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A Cognitive Approach to Translation Shifts: Using an LDC Arabic-English Parallel Corpus

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Abstract

The advent of the discipline of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) has allowed the study of “translation shifts” to break free from the age-old mold of “equivalence” to new vistas. Translation is not only an act of communication and textual operation, but also the result of cognitive processing carried out by translators, thus presupposing choices, alternatives, decisions, strategies, aims and goals. Under DTS, the focus has shifted from translation-as-product to translation-as-process manifested through its product, yielding insights into the decisions made during the act of translating. This study focuses on the way the text changes as it is translated, and on the investigation of the nature and motivation of such changes from the cognitive viewpoint, based on Croft and Cruse’s (2004) taxonomy of construal operations, which correspond to the four main cognitive processes and capacities; namely Attention/Salience, Judgement/ Comparison, Perspective/Situatedness, and Constitution/Gestalt. A parallel corpus is one type of corpora that would help locate all the occurrences of a query in context in the source language together with their corresponding sentences in the target language; hence, shedding light on the translation strategies used. The corpus used is the *Arabic-English Parallel News – Part 1* (LDC catalog no.: LDC2004E08) provided by the Linguistic Data Consortium (LDC), as it is one of the very few Arabic-English parallel corpora available for research.

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Abbreviations

Bold types are for conceptual domains.

Bold types in the form of X IS Y or X AS Y denote conceptual metaphors.

Brackets are used for my examples.

Descriptive Translation Studies – DTS

Corpus Translation Studies – CTS

Source Language – SL

Target Language – TL

Source Text – ST

Target Text – TT

Linguistic Data Consortium – LDC

Translation Memory – TM

Keyword in Context – KwiC

Idealized Cognitive Model – ICM

Source Domain – SD

Target Domain – TD

Think-Aloud Protocol – TAP

Choice Network Analysis – CNA

Cross-language Information Retrieval – CLIR

Example-Based Machine Translation – EBMT

Computer-Assisted Translation – CAT

Similar Mapping Conditions – SMC

Different Mapping Conditions – DMC

1. Introduction

1.1. Initial Remarks

Translation has for long been unfairly presumed to be an uninteresting photocopy of the original text. The translator, with the sword of Damocles of “treason” hanging from a thin thread over his head, has been forced into a mold of “equivalence”, which has resulted in viewing any transformations, deviations, or shifts as errors or mistranslations to be brutally criticized. However, with the advent of the discipline of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), the fact that losses, gains, and changes are a necessity and not a crime has become more established, opening new vistas in the field of Translation Studies. Translation has come to be viewed as a decision-making process. It is not only an act of communication and textual operation, but it is also the result of cognitive processing carried out by translators. It presupposes choices, alternatives, decisions, strategies, aims and goals. “Shift Analysis” is no longer directed at exposing faults committed by the translator. It is rather a means of getting a glimpse of what is inside the “black box”, i.e. the translator’s mind. This, in turn, has led to a shift from focusing on translation-as-product to translation-as-process manifested through its

product, yielding insights into the decisions made in the act of translating.

This has led to another point. There are numerous detailed accounts of translation shifts. However, as Sandra Halverson (2007) expertly puts hands on the problem, they mostly lack adequate explanation of WHY these shifts take place. She notes that “if these ... shifts ... occur in translation regardless of the language pairs involved, then the explanations of these clearly must be linked to causal factors that are external to the linguistic systems ...” (p. 109). She also notes that “all translational decisions, even those that do not result in any evident changes, contain evidence of interpretation or strategy” (p.111). The previous observations point towards the assumption that shifts in translation are derived from the conceptualization or “construal” of the experiences being communicated. Therefore, they are cognitive in nature.

Cognitive linguistics assumes that a linguistic structure is a bipolar form-meaning pair. The form acts as an access point to the process of meaning construction, as the form triggers the activation of conceptualization. Construal operations are central to cognitive semantics; as they refer to the ability to conceive and portray the

same situation in different ways. They are based on the main four already-established cognitive abilities, fundamental not only to linguistics, but also to various forms of human cognition; namely, the phenomenon of attention and the degree of its activation (Attention/Salience), the ability to compare objects, events and experiences and reach generalizations (Judgement/Comparison), the ability to arrange viewing and assume different perspectives to an object, event, or experience (Perspective/Situatedness), and the ability to construe a single complex object from seemingly fragmented perceptual sensations (Constitution/Gestalt). These underlying cognitive processes are manifested linguistically in other ways. Construals of events have been noticed to differ within the same language as well as across languages. Since translation is a process of dynamic meaning construction, it necessarily involves the activation of raw conceptual content and its construal. Exploring the reasons behind the shifts in the translation process would mean looking into the cognitive processes involved in this dynamic process.

With the expansion of the quality and the quantity of information, another consequent expansion takes place in the empirical results from the fields of Corpus Linguistics and Translation Studies, due to

the introduction of the use of e-corpora. E-corpora embrace an empirical perspective based on direct observation of real-life examples. They also allow systematic research. Parallel corpora, in particular, have allowed researchers to study how an idea in one language is conveyed into another. What is observed is correspondence, not equivalence. A parallel corpus helps locate all the occurrences of a query in context in the source language together with their corresponding sentences in the target language. This should help shed light on the translation strategies used.

1.2. Context and Purpose of the Study

This investigation is carried out in order to identify what construal operations are behind the shifts that take place in translation. It is based on the belief that translation is not an equative relation, but an additive one, where the focus is not on the preservation of the identity of the text rather it is on the way the text changes as it is translated, and on the investigation of the nature and motivation of such changes from the cognitive viewpoint. For this aim, the researcher attempts to resort to Croft and Cruse's (2004) taxonomy of construal operations, which correspond to the four main cognitive processes and capacities. This taxonomy is based upon the contributions of Ronald Langacker

(1987, 1993), Leonard Talmy (1988, 2000), and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980). The researcher attempts to combine this taxonomy together with a descriptive – as versus prescriptive – approach to shifts in translation. The descriptive approach aims at being non-judgmental in nature. Its sole focus is on the pure description of what takes place in the translated text, as a means of inferring what takes place during the translation process itself, as a result of the cognitive processing carried out by the translator, i.e. the processes whereby the translation has come into being.

This descriptive-cognitive approach to translation shifts has utilized another discipline that has grown recently out of the field of Corpus Linguistics; namely, Corpus Translation Studies (CTS). This corpus approach to translation studies is a powerful tool for perceiving differences and variations. Its point of strength is its flexibility as well as adaptability. Through CTS, investigations in translation are no longer “text-based”, but rather “context-based”. Among the different types of corpora available for CTS, the researcher has found out that Parallel Corpora are the best to serve the objectives of this investigation. A parallel corpus is a set of source texts and their translations in one or more languages, aligned in a way that allows the user to view all the examples of a particular search term in the

source language and all their translation correspondents in the target language(s).

Jeremy Munday (1998) in his celebrated article “A Computer-assisted Approach to the Analysis of Translation Shifts” gives a detailed idea of how to use the basic tools of corpus linguistics to “enable accurate and rapid access to surface features over a whole text, reducing the arduousness and tedium of what has previously been a manual task” (Munday, 1998, p.1). The first question that comes to mind is what to look at in order to locate relations between small Source Text (ST) and Target Text (TT) segments. This is grounded in the concept of Translation Shifts where small changes build up accumulatively over a whole text to form “a wave of change at a text’s macrolevel” indicating a general translation strategy adopted by the translator (Halverson, 2007, p. 4). Munday (1998) starts with “basic statistics analysis” in order to get a feel of the “comparative texture” of the two texts to be analyzed (Munday, 1998, p.3). He uses the “Wordsmith” program which provides him with frequency lists of words. This step provides the researcher with examples of particular keywords. He then uses the concordance, which Baker (1995) describes as “the corpus analyst’s stock-in-trade”, to further investigate these keywords in their context (as cited