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Expressivity in Technical Texts From a Translation Theoretical Perspective

1. Introduction

The aim of the thesis - which was defended on 9 January, 1998 - has been to provide linguistic evidence for the intuitive impression that many technical texts, instead of being almost exclusively informative, are meant to serve a variety of communicative purposes and that a multitude of stylistic expressive means are applied in order to get the intended messages through in the most effective way. Such evidence would have important consequences to the discipline of technical translation.

The intuitive claim is based on three years of full-time translating - mainly of texts within the technical area - and will, I am sure, not come as a surprise to experienced translators working within that field. It is described in Chapters 1 and 2 how translation scholars on the other hand have generally been occupied discussing various kinds of equivalence between the source text and the target text and setting up rigid text typologies. Typologies using Bühler's language functions not to describe the various functions of a text - as originally intended - but as a basis for text classification according to dominant function and by means of which the translator should be able to decide on a suitable translation strategy once a text had been placed in the typology. Translation scholars have mainly been interested in technical language from a terminological point of view. Textual strategies, textual meaning and expressivity (if existence was acknowledged at all) in technical texts were not considered relevant to the translator.

The explicit and especially implicit expressive elements are often disregarded as a result of the traditional focussing on terminology within this area of translation. Consequently, the translation may be less effective/weaker than the original and in the worst case only part of the message - the purely referential one - is passed on.

The approach of the thesis is that of a translation scholar, i.e. the starting point is the various interests and problems of the translator. As advocated by Snell-Hornby (1988) I favour an integrated approach to translation studies where translational research is not considered a sub-discipline of applied linguistics, but as a research area in its own right, using and contributing to results obtained within relevant areas such as linguistics, psychology and philosophy.

2. Summary

Chapter 1 sets out the translation theoretical standpoint of the thesis, namely that of the skopos theory¹ as opposed to the equivalence-based approach to translation theory which prevailed in the 1960s and 70s². The functional purpose of a given translation - instead of the purpose of the source text - is considered the basis for a sound translation strategy.

The chapter, furthermore, describes and evaluates Nord's skopos-oriented approach to textual analysis. Her model of analysis (i.e. her parameters) may not deviate that much from other models; what is new and all-important is her view that textual analysis should be applied as a means of establishing the "function-in-culture" of a source text. This function must then be compared with the prospective function-in-culture of the target text in order for the translator to find out which source text elements have to be preserved, omitted or adapted in translation. In accordance with the skopos theory Nord thus sees the source text as an extremely important basis for decisions regarding the translation of a given text, but not as the basis for an equivalent text in the target language.

With the emergence of the skopos theory it was finally possible to reject the concept of equivalence as a basis for determining translation strategies in favour of the fairly simple assumption that every translation has a skopos and that it is this skopos and not the source text which should lead the way to a suitable translation strategy at the macrolevel. The skopos theory does not, however, provide (and does not claim to provide) solutions at the microlevel. It is of course possible to make certain generalisations about the microlevel, but eventually it is a question of context. Contrary to what is often believed of the skopos theory the source text is still considered very important as a *tertium comparationis* for possible omissions, additions or adaptations in the target text. What the skopos theory offers us is simply awareness of the function of the translation as intended by the initiator of the translation, i.e. in most cases the customer. The skopos theory is a theory, or rather an approach, which is relevant to the translation scholar and which matches the reality of the translation profession of today.

Chapter 2 discusses the traditional view of the translation scholar - and the possible reasons for this view - on technical texts and consequently on technical translation. The discussions of Chapter 2 are central to the main claim of the thesis that technical texts - like texts in general - serve various communicative purposes and are thus not only concerned with the transfer of facts. A **pragmatic** definition of a technical text seen from the professional translator's

¹ See e.g. Vermeer 1989, Nord 1991 and 1997.

² See Snell-Hornby 1988.

point of view is provided. The traditional definition of a technical text as a text within a technical field containing specialised technical terminology is still considered valid, but the very narrow traditional characterisation of the typical technical text (informative function, prevailing syntactic features) is omitted and for present purposes a technical text is defined as a text which is written within a technical subject area and which contains such a degree of specialised technical terminology **that a technical translator is needed for its translation.**

The addition is justified by the fact that due to the technical element of so many texts to be translated today the technical translator is assigned a large number of texts dealing with technical subjects and containing technical terminology, but which are so heterogeneous in nature that classifying them as technical texts and assigning them to the category of informative texts with a limited number of stylistic conventions does not help the translator in the least when laying down a relevant translation strategy. The extension is not a help when trying to classify technical texts, but is necessary for pragmatic reasons.

Though it has been deemed necessary for present purposes to define what is meant by a technical text I generally do not consider a rigid definition of technical texts to be of any use. All texts should first and foremost be considered texts - the fact that a text is written within a certain knowledge area may mean that it possesses certain text type characteristics. However, this is only one important piece of information among many factors relevant to the translator. As concluded in Chapter 2 texts containing technical language are of such a varied nature that translation-oriented text typologies can only be regarded as one tool among others when laying down a suitable skopos-oriented translation strategy.

As pointed out by Newmark (1988:160) terminology only constitutes a minor part of a technical text, "the rest is language". LSP is deeply rooted in common language. For this very reason the discipline of textual analysis is not only needed for non-LSP texts, but for all texts to be translated. Instead of the artificial boundaries between various areas of translation, any text to be translated should be considered a communicative transaction, as stated by Hatim & Mason (1990:2), and focus should be on the intended function of that transaction.

Finally, a text purpose model is presented outlining the non-referential purposes of technical company texts to be translated.

Chapter 3 suggests that the non-referential purposes are often fairly subtle in technical texts and manifest themselves by means of expressive features. These purposes may be elicited by means of textual analysis and subsequent contextual interpretation of the expressive features found. The informative and

the expressive language functions are defined for present purposes and it is pointed out that expressivity is not only found at the level of lexis, but also syntactic stylistic devices are potentially expressive. What is meant by expressive features is explained and illustrations from a mini-corpus of technical texts are provided. One lexical expressive feature - that of isotopy - is dealt with in detail in the semantic analyses of Chapter 9. Furthermore, it is emphasised that it is the sum and interplay of these elements that carry the effect and that the expressive value of each element in isolation may be very insignificant and hard to determine. This is yet another argument for a **textual** approach to translation-oriented text analysis. It is, furthermore, acknowledged that there is a group of hard-core technical texts which are almost exclusively informative. This group is presumably not quantitatively very significant in view of the very competitive environment of the modern company.

Finally, some of the aspects of lexical choice are discussed and the importance of connotations for the elicitation of the non-referential meaning of a text is emphasised.

In Chapter 4 we leave the area of technical texts for a while in order to explain some of the central ideas and concepts of structuralism, especially the British branch, represented by John Lyons. Lyons (see e.g. 1977) has shown how the search for structure in language has resulted in certain patterns being discovered notably within the area of paradigmatic relationships. Patterns which are important for our understanding of the way the referential meaning of lexemes can only be determined by means of their sense relations. It is argued in Chapter 3 that a writer's choice of lexis is central to the translator when trying to elicit the intention of a text which is why the domain of lexical semantics is highly relevant to the thesis.

Chapter 5 explains and criticises Trier's structuralist field theory³. Contrary to the thoughts of Trier gaps and overlaps exist between fields, but though field theory may not hold as a general theory it does not detract from its descriptive value and, furthermore, there is some evidence that semantic fields constitute a psychological reality. Wittgenstein's concept of "blurred edges" is introduced as central to the criticism of field theory. However, most fields have a relatively well-established nucleus on which there is general agreement. The study of fields is important to understand the lexical choices of a writer and thus his lexical strategies, however, the important factor (from a pragmatic point of view) of context - linguistic as well as extralinguistic - is not considered by the field theory.

Chapter 6 discusses and criticises traditional componential analysis. Componential analysis was developed in the post-Saussurean structuralist tradition

³ See e.g. Lyons 1977.

and has many affinities with field theory and in a way presupposes field theory though it was developed independently. In Chapter 6 the theory of prototypology⁴ is introduced as a feasible alternative to the rigid classical Aristotelian way of categorising on which some parts of field theory and componential analysis rest. Prototypology makes use of the notion of semantic components for the description of prototypical features, i.e. features which may but need not be there in order to include a particular lexeme in a semantic field. That is, prototype theory does not claim to be able to provide an exhaustive analysis of a lexeme by adding its semantic components, but rather a description of its prototypical features and thus helps us account for both typical features and fuzziness and borderline cases. Very important for the semantic analysis of Chapter 9 prototypology does not restrict itself to inherent lexical features, but allows for contextual features as well. Thus, prototypology is a feasible alternative to traditional componential analysis, especially as we cannot do without encyclopedic and contextual knowledge when analysing the meaning of real-life texts.

In Chapter 7 the phenomenon of isotopy, i.e. a textual chain of lexemes sharing the same semes, is introduced. Isotopy is generally considered a cohesive device, but within translation theory it may be interesting as a tool for establishing the intention of a source text. Especially chains at the expressive level are interesting in the present context as they may provide us with information about the more or less implicit objectives of a technical text. The nature of the analyses require the inclusion of inherent as well as contextual semes and consequently the definition of isotopy must be extended accordingly. The principle of contradiction and the notions of analytic and synthetic propositions are explained as they will be used to distinguish between inherent and contextual semes.

Chapter 8 is an introduction to the subsequent analyses. It makes a distinction between cognitive, idiosyncratic meaning and shared lexical meaning, the latter making it feasible to embark upon a semantic description of lexemes. The chapter briefly suggests what happens in the mind of the reader when reading a text and how the mental representation of a subject may gradually be changed as attitudes are expressed by means of isotopic semes (or other expressive elements) working together and building up a chain as the text proceeds. The model of analysis is explained.

In order to provide linguistic evidence for the existence of expressivity in technical texts, “isotopic chains” has been chosen as a lexical expressive feature of great importance when trying to elicit the intended meaning of a text. When trying to establish the isotopic chains of a technical text to be translated,

⁴ See e.g. Rosch 1973 and 1978 and Lakoff 1987.

we investigate the lexical choices - and their associated connotations - of the text. We could say that isotopic chains point at the skopos of the source text. A thorough semantic analysis of a technical text (from the Danish power station association ELSAM) is carried out in [Chapter 9](#) in search for isotopic chains at the non-referential level of the text in question.

[Chapter 10](#) states and discusses the results of the analyses. 17 features are used to describe 51 lexemes in context and evidence has been found for the existence of the following intuitively postulated isotopic chains:

1. ELSAM is large and efficient
2. ELSAM cares about the environment
3. ELSAM is good at cooperating
4. ELSAM cares about the consumer

Each of the chains is represented by 7 to 26 positive values and it applied to all four isotopic chains that positive values are present for each isotopy in at least four (and up to eight) out of nine possible paragraphs.

On the basis of the above I can thus conclude that the analyses support the main hypothesis of the thesis and contribute to the understanding of isotopy as a concrete phenomenon which can be analysed and pointed out in a text and of the fact that it is a crucial tool for the interpretation of a text.

[Chapter 11](#) provides a final conclusion to the thesis along with didactic and research perspectives.

3. Didactic Consequences

I consider the skopos theory a valuable starting point when trying to make students **aware** of the fact that most texts - be they LSP texts or non-LSP texts - are multifunctional, i.e. serve communicative purposes at the expressive as well as the informative level and that as far as possible **all** messages in a text relevant for the skopos of the target text must be rendered by the translator.

It seems fair to assume that the notion of isotopy, as narrowed down in the thesis, will reveal new aspects of a technical text to the recently graduated or student translator and will provide him with a new approach to the understanding of a text also at the expressive level. Isotopic chains, furthermore, emphasise the importance of working on a textual basis.

As to textual analysis it may seem a tedious business to the student translator, but it is imperative that he gain active knowledge about the subject in order to be able to draw on this knowledge as a professional translator. It has then hopefully become second nature and only very difficult texts will need a more thorough analysis.

4. Research Perspectives

The model of analysis worked out for the establishing of isotopic chains in a text is fairly time-consuming to use. This is of course the reason why only one exemplary analysis was carried out. It may be possible in future to modify/tighten up the model in order to be able to carry out analyses which would also be quantitatively significant. Furthermore, much research is needed on many aspects of the complex nature of the intuitively based phenomenon of isotopy.

As to the expressive elements, other than isotopic chains, of technical texts it might be useful to be able to say something general about the potential function of some of the most used types, though as pointed out above their function is eventually highly context-dependent. Also, it would be interesting to further investigate the concept of “technical text” and to analyse other LSP texts than technical texts at the expressive level.

5. Concluding Remarks

Much has happened within translation theory during the past decades and though some of the quotations of the thesis show that many scholars still consider technical translation to be a semi-automatic transfer of facts an even larger number of scholars have become interested in the creativity and expressive language of technical and LSP texts. In short, in the fact that all texts in one language explore and exploit the same linguistic systems and no text type holds a monopoly on creativity or certain stylistic devices.

Semantics has much to offer the translator and the translation scholar. As long as one remembers that it is not the meaning of individual lexemes in isolation which is important here, but the meaning of the **text in context**.

“...the translation scholar has to be a semanticist over and above everything else. But by semanticist we mean a semanticist of the text not just of words, structures and sentences. The key concept for the semantics of translation is textual meaning.” (Neubert in Bell 1991:79)

The thesis concludes with an appendix consisting of the texts on which the analyses of the thesis are based.

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