# Translation as Interpretation

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While we obviously have an intuitive knowledge of what makes a translation a translation, if we want to be able to provide a systematic and explicit characterisation of the nature of the translation process, it will have to be done, as is claimed, for instance, by Steiner (1975/1992) and Gutt (1991), in terms of a suitable theory of communication. This paper[1] argues in favour of this approach and shows how translation can be explicated within the bounds of relevance theory, along the lines presented in Gutt (1991).

## 1  Translation as Interpretation: A First Approximation

Today it is commonly accepted that translation is more than just mere manipulation of language or linguistic utterances—it is a form of inter-lingual or, in a wider sense, intercultural communication. The essential question here is how translation is different from other forms of communication.

One specific characteristic of communication through translation is, of course, that it involves, apart from the original or source communicator, an extra communicator, the translator, who mediates between the source communicator and the target of the translation process, the target audience. In this respect, translating seems similar to the situation where in a noisy place somebody has to render the words of the person standing on his right side to the one standing on the left because under the circumstances they cannot communicate with each other directly, even though they may share a common language. What makes the rendering of the message necessary here is that there is noise in the channel of communication, which blocks the transfer of information between the communicator and the audience.

There are then other situations in which the signal gets through to the audience, who is, moreover, familiar with the code, yet it does not seem to make sense to him. This might happen, for instance, in the case of sophisticated texts on elaborate topics (such as linguistics or communication), where the reader, although familiar with the language, will be

puzzled at what the language conveys and will ask for the help of somebody who can explain or interpret the text for him.

Translation, however, is different from the above cases in that the interference of a mediator is necessitated not simply because the signal needs to be amplified or because the audience is unable to make sense of it but, first of all, because the signal as such is unintelligible to the audience.

Thus, translation may be seen as a form of communication where the translator, a mediator, interprets the source communicator's message for the target audience, as he is incapable of interpreting it for himself. This can happen for two main reasons. Firstly because the audience may not be able to identify the source signals (problems with the code) and, secondly, because the audience may not possess the necessary background information for making sense of them (problems with the context).

Unfortunately, this definition of translation as an interpretive communicative process is still too wide and imprecise in that it allows for the inclusion within its bounds of phenomena which are not normally thought of as instances of translation, such as hermeneutic interpretation or reading a fairytale to a child. However, it puts into focus the notion of interpretation, which may serve as the starting point of the quest for a more rigorous definition of translation.

## 2  Interpretation

As explained in Sperber and Wilson (1986), utterance interpretation is an inferential process whereby the audience, on the basis of the context, infers from the stimulus the intended meaning of the communicator. For this to happen, the audience must use the set of contextual assumptions envisaged by the communicator, otherwise the communication may fail. Let us call the situation when this condition is fulfilled a *primary communication situation,* and the second, where the audience uses a more or less different set of contextual assumptions a *secondary communication situation* (Gutt 1991:73).

Translation, of course, often occurs in secondary communication situations. An important question here is whether a given message (set of assumptions intended by the communicator) can be communicated in such a situation and to what extent. A secondary communication situation will often result in a misinterpretation. An observation to this effect

appears in Seleskovich (1977), where she notes that problems in the process of interpretation arise when the translator lacks the necessary knowledge of the world and/or of the *cognitive context* (of the text) which can enable her to work out the *non-verbal sense* of the text on the basis of its *linguistic meaning*. Gutt (1991) lists four kinds of misinterpretations which may arise when a linguistic utterance is interpreted against a context different from the one that was actually intended by the communicator:

- The use of wrong contextual assumptions can lead to the choice of the wrong semantic representation;
- A wrong context may lead to the derivation of a wrong propositional form;
- Wrong contextual assumptions can prevent the identification of a propositional form as an intended explicature or as only a source of implicatures;
- A wrong context can also lead to the derivation of implicatures not intended or, vice versa, to the loss of implicatures actually intended by the communicator (p. 73).

The terms explicature and implicature are meant in the following sense. When an assumption communicated by the utterance is a development of a logical form encoded by the utterance, we call this assumption an *explicature*. This is the case with ordinary assertions, where the propositional form of the utterance is part of the intended interpretation. The situation is different, of course, with figurative or non-assertive utterances: here the propositional form of the utterance is not an explicature because it is not part of the intended interpretation. When an assumption is communicated otherwise, it is called an *implicature* (Sperber and Wilson 1986:182).

According to relevance theory an act of communication can only be successful if it achieves relevance in a given set of contextual assumptions, and relevance is defined in terms of *contextual effects* and *processing effort*. There are three ways in which the contextualisation of new assumptions in a context of old assumptions may achieve some contextual effect: by adding new assumptions to the context in the form of contextual implications, by strengthening some old assumptions or by erasing others. Otherwise, if a contextualisation does not modify the context

(because the new assumptions are found too weak and are consequently erased) or all it does is simply add some new assumptions to it, it will have failed to achieve any contextual effect (Sperber and Wilson 1986:117).

Relevance, then, is clearly context-dependent: a given set of assumptions to be communicated that yields an appropriate number of contextual effects may fail to do so in a different context and thus the communication may break down. Alternatively, it can break down because the effort needed to work out these contextual effects in a *secondary context* may be gratuitously great, leading to a loss of interest in the communication on the part of the audience. As Bell (1991) writes, this is the point, the *threshold of termination,* "where the reader has got enough out of the text and/or feels that, in cost-benefit terms, there is little point in continuing" (p. 213).

It is then a gross oversimplification of matters to say that a given message can always be communicated through translation: it is only possible if the secondary context makes it possible to communicate that message. And this is exactly what Steiner says when he writes "not everything can be translated *now* " (Steiner 1975/1992:262, italics as in original). Some things may defy translation at a given moment but through changes of context and language may become translatable in the future.

Translators, too, have long been (even if only intuitively) aware of this fact. This is manifest in translations which are addressed to an audience essentially different from the original one, for instance when a great classic of American literature like *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fennimore Cooper was rendered into Hungarian by Ádám Réz in such a way that long politico-historical descriptive passages were eliminated for the obvious reason that the translation was done for children, who would not be interested in these or, rather, would not be prepared to interpret such descriptions, all of which might result in the child reader losing interest and putting the book down. Thus in such a case it may be a wise decision on the part of the translator to leave out these parts, in order to ensure that the communication as a whole would be successful.

In sum, the primary question in translation is not in what way a given message can be communicated in the target language but whether it is communicable at all in the context of the receiving culture, in the given communicative situation, in consistency with the principle of

relevance; all other considerations follow from the answer given to this fundamental question. Thus, as Gutt writes, the translator, first of all, needs to clarify for herself whether the original informative intention is communicable in the given circumstances or it needs to be modified, and only then can she start thinking about the question of exactly how her communicative intention may be formulated (Gutt 1991:180).

## 3 Translation as Interlingual Interpretive Use

If, as is most often the case, the same informative intention cannot be conveyed in the secondary context, then it will need to be altered in order to make it communicable, while ensuring at the same time that only such changes are effected as absolutely necessary to achieve this purpose. Translation can then be seen as the act of communicating in the secondary context an informative intention that interpretively resembles the original one as closely as possible under the given conditions. This entails that the principle of relevance in translation is manifested as a *presumption of optimal resemblance:* the translation is "(a) presumed to interpretively resemble the original [...] and (b) the resemblance it shows is to be consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance" (Gutt 1991:101). In other words: the translation should resemble the original in such a way that it provides adequate contextual effects and it should be formulated in such a manner that the intended interpretation can be recovered by the audience without undue processing effort.

The following example in (1), taken from Péter Esterházy's *Hrabal könyve* (Magvető Kiadó, Budapest, 1990, p. 10) and its English translation in (2) by Judith Sollosy (Quartet Books, London, 1993, p. 4) will help to elucidate what optimal resemblance means in translation (the italics are mine).

(1)    Volt cukrászda, két konkurens kocsma, melyet mindenki a régi
       nevén hívott, a *Serház* meg a Kondász ...

(2)    There was a café of sorts and two rival taverns, which
       everyone called by their old names, the *Beerhall* and the
       Kondász ...

The problem here is that the Hungarian word 'ser' is associated with an encyclopaedic assumption to the effect that the expression is old-fashioned, it is not used any longer, and evokes the atmosphere of "the

golden days" of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Since in this part of
the book the writer describes the layering upon each other of the past
and present, this assumption definitely has some contextual importance
here. However, the English word 'beer' does not carry a comparable as-
sumption and this part of the context is thus lost in the translation. On
the other hand, it has a near synonym in English, 'ale', which does con-
tain in its encyclopaedic entry the assumption, waking images of the past,
that this drink is brewed in the traditional way, without adding hops.
Moreover, the related compound 'alehouse' is further loaded with the
encyclopaedic assumption that the expression is outdated, old-fashioned,
and its use in the translation would thus have resulted in the closest pos-
sible interpretive resemblance with the original. Here, in my opinion, the
translator committed a mistake: she let part of the context be lost with-
out a good reason, since the preservation of the encyclopaedic assump-
tion in question would not have caused a considerable increase of
processing effort and would not therefore have threatened the optimal
relevance of the translation. In this case, then, although the target text
does fulfil the presumption of optimal relevance, the level of interpretive
resemblance could have been made higher. In traditional terms, this
might be called an instance of "unjustified translation loss", which in this
case means the loss of some implicature, while in other cases an expli-
cature can also be lost in similarly unwarranted ways. On the other hand,
it may happen that the preservation of some implicature or explicature
will threaten the optimal relevance of the target text; that is, an excessive
degree of interpretive resemblance may also count as a—different kind
of—translation mistake.

We have arrived at, then, a definition of translation which seems to
provide all the necessary conditions to guide the translator:

> 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 (Gutt
> 1991:102).

These conditions, among other things, seem to explain why it is
preferred that the translator translate into her mother tongue (or her

"language of habitual use", as is sometimes allowed). The translator, on the one hand, has to be able to predict what assumptions might be present in the audience's cognitive environment and this is most likely when they share a common culture. And, on the other hand, she has to possess an ease of expression in the target language which is normally possible only in the mother tongue. That is, in most cases the translator will be familiar with the cultural context and also with the language to an extent sufficient to enable her to satisfy the above conditions only in her mother tongue and very rarely in a foreign language.

The above definition also accounts for another interesting problem, namely that although the degree of resemblance between translation and original can always be increased, for some reason it often seems undesirable. We can now explain why this is so: exactly because the increase in resemblance may be accompanied by an increase of processing effort which might outweigh the gains in contextual effects. The two factors, contextual effects and processing effort need to be carefully balanced by the translator, who has to accept the fact that losses in contextual effects are sometimes unavoidable in order to keep the processing effort at a reasonable level, thereby ensuring the overall success of the communication. Relevance, it needs to be kept in mind, is always a joint function of contextual effects and processing effort.

Having accepted a definition of translation as an act of communication aimed at optimal resemblance with the original, it seems in order that I clarify certain points here. First of all, how should we understand the expression "*the translation* optimally resembles *the original*"? The terms "translation" and "original" are certainly not meant here as the translated and the original text (a text, in the narrow sense, is a collection of printed marks) but as the set of assumptions they give rise to in the secondary and the primary contexts, respectively.

Second, what is the specificity of translation (as a form of interpretive language use) compared to monolingual communication? In monolingual communication the communicator communicates (that is, provides evidence, for the audience, for) her own thoughts, whereas a translator communicates (provides evidence for) the assumptions conveyed by the source text, which she has worked out in a different context and language, built on a conceptual system which is likely to be, at least partially, different from that of the secondary context (including the target language). Thus the uniqueness and the difficulty of translation lies

partly in the fact that it involves second-order interpretation and partly in that it may (and most often does) necessitate a shift between conceptual systems.

Third, does this definition enable us to distinguish translation from other forms of interlingual communication, like adaptation, where a certain interpretive relationship between two texts also obtains? In Gutt's (1991) view, every interlingual interpretive act of communication is an act of translation, irrespective of how close is the interpretive relationship between the source and the target text. This relationship may range from complete to non-existent, and since in this continuum there are no natural break-points, the theory does not provide a grasp to distinguish between what counts as translation and what counts as non-translation. Yet, at one point he does allow for the possibility of separating translation from, for instance, paraphrase in such a way that an interpretive act which does not fulfil the promise of optimal relevance may be regarded as paraphrase (Gutt 1991:121). In my opinion, however, this view takes us the wrong way for the following reasons. The relevance of a stimulus is always a function of the context and thus an utterance which is optimally relevant in one context, may not be so in a different context. From this it follows that an interpretive act which is optimally relevant in one context and is thus a translation, may not be optimally relevant in another context and would therefore be an instance of non-translation. I do not think that this would be a desirable turn. Whether a given target text qualifies as translation or not, obviously, cannot depend on if it is optimally relevant but on the intention with which it was produced. The pivotal question, in my view, is whether the secondary communicator intended the target text to be a translation or a paraphrase. This, of course, is a rather trivial statement. The question is how and, most importantly, whether the theory is able to grasp this difference of intentions. I think it is, and the crucial element is contained in the definition. If translation is regarded as a communicative act which, in the secondary context, purports to convey an informative intention that interpretively resembles the original *as closely as possible*, this means that an interpretive act of communication will be a translation only if it is produced with the intention to convey in the secondary context, in consistence with the principle of optimal relevance, those and only those explicatures and implicatures which the original conveyed in the primary context. If the secondary communicator does not have this basic ·

intention then the target text is not a translation but something else, a summary or an exegesis, for example.

## 4  Direct and Indirect Translation

A limiting case of translation as interpretive use is when the interpretive resemblance between the translation and the original is purportedly complete: that is, when the translation "purports to allow the recovery of the originally intended interpretation interlingually" (Gutt 1991:163). In a way, this is similar to direct quotations, which may be employed to allow the recovery of the original interpretation intralingually, on condition that they are processed in the original context. Generally speaking, two stimuli may give rise to the same interpretation if and only if they are processed in the same context, because any interpretation is causally dependent on the interplay between stimulus and context.

This kind of *direct translation,* consequently, is only possible if the translation is processed in the original, or primary, context, otherwise the contextual differences will result in differences in contextual effects. Technically, the following definition can be adopted:

> A receptor language utterance is a direct translation of a source language utterance if and only if it purports to interpretively resemble the original completely in the context envisaged for the original (Gutt 1991:163).

Naturally, in interlingual (intercultural) situations it is very rare that the original context should be available in the target culture. It is possible perhaps in circumstances where different language communities have shared the same geographical, political, and economic environment for a long enough time to eliminate major cultural differences but in most cases the secondary communication situation will be substantially different to exclude the possibility of direct translation. This, then, implies that the default case is not direct but *indirect translation,* which covers various grades of interpretive resemblance.

Consider, for an illustration of the exposition above, example 3, taken from an interview with Clint Eastwood by Ginny Dougarry (The Times Magazine, 28 March 1998, p. 19):

(3)    In the early Fifties, during his two-year stint in the US Army,
       he had a casual relationship with a schoolteacher in Carmel.
       When he attempted to end the affair, she turned violent. Did it
       frighten him? "Yeah, it gave me the spooks," he says. "It
       wasn't a homicide—someone trying to kill me. But it was
       someone stalking me and threatening to kill themself."

What is interesting here is the use of the pronominal form
'themself', when the referent is clearly a female person. Naturally, any-
one familiar with the present-day American cultural context will realise
that this is probably the result of a somewhat exaggerated effort to com-
ply with expectations of political correctness. Thus (3) conveys the fol-
lowing implicature:

(4)    Clint is trying to be PC.

Now what could a Hungarian translator do with the last sentence in
(3)? Let us first suppose she assumes that her average Hungarian reader
knows nothing about what PC means in America and she does not con-
sider it possible to introduce this notion within the limits of the given
translation task. In this case, assumption (4) will, most probably, be
completely lost, and the result will be an instance of indirect translation,
since the interpretive resemblance between the original and the transla-
tion is less than complete.
    Let us now suppose that the translator assumes her reader to be
familiar with the concept of PC, that is, she assumes that the translation
operates in the same context as the original does. Then she could try to
look for a solution that will convey assumption (4) in the Hungarian text,
thereby achieving complete interpretive resemblance, in this respect at
least, between (3) and the translation, which can thus be said to be an
instance of direct translation.
    Parenthetically, my guess is that in this particular case the assump-
tion is likely to be lost because the difference concerning pronominal
gender contrast between the two languages would probably make the
preservation of the assumption too effort-consuming and would thus
threaten the optimal relevance of the translation.
    Therefore, it seems that here the translation is doomed to be
somewhat indirect but, regarding that (4) is a relatively weak implicature,

no serious damage occurs—unless, of course, (4) will later be needed as part of the context.

## 5  Conditions and Corollaries of Direct Translation

The notion of direct translation, however, sheds light on some important points. First of all, complete interpretive resemblance can only be aimed at if the translator herself is capable of performing a thorough interpretation of the original. If this condition is not fulfilled, then the translation cannot even purport to be direct, in the true sense of the term. What this entails is the requirement for the translator to be thoroughly familiar with not only the two languages but also with the two cultures (cultural contexts) in question.

Second, direct translation may serve as a useful means of familiarising the target audience with the source culture by communicating to him the original informative intention. On the other hand, the originally intended interpretation, as we have seen, is only communicable in the original context, which entails that the target audience needs to have, or seek, access to all of this contextual background information. This means that the translator has to look for ways to provide such information and it also points to the fact that direct translation in many cases requires some extra effort on the part of the audience as well, in the hope of gaining a full understanding of the original message. One might see some contradiction in that direct translation presupposes the availability of the original context and that, at the same time, the target reader may be expected to make an effort in accessing this context. I do not, however, see this as a problem. Direct translation presupposes the original context in the sense that complete interpretive resemblance cannot be achieved in a different context and thus the translator, aiming at direct translation, is bound to suppose that the target text will be processed by the reader in the original context. It is a different question whether the target reader is in fact able to access this context (that is, whether it is part of his cognitive environment) and if not, whether he is willing to exert some effort to that effect. For this to happen, the reader needs to be aware of the necessity of this effort, that is, he needs to know that what he is reading is a translation, and a translation which was produced with the aim of reproducing the original informative intention (message) in full.

Then, thirdly, as Gutt (1991) also points out, in such circumstances it is a crucial requirement, in order that the communication does not fail, that the audience be explicitly made aware by the translator of the intended degree of resemblance between the original and the translation in a translator's foreword or otherwise (p. 183). This case, when the target reader is aware of the fact that what he is reading is a translation, Gutt (1991) calls overt translation.

Finally, the translator, as any communicator, has to make sure that her communicative intentions are in accordance with the expectations of the audience. If she thinks that the intended target audience will not be able or willing to exert the extra effort demanded by a direct translation then she will be bound to choose another approach to the given translation task, in order to ensure the success of the communication (Gutt 1991:185).

## 6  Conclusions

The notion of translation as interpretive language use is based on the view that translation is a form of communication and, as such, can be accounted for in terms of the relevance theory of communication. This implies that the theory of translation is a natural part of the theory of communication and that any translation principle, rule or guideline is an application of the principle of relevance and "all the aspects of translation [...], including matters of evaluation, are explicable in terms of the interaction of context, stimulus and interpretation" through this principle (Gutt 1991:188).

Of course, the importance of the context had already been realised by the communicative-functional approaches to translation as well. Polysystem theory, skopos theory, and the action theory of translation all pointed out that a translation is always the product of a specific context, including various factors such as cultural conventions, the circumstances and expectations of the target reader, or the intended purpose of the translation and thus the content of the translation is effectively determined by these factors. As a consequence, in these theories the source text is relegated, from the status of the absolute measure of evaluation, to that of a mere stimulus or source material and the success of the translation is measured by its functional adequacy in the target context. In this, these approaches can be regarded as the forerunners of relevance theory. What I see as a major advantage of relevance theory is that, con-

trary to them, it actually explicates what adequacy means in a context: a text can be regarded adequate in a context inasmuch as it achieves optimal resemblance in it. In this framework, we could even substantiate the much-debated notion of equivalence, by considering it as the instance of maximal interpretive resemblance of the translation to the original in the secondary communicative context of the translation. This brief and sketchy train of thought was only meant to illustrate that the conceptual apparatus of relevance theory can also be used in the analysis of matters of translation quality with the sort of explicitness which, I think, is not offered by any of the previous theories.

As for the objection to the application of relevance theory to translation, voiced among others by Tirkkonen-Condit (1992), concerning the vagueness of the criteria by which the translator can decide what is relevant in a context, the answer is that, on the one hand, no other theory has ever come close to providing nearly as explicit a definition of what relevance means in communication and, on the other hand, eventually the success of an act of translation, as of all communication, is the responsibility of the translator-communicator—it depends on how well she assesses the cognitive environment of the assumed target reader.

Another critical observation concerning Gutt's theory is that he does not try to link his statements to the notions and categories of earlier, more traditional, theories of translation. Although he does recognise, for instance, the correspondence of the distinction between his direct and indirect translation with the distinction between the traditional categories of literal and free translation, he abstains from using these, in my view, in order not to burden his notions with unnecessary connotations. This, I believe, is not a shortcoming but the natural result of his intention to break away from the descriptive-classificatory approach. Gutt's theory is not a translation theory in the traditional sense but, rather, the application of a general communication theory to translation. As such, it is not in the strict sense part of what we may call the traditional literature on translation since, instead of using concepts worked out specifically for describing translation, it attempts to refine an already existing conceptual apparatus in order to make it more general in scope, enabling it to handle an even wider range of communication phenomena.

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