

RELEVANCE THEORY AND TRANSLATION

An Introduction to Relevance Theory

In 1986, D. Sperber & D. Wilson published their book, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, in which they proposed relevance theory. Relevance Theory (RT) is the development of Grice's Relevance Maxim and is regarded as the most important and influential cognitive pragmatic theory in recent years.

RT provides us with a new approach to pragmatics, which attempts to answer not only philosophical question about the nature of communication, but also psychological question about how the interpretation process unfolds in the hearer's mind. RT focuses on both human communication and cognition.

In the framework of RT, utterance comprehension is not just a mechanical decoding process, but an intelligent activity involving reasoning and imagination.

From the communicator's end, to communicate is to overtly claim an individual's attention with the implication that the information communicated is relevant.

From the hearer's point of view, to understand an utterance is to recover the overtly intended interpretation through inferential process.

After the proposal of RT, many papers and books, both abroad and at

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home, concerning with it and its applications came into being. From the late 1980s, some scholars at home began to introduce RT and its application. Shen Jiaxuan, Zhang Yafei, Lin Kenan, He Ziran, Liu Shaozhong et al are the first ones to publish papers about relevant aspects of this theory.

Application of RT in Translation

The criterion for translation is the key factor in translation theory and is also the standard to criticize whether the translation is good or not. Different translation theorists have advanced different theories according to their own points of view. S&W proposed their influential RT from the cognitive point of view in 1986.

Then in 1991, Ernst-August Gutt applied RT to translation study and put forward his famous relevance-theoretic translation approach. Though RT is not meant for translation, it is powerful in accounting for translation, which is the “most complex phenomenon in the evolution of cosmos”.

Gutt, in his book, *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*, presents the interpretation of translation and gives us a new recognition of it (Zhao Yanchun, 1999:273).

RT is concerned with language communication. In Gutt’s point of view, translation is a special form of communication, which involves three parts: the original author, the translator and the target language text reader, thus it should follow the general rule of communication — RT.

Therefore in the framework of RT, translation is also a process of ostensive-inferential communication. Because translation concerns with two languages and cultures as well as the author, translator and reader,

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this ostensive-inferential process constitutes two processes of communication.

And the difference caused by intercultural and intralingual communication combined with the intervention of translator make the situation more complex (Lin Kenan, 1994:7).

In translation, the translator must make inference according to the ostensive behavior of the original author and get the efficient contextual effect on one hand, and on the other he has to show his understanding of the original author's intention ostensively to the target language text reader so that the reader can make inference and get contextual effect. The two communication processes are not static but dynamic, inevitably being affected by the cognitive psychology of the three parts.

In order to get correct and efficient contextual effect, the translator should choose code according to the intention of original author and the cognitive environment of target language text reader. Only in this way can he find out optimal relevance between the translation and context.

The ultimate goal for translation, as is assumed by Gutt (1991), is its optimal relevance to the source language text as well as the target cultural context on which the contextual assumptions are built. As a communicator, the translator must perform his duty — to match the source language text communicator's intention with the target language text reader's expectation.

The inferential nature of translation ask the translator to use his inferential abilities (with the help of lexical, logical and encyclopedic information) to make contextual assumptions and get the optimal relevance in translation and then the translation can achieve the

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interpretive resemblance between relevant aspects.

In the perspective of RT, translation is a dynamic process. So we cannot simply say which translation method is better than the other. The translator should use various methods according to particular translation purpose, the text typology and the specific context. But the most important thing is that the method the translator uses in certain context must accord with the optimal relevance, that is to say, to achieve adequate contextual effects on the target language text reader's part without unnecessary processing effort.

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