

Cognitive Translation and the Creation of Meaning

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Abstract:

The power of words and the tyranny of thought create a maze of critical alternatives in the creation of meaning. This is jointly torn off by the translator's own cultural competence and the tyranny of the socio-cultural layers that the text regularly produces.

Cognitive functions in translation are not confined to the linguistic contact with a text, but they go further deep in pithy cognitive functions that embrace the reception of the translation output. Creation of meaning in a literary text is extended to the translator's apprehension and decision-making. The translation act comprises three stages that do not seem to occur simultaneously but in an endlessly circular movement. In a text founded on expressiveness, the cognitive function embraces the creation-creativity aesthetic, emotions and mood. Decoding is not only a psychological cognitive phenomenon but a social construction as well. It is a process that stems in reading, traverses the linguistic bridges, and matures in the written composition. The major question our article tries to answer is: Do Cognitive Functions of Translation embrace the reception of the translation output?

Key words: Translation; Cognitive translation; Reception; Emotions; Simulation and Creativity; Meaning; Decision-making.

Introduction

Translation is above all understanding, but as my title suggests it we can hardly rely on semantic translation. In fact, 'creation of meaning' would literally translate into '*khalq el Ma3na*'. However, it would sound more relevant if we translated into '*bina'e*' or '*tawlid*' as translation, independently from any conscious cognitive activity, generates meaning(s), hence, our choice. Nevertheless, our paper

suggests other cognitive issues that lie beyond the semantic dimension.

Cognition: definition and boundaries

The Latin origins of the concept 'cognition' derives from knowledge. In fact, the roots are from Latin *cognoscere* which means 'to get to know', from *com*-together + *noscere* to know.

Despite its straightforwardness in denotation, cognition seems to be rather a complex concept that various sciences apprehend and adopt in their own fields. Thus, Coleman (2006) defines cognition as 'The mental activities involved in acquiring and processing information. Its study includes cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, artificial intelligence, and cognitive neuropsychology. A cognition is an item of knowledge or belief.' (Coleman in Schreuder p. 607)

The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy introduces experience and memory in its definition of cognition. The cognitive processes are thus 'those responsible for knowledge and awareness. They include the processing of experience, perception, and memory, as well as overtly verbal thinking ((Blackburn p.87)

The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics defines cognition as 'the various mental processes used in thinking, remembering, perceiving, recognizing, classifying, etc.' ((Richards et Schmidt p. 90)

It all seems therefore that cognition in all the different disciplines includes the mental processes of knowledge. We can easily claim that cognition deals with the acquisition and processing of data or information, ideas and beliefs. Knowledge deals with both language and perception, language and thought, thinking and problem solving, but above all the knowledge representation itself.

Cognitive functions in Translation:

It would be naïve to claim that translation is a mere transfer of words from one language to another, but it would be also unfair to

think that linguistic translation is not associated in the transfer of meaning.

Beyond the linguistic association of parts of speech emerges an unseen almost occult realm where lies the fabric of meaning and cultural transfer. These hidden functions that help in the production of the translational output remain unobservable according to Hanna ‘What makes cognitive translation research cognitive is the fact that it tries to look “behind” the observable processes’ (Hanna Risku) Hanna insists on the ‘inner processes’ in the production of the translational outputs rather than the outer elements. However, are there any instruments to locate these processes and quantify them apart from the word and the text? What is meaning? Is it an idea that dwells in the mind or is it the word, or again the reference?

The processes borrow from cognitive linguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, sociology and a host of other sciences and approaches that investigate the human mind when in action, and therefore cognitive approaches to translation focus heavily on the translator. It is definitely an obscure side during the translational act where the processes and functions are invisible but revolve around mapping the meaning while rendering the meaning from L1 to L2. Cognitive translation rests upon some functions. These are ‘thinking, learning, and understanding.’ (Hanna Risku)

Cognition and cultural translation

Thinking, learning, and understanding very often set translation in an uncomfortable situation close to untranslatability. The idea goes back to the Whorfian hypothesis and linguistic determinism. If culture shapes the outer world, meaning resides in the word. The word is not an empty entity, but it encodes culture and the categorization of the universe. This is the most difficult cognitive task for the translator. Literary translation is by excellence the field of cognitive approach as it is translation is not only a ‘science’ but also an ‘art’ and a promising channel to comparative literature. It is in this very respect that Hanna’s *Thinking, learning, and understanding* prove to be of paramount importance to shorten spatial distances between cultures and nations in a very fast paced globalising process.

Cognition in translation is also concerned with the reception of both the original work and its written translation as a cultural 'phenomenon' that can be accepted but rejected as well because of the collective taste, imaginary, cultural and intellectual mores. This coincides with the translation as a mental image and a representation of the *other*. The conflict between the mental representation and the *other* can be severe especially in 'an unknown environment' and this despite the ambitions of 'cognition and supporting the creation of a robust cognitive model of translation.' Marianne Lederer (1994) is clear about the inability of the translator to encode/reformulate all the data in the target language. It is rather a pessimistic vision in a technologically advanced world as knowledge remains also a human feature. For her

For this to happen, translators must want to understand and they must have the necessary knowledge to do so. Their knowledge will never be exactly the same as the author's – neither knowledge nor experience is entirely identical from one individual to another – but it must have enough in common with the author's knowledge to allow relevant cognitive elements to be added to the text's linguistic explicitness, thereby preventing the sense from becoming hypothetical. (27)

Social construction of meaning

The construction of meaning is also social but above all a risk and decision making process. This is valid for both interpretation and both (non) literary translation. Decision-making rests upon sound foundations of correct information. Cognition is not only a pure psychological process, but it happens to have roots in social and cultural dimensions. Literary discourse encompasses personal subjective on the one hand and social and cultural blends on the other hand. It is therefore deeply rooted in the reality of language and the metaphysics of meaning that the community of that particular language can decipher. It deals with a particular life and ontology experience that language encodes.

The relation between translation as first reader and literary text is twofold challenging because of imagination and interaction between the mind as a processing information box and the text as a matter to

know, understand and explain. This is especially true for poetic language conveying also philosophical or / and cultural marks. However, to what extent can the mind be challenging? From a phenomenological perspective, it can also be a source to reality at large and to the reality of the text in particular. It is extremely difficult to the translator to 'guess' the intention, consciousness, and 'hidden' meanings of the author. The dilemma is set when we try to think about reality: Does it dwell in the mind of the author, his written output or does it belong to the outer world? Alternatively, is it a holistic reality?

The translator encounters this reality, without whom no meaning can be produced in the target language. Interpretation stems from this first encounter, in a violent very often-abusive manner to construct meaning. The following diagram shows the battlefield of meaning. The translator does not necessarily share his realities with the author. Yet, the latter with his own text is subject to interpretations, depending on the number of translations and ideologies, space and time.

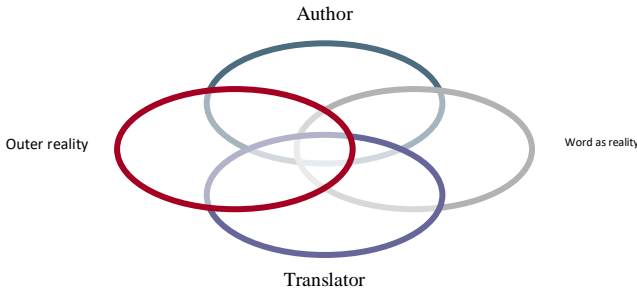


Figure 1: interaction between the Author and Translator's Realities

Knowledge representation

Reading as the first step towards translation might seem an easy first encounter with the text. I can just read Shakespeare's tragedies or Lawrence's novels to understand what they intend to communicate. The wealth of information the literary theory and literary criticism can provide us with alters our vision to the text. Is, then, translation a mere photography? It can be, but it does not portray all the hidden participants within the frame. The following picture

might be an instance of this vision or photography. The following picture can vehicle multiple suggestions to understand what it represents. Knowledge representation is a mental process.



Figure 2 (Snowden, Thompson et Troscianko p.03)

The figure above can nurture various thoughts on our apprehension of the universe, society, art, literature, and even literary translation, which becomes a source of enquiry, skepticism, assessment and continuous reevaluation. Philosophy steps into this unknown environment without being invited as long as cognition is mental above all.

It is very interesting to note how Celia Martín de León defines representation. For her ‘a representation can be defined as an entity that stands for something else.’ (Celia Martín de León (Schwieter et Ferreira p.123) One would wonder what is this *double* representation especially if it straddles two cultural systems with all their complexities. Imagery is the most controversial concept in this case as it has been approached by philosophers from Plato to Heidegger. It can be the picture, or the conception, but it can also stand for the underlying cultural system.

The theory of translation and the theory of literature

The theory of literature has taken advantage of all the researches in the field, and theoreticians like H.R. Jauss and his concepts such as *Horizon of Expectation*. The reception of a literary

piece of work is not that easy. The significance of a written literary text depends on the reader, without whom it seems that it does not exist. Meaning becomes a cornerstone to the production and reception wherein mental and imagery activities and interactions create complex models of representations. The act of reading is not less important than the production as such despite the disparities in terms of space, time but above all emotions to the core events and how they relate not only to culture but to the human body as well. The 'spirit of place' as D.H. Lawrence calls it determines both the subject and object. What can a Faust mean for Buddhist or what can a King Lear represent for a primitive society unless the taste of betrayal?

The task of the translator is to use a robust cognitive approach to lie his output between a 'pure' source-text supposed unattainable and a profane target-text. To smoothen the cultural conflict, the translator's task is to come closer to the linguistic qualitative assessment to verify the validity of his task. It is obvious that the colossal cultural and intellectual legacy will be framed within gain and loss criteria because of the linguistic properties. Translation thus becomes a matter of 'creation' and 'magic' because 'the translator plays an important role in the evolution of the story, for she or he can either resist or assist the story's growth and transmigration.' (Cutter p.106)

The closest approach to the cognitive approach might be the Paris interpretive school's one. It should be based on understanding, de-verbalization and reformulation. The whole process works as a synecdoche and erects translation to the tasks of representation and imagery.

However, the task of the translator is a mould and construction between aesthetics and reception, art and memory wherein the target text do not seem to belong totally to the original author as long as the translator adds some features, cultural and intellectual, aesthetic and artistic, to suit the general taste of his own community.

Conclusion

Nigel Armstrong (2005) compares the translator to the 'secret agent.' (22) The comparison was meant to raise the issues of the

translator's invisibility. However, the metaphor is important in so much as the operative has a twofold functions. He can be the *liaison agent*, the black box, where all the cognitive functions from taking pictures to elaborating plans, coordinating and channeling meet so that he can send /deliver his message(s). He takes pictures pinned in time and space though all its effects features might be elusive and lost. He is the communicator and the mediator of cultures.

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