use of *context*; the subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world which is used to interpret the utterance. This subset is selected on the bases of (i) ease of accessibility, that is, the amount of *processing effort* involved in the selection, and (ii) optimization of benefit from the selection, that is, the number of *contextual effects* resulting from the interpretation of the utterance in the selected context. An assumption's *relevance* in a context is defined in terms of its propensity for producing contextual effects in that context relative to the amount of effort required to process it in that context. Hearers interpret utterances on the assumption that the interpretation will yield *adequate contextual effects* at *minimum processing cost*, and the *principle of relevance* says that 'every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance' (Sperber and Wilson, 1986a, p. 158; quoted by Gutt, p. 30).

What is said need not be, indeed rarely is, identical to the full interpretation it causes a hearer to arrive at. Rather, what is said frequently bears *interpretive resemblance* to the required interpretation. Wilson and Sperber (1988a, p. 138; quoted by Gutt, p. 34) define interpretive resemblance as follows:

two propositional forms P and Q ... *interpretively resemble* one another in a context C to the extent that they share their analytic and contextual implications in the context C.

(analytic implications follow from an utterance alone, without the use of context; for example, 'Nils is Tom's brother' analytically implies 'Nils is a male sibling of Tom'). When two propositions share all their implications, one is a *literal interpretation* of the other.

In order for the definition of interpretive resemblance given above to be applied to the translation situation, it needs to be reformulated to take account of cases where P and Q are utterances processed in different contexts (p. 44):

Starting from the definition of interpretive resemblance between propositional forms, the crucial point is the sharing of analytic and/or contextual implications. Since these implications are assumptions, we can say more generally that interpretive resemblance is characterized by the sharing of assumptions.

Considering further that the main purpose of utterances is to convey the set of assumptions which the communicator intends to convey, it seems reasonable to define interpretive resemblance between utterances in terms of assumptions shared between the intended interpretations of these utterances. Since the set of assumptions an utterance is intended to convey consists of explicatures and/or implicatures, we can say that two utterances ... interpretively resemble one another to the extent that they share their explicatures and/or implicatures.

(explicatures are analytic implications; implicatures are contextual implications).

Given this theoretical framework, Gutt sets out to examine a number of theories of translation (Chs 3 and 4), measuring their success against what can be achieved by means of relevance theory. He looks, first, at House's (1981) model for translation quality assessment which operates with a notion of 'covert translation' as the ideal case of translation. A covert translation is a translation which is in no sense marked as such, and which enjoys the status of an original in the target culture. Covert translations are the only translations which are able to achieve functional equivalence with their originals, and it is in terms of functional equivalence that House wishes to assess

the quality of translations. Gutt maintains, however, that it is often difficult to be precise about what function a particular text or text-part fulfils; that the preservation of one particular function may make a translation non-equivalent with the original with respect to other functions; and that functional equivalence between an original and a translation often requires the two texts to differ quite radically.

In the scheme proposed by Hönig and Kußmaul (1984), to which Gutt turns next, even a translation which only resembles its original in terms of overall intentions (such as the intention to sell products – the case is of an advertisement for the products of a particular company, though not necessarily the same products in the target culture as in the source culture) counts as a translation. As Gutt points out, this makes it very difficult to be precise about what constitutes translation as opposed to non-translation. This difficulty, he asserts, can be explicated via a distinction between texts which are crucially dependent for their content and, indeed, for their very existence, on the prior existence of another text in another language, and texts in the case of which the existence of source texts is incidental to their content (pp. 55-6). In relevance theory, this difference is accounted for in terms of the distinction between descriptive and interpretive use: A text which is intended to achieve relevance in its own right is an instance of descriptive use, while a text which is dependent on its source text is intended to achieve relevance in virtue of interpretive resemblance to it. Translation theory need only be concerned with cases of interpretive resemblance, since only texts which are intended to achieve relevance as representations of other texts should be considered translations. Even if, for example, a manual in language A has served as a shortcut for the production of a manual in language B, the relevance of manual B depends on how well it enables someone to operate, and not on its resemblance to manual A. The use of translation in its production is incidental. So relevance theory provides a particular angle on the problem – a useful way of conceptualising the difference between two kinds of text. Note, however, that the distinction itself might plausibly have been drawn – and had, indeed, already been drawn by Hönig and Kußmaul (1984) – independently of the invocation of relevance theory. The fact that Hönig and Kußmaul chose to call both cases ‘translations’ may be odd, but one need not be familiar with relevance theory to notice the oddity.

In Chapter 4, Gutt discusses the concern of translators (Bible translators in particular) with the impact of their work on the target audience. This concern led to Nida’s (1964) theory of dynamic

equivalence. Dynamic equivalence is achieved when a reader of a translation responds to it in substantially the same way as a reader of the original responded to it. In order to achieve dynamic equivalence, a translator must aim to reproduce the message of the original, not only in terms of the information it contains, expressed in a way that seems natural in the target language, but also in such a way that it will seem relevant to the receptor and in such a way that the receptor will feel able to act on it. By 'message' is meant (Nida and Taber, 1969, p. 205) 'the total meaning or content of a discourse; the concepts and feelings which the author intends the reader to understand and perceive' (quoted by Gutt, 1991, p. 69). In relevance theoretic parlance, this becomes (p. 69): 'the set of assumptions {I} the original communicator intended to convey'. If an audience is to be able to retrieve this set of assumptions, they need to use the contextual information which the communicator intended them to use to make the appropriate inferences on the basis of the interaction of the context with the discourse. If they do not use the intended contextual information, misunderstanding will ensue. But often an audience will not have available to them the contextual information the original writer intended them to use. Therefore the aim of providing the same message, as defined by Nida and Taber (1969, p. 205) cannot provide an adequate basis for a theory of translation, especially not when it is combined with their emphasis on linguistic translation – translation in which only linguistically implicit information in the original is made explicit in the translation – as the only faithful type (similar difficulties are found to pertain to the idiomatic approaches presented by Beekman and Callow, 1974, and Larson, 1984).

Chapter 5 is devoted to showing how the relevance theoretic view of translation as interlingual interpretive use can serve as a framework for a theory of translation. Gutt begins by explicating what is meant by saying that 'an utterance interpretively resembles an original' (p. 100).

In interpretive use the principle of relevance comes across as a presumption of optimal relevance: what the reporter intended to convey is (a) presumed to interpretively resemble the original ... and (b) the resemblance it shows is to be consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance, that is, is presumed to have adequate contextual effects without gratuitous processing effort. This notion of optimal resemblance seems to capture well the idea of faithfulness, and Sperber and Wilson have, in fact, stated

that in interpretive use “... the speaker guarantees that her utterance is a faithful enough representation of the original: that is, it resembles it closely enough in relevant respects” (Wilson and Sperber, 1988a, p. 137).

The principle of relevance thus constrains a translation both in terms of what it should convey and in terms of how this should be expressed (pp. 101-2):

If we ask in what respects the intended interpretation of the translation should resemble the original, the answer is: in respects that make it adequately relevant to the audience – that is, that offer adequate contextual effects; if we ask how the translation should be expressed, the answer is: it should be expressed in such a manner that it yields the intended interpretation without putting the audience to unnecessary processing effort.

Both constraints are context determined, since the principle of relevance is context dependent. And (p. 102):

These conditions seem to provide exactly the guidance that translators and translation theorists have been looking for: they determine in what respects the translation should resemble the original – only in those respects that can be expected to make it adequately relevant to the receptor language audience. They determine also that the translation should be clear and natural in expression in the sense that it should not be unnecessarily difficult to understand.

So the demand for naturalness of expression in translations follows from relevance theory, and the notion of faithfulness can be recast as a notion of optimal relevance (p. 101). This explains why different types of text, or passages within them, demand faithfulness with respect to different types of feature (as per Newmark, 1988, p. 15). What is unclear is that the need for classifications of text types and the kinds of feature which it is important to retain in them thereby disappears. How can the fact that each of Newmark's rules ‘is an application of the principle of relevance to an audience with particular kinds of interests’ (Gutt, p. 115) possibly justify the claim that these and other rules and principles of translation are unnecessary? It is fine for a translator to know that it is important for him or her to employ the principle of relevance in translating, but s/he can surely still benefit from some guidance about what this principle might demand

in the case of certain types of audience reading certain types of texts for particular purposes. Gutt concedes that 'much of the literature on translation is useful', but 'only in a limited way' (p. 118), as the guidelines it offers are circumstance specific. But it is obvious that what one gains from the principle of relevance in terms of generality of application must be balanced against what one would lose in terms of specificity if *nothing but* this principle were made available to guide translators.

The type of translation accounted for by the notion of interlingual interpretive use is called 'indirect translation', because it does not focus on the way in which something was said, but rather on *what* was said, rather like indirect quotations do. The notion is close to 'sense-for-sense' or 'free' translation. It is defined in terms of shared explicatures and implicatures. In Chapter 6, this kind of translation is distinguished from 'direct translation', a notion derived from the idea of direct quotation and close to 'literal' translation. For the notion of direct speech quotation to make sense in cases of interlingual communication, it is necessary to focus, not on the exact words and structures used – as these must obviously be different in different languages – but, rather on what Gutt terms 'communicative clues' (p. 127). These are stylistic properties which guide readers to the interpretation intended by the communicator, and it is commonly accepted that different stylistic properties in different languages may lead to similar interpretations. For example, theme is indicated in English by position in the clause, whereas in Japanese it is indicated by a particle. In 'direct translation', the preservation of all the original's linguistic clues 'would make it possible for the receptors to arrive at the intended interpretation of the original, provided they used the contextual assumptions envisaged by the original author' (p. 128). But, as Gutt shows in Chapter 7, since direct translation produces complete interpretive resemblance between original and translation, it is, in effect, the optimal case of interpretive use, and we have a unified account of translation. Direct translation is defined *without* reliance on the notion of communicative clue; only the notion of complete resemblance in the same context as that envisaged for the original is used (p. 163). And in spite of having covered around 30 pages (pp. 129-159) with discussion of different kinds of communicative clues (arising from: semantic representations; syntactic properties; phonetic properties; semantic constraints on relevance; formulaic expressions; onomatopoeia; accent, dialect and register; and sound-based poetic properties), Gutt is curiously reticent

in recommending the study of such clues to translators, saying only that (p. 164):

it may well be that the concept “communicative clue” will prove of some value in the practice of translation: it might help the translator identify and talk about features in the source and target-language utterances that affect their interpretation.

I would have expected it to be blatantly obvious to anyone engaged in the teaching and practice of translation that stylistics is of the utmost importance to the successful outcome of the enterprise – although no-one would deny that it is not sufficient in itself to guarantee such success.

A direct translation must be made with regard to the context of the original, and it is the responsibility of the target audience to familiarize themselves with the context assumed by the original communicator, even if this may be difficult (p. 166). Of course, footnotes, prefaces or introductions may help, but these are not part of the translation proper. Gutt reports on many cases in which attempts to lay bare the explicatures and implicatures of an original *within* its translation have led to the sad consequence of preventing the audience from deriving the full, usually indeterminate, range which the original in fact offered. To demand that a translator provide all the background information which was available to the intended readership of the original text is as absurd as it would be to demand that each new edition of Shakespeare, for example, be expanded to enable the contemporary readership to understand it exactly as Shakespeare’s contemporaries did. Of course, such expansion is impossible since (a) we don’t *know* just how Shakespeare’s assumed that his audience would understand him and (b) no readership consists of individuals with identical assumptions about the world to begin with, so it is impossible to ensure that any extra information is required by and/or sufficient for the whole readership.

Furthermore, as Gutt also points out, people tend to expect translation to be direct. Therefore it is very important, if indirect translation *is* used, to make this clear to the intended readership.

Finally, Gutt describes the translator’s task as follows (pp. 180-1):

The translator’s responsibility begins with the formation of his informative intention ... The translator needs to clarify for himself whether his informative intention is, in fact,

communicable, that is, whether he can reasonably expect the audience to derive this interpretation in consistency with the principle of relevance. Thus, the translator is confronted not only with the question of *how* he should communicate, but *what* he can reasonably expect to convey by means of his translation.

The answer to this question will be determined by his view of the cognitive environment of the target audience, and it will affect some basic decisions. It will, for example, have a bearing on whether he should engage in interpretive use [translation, *KM*] at all or whether descriptive use [non-translation, *KM*] would be more appropriate.

If the translator judges that it is 'relevant to the audience to recognize that the receptor language text is presented in virtue of its resemblance to an original in another language', i.e., if the translator decides to translate, then,

he will have to consider further what degree of resemblance he could aim for, being aware that communicability requires that the receptor language text resemble the original "closely enough in relevant respects" (Wilson and Sperber 1988a, p. 137). To determine what is close enough resemblance in relevant respects, the translator needs to look at both the likely benefits, that is, the contextual effects, and also at the processing effort involved for the audience. Thus he will have to choose between indirect and direct translation, and also decide whether resemblance in linguistic properties should be included as well.

In other words, the translator has to decide whether a faithful or literal translation would be too difficult for the audience, in which case s/he might opt for a freer version or even an adaptation; and s/he has to decide whether rhyme, rhythm, metre, syntactic choices, etc, have to be reproduced.

Obviously, what Gutt achieves amounts largely to a reformulation of some of the concerns of translation theorists in relevance theoretic terms. Post-relevance-theory-translators have to make the same decisions as pre-relevance-theory-translators had to make. Some of the decisions *may* have been made easier because the relevance theoretic formulation provides some degree of clarification of the issues involved – though this 'contextual effect' has to be bought at the expense of the processing effort required to learn

relevance theory. But while thus handing translators and translation theorists the relevance-theoretic tool with one hand, Gutt unfortunately takes away with the other certain ancillary tools without which I doubt the relevance theoretic framework can be set in motion. I have already mentioned the obliteration of specific rules and guidelines about text and reader types and purposes and translation strategies suitable for them. This follows in fact from Gutt's quite astonishing claim that the possibility of reformulating translation theory in relevance theoretic terms makes it possible, and that it is desirable, for the study of translation to shift away from its preoccupation with translational behaviour and from the descriptive-classificatory approach (p. 20).

The descriptive approach to translations, to which Gutt takes particular exception, has, he claims, quoting Toury (1985, p. 20), tried to establish large corpora of texts which are, in particular cultures, considered translations, so that an underlying concept of translation may be discovered. As Gutt points out, such an approach must either be culture specific, or it must assume that a universal notion of translation exists. Now, given Davidson's (1973) theory of radical interpretation, which permits a universal notion of translation, the descriptive approach might achieve the aim which Gutt highlights for it. But even if this aim were unachievable, it is not clear that descriptive translation studies ought to be dismissed on the grounds that it cannot provide a theory of translation. That is not its sole aim and function. As Lefevere (1981, p. 41) pointed out long ago, a descriptive poetics of translation can provide practitioners with useful technical hints, and teachers of comparative literature with guidelines about what different existing translations offer.

The claim that translation theory and translation studies have been made redundant by relevance theory is astonishing, not to say perverse, since Gutt's declared aim is neither 'to give a systematic account of what people do in translation nor to tell them what they ought to do (p. 190). Does such liberalism need to extend to a ban on *anyone* trying to offer specific advice? Where is the practising translator to turn? Can translators be trained in relevance theory alone?

Relevance theory has done linguistic theory a service in, so to speak, drawing context inside the consciousness of speakers and hearers. It provides field, tenor and mode with a cognitive boundary, and makes specific allowance for prior knowledge: context is whatever assumptions a new piece of information happens to call to mind. Of course, we cannot know or predict exactly what assumptions

these will be, but this does not interfere with the basic definition of context: relevance theory tells us that it will be those assumptions, although it does not tell us, and is not intended to be able to tell us, what assumptions they are.

What is not obvious is that this is helpful for a translator. An understanding of relevance theory will not by itself enable translators to predict the relevance of any particular turn of phrase to those individuals which they might see as the projected audience for their translations. *Ergo*, translators cannot expect to be able to apply relevance theory directly when translating. They must, therefore, be permitted to have something else to apply, and it remains one of the aims of translation studies and translation theory to provide them with this.

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