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Exploiting Relevance Theory Findings in Translation

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Abstract: *This research is an attempt to investigate the applicability of the Relevance- Theoretic framework in the field of translation. Relevance Theory was developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson; it is a theory of a cognitive communication that proposes a set of concepts that govern the process of intralingual interpretation of utterances and texts. Thus, we aim to explore the findings of Relevance Theory in studying the process of interpretation in translation at an interlingual level so as to see to what extent can the translator rely on Relevance Theory interpretation framework to provide the target reader with a translated text that realizes optimal relevance and contextual effects without making him expending unnecessary processing efforts.*
Keywords: *Contextual Effects, interpretation, Optimal Relevance, Relevance, Processing Effort, Translation.*

الملخص: تندرج نظرية الملاءمة التي أرسى قواعدها كل من دان سبيربير **Dan Sperber** و**Deirdre Wilson**ديردري ويلسون في إطار التداوليات المعرفية. يرى الباحثان أنّ نجاح العملية التواصلية بين المرسل والمتلقي مرتبط بمدى نجاح المرسل في مدّ المتلقي بنصّ يحقق له مبدأ الملاءمة. تروم هذه الدّراسة البحث في إمكانية الاستفادة من المفاهيم التي أتت بها نظرية الملاءمة في ميدان الترجمة ذلك أن الترجمة تعدّ فعلا تواصليا يتم بين كاتب النصّ الأصل والمترجم والقارئ الهدف. سنركز في هذا البحث على العملية التأويلية ذلك أنّها تشكل قطب الرحى في العملية الترجمية، وهي التي تحسم مآلاتها في نجاح الترجمة أو فشلها. وعليه سيتم البحث، من خلال مجموعة من الأمثلة التطبيقية، في المنهجية التي يعتمد عليها المترجم في تأويل النصّ الأصل الذي يكون في بعض الأحيان قابلا لعدّة تأويلات. يتعين على المترجم، استنادا إلى نظرية الملاءمة، انتقاء التأويل المناسب من ضمن مجموعة التأويلات المتاحة، ثمّ العمل على إعادة صياغة ذلك التأويل في نصّ هدف يحقق آثارا سياقية،

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بمعنى نصّ هدف لا يجعل القارئ الهدف يبذل جهودا غير ضرورية في المعالجة والتحليل من أجل التوصل بمقاصد الكاتب الأصل، وبهذا يحقق النصّ الهدف الملاءمة للقارئ الهدف.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الآثار السياقية، التأويل، الترجمة، الملاءمة، الملاءمة المثلى،جهود المعالجة.

1. Introduction

Interpretation constitutes the core of the translation process; therefore, many scholars and theorists stress the importance of the interpretation process (the Interpretive Theory for example) in achieving an effective translation. Different branches of Linguistics have contributed significantly to provide translation studies with a set of concepts and frameworks to address the different problems that may arise during the translation process. Relevance Theory (henceforth referred to as RT) is a pragmatic theory developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986). It aims at studying human communication by combining both cognition and pragmatics. Ernst-August Gutt was the first scholar who tried to apply RT in the field of translation. In fact, he proposed a Bible translation based on RT findings (Translation and Relevance, 1991).

RT proposes a set of concepts in studying intralingual communication which includes "the principle of relevance" that constitutes the core of RT. We may mention also other concepts such as "context", "contextual effects", "processing efforts", "optimal relevance", "strong implicatures", "weak implicatures", "interpretive use of language", and "interpretive resemblance". In addition to the set of concepts proposed within RT, Sperber and Wilson stress the importance of inference in understanding utterances and texts. Thus, a decoding process is not enough as it should be enriched by inferences in order to arrive at the intended interpretation. Given the fact that translation is an act of communication, the aim of this study is to investigate the applicability of the theoretical framework proposed by RT in the field of translation.

We aim in this research to demonstrate that RT can provide a sound basis for the process of translation and it can help the translator select the plausible interpretation among a range of available ones. We try in this study to explore the findings of RT at an interlingual level of communication, i.e. translation which involves two different languages and two different cultures. Thus, we are going to explain the main concepts of RT in studying intralingual communication. Then, we attempt to apply them in translation through some examples to see to what extent the translator is able to rely on RT framework during the process of interpretation to select the plausible interpretation that assists him/her to provide the target reader with an effective translation.

2. Relevance Theory (RT)

RT asserts that the interpretation process of linguistic communication is dependent on the use of contextual information. It has also helped to distinguish two models of communication – a code model and an inferential model – and provided evidence that verbal communication always has an inferential element and is never achieved by coding alone (Sperber and Wilson, 1986).

According to RT, human communication is an ostensive-inferential phenomenon. The terms ostensive and inferential describe two complementary aspects of the same process of communication. It is an ostensive process because the communicator provides

evidence of his informative intention in form of clues while an inferential process means that the audience should rely on the set of clues provided by the communicator to infer what he intends to communicate.

Sperber and Wilson (1986:155) gave the following definition of ostensive-inferential communication: "The communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience the set of assumption I". Thus, within the relevance theory framework, people perform distinct processes in linguistic communication in such a way that a message that has been encoded using a set of clues is first decoded and then enriched by inferences to arrive at the intended interpretation of an utterance. In fact, the stimulus (an utterance or a text) is just a set of clues that require interpretation. This means that the understanding of what a communicator says is not just a simple matter of decoding the linguistic units of his message.

3. Main Concepts in RT

3.1 Context

Context is one of the key concepts in RT. Sperber and Wilson (1995: 6-15) offered a new definition of context:

> A context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world... A context in this sense is not limited to information about the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterances: expectations about the future, scientific hypotheses or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker, may all play a role in interpretation.

Thus, the notion of context given by Sperber and Wilson is totally different from the traditional notion which considers the context as a grammatical notion consisting of what comes before and after a particular sentence. Context, according to RT, depends on the cognitive environment of the hearer; it consists of the hearer's assumptions about the world. Even though the external setting is an important factor in determining what contextual assumptions the hearer or reader will use to interpret an utterance or a text, it is not the only source form which the hearer can draw contextual assumptions (Kevin Gary Smith, 2000:39).

Ernest Gutt (1991: 21) claims that a person's cognitive environment: "*includes information that can be perceived in the physical environment, information that can be retrieved from memory... and information that can be inferred from these two sources".* According to RT, the context is a set of assumptions in the hearer's or reader's mind. Therefore, the context is not given but chosen. When it comes to interpreting an utterance or a text, the hearer or the reader has a wide range of information that can be used in setting the appropriate context from a range of potential contexts.

Concerning the selection of the appropriate context, Sperber and Wilson (1986:141) say:" The selection of a particular context is determined by the search of relevance". According to Sperber and Wilson, the relevance of a new assumption is determined by the

amount of contextual effects that a hearer or reader can gain in the specific context in which the new assumption is processed.

3.2 Contextual Effects

In an ostensive-inferential communication the communicator ostensively manifests his/her communicative intention whereas the audience makes an effort in processing the stimulus in order to infer what was communicated. Contextual effects constitute the outcomes of the interaction between a new piece of information and the existing assumptions within the cognitive environment of a hearer or a reader.

The interaction may contribute to the improvement of the hearer's cognitive environment; it may enhance and strengthen an existing assumption by providing more evidence, or it may eliminate an existing assumption, or the new piece of information may interact through inference with existing assumptions to produce a new assumption (Matsui, 2000:27).

3.3 Processing Efforts

Processing efforts refer to the efforts required in processing new information to the point that the hearer or reader could derive its cognitive effects (Nicholas Allot, 2013:7). Processing efforts are the mental efforts the hearer or the reader expends to derive contextual effects. However, the hearer or the reader expends more processing efforts as the stimulus is less relevant. The amount of processing efforts differs from one stimulus to another; a complex sentence, for example; requires more processing efforts than a simple sentence, and uncommon word requires also more processing efforts than a common one (Forster & Chamber, 1973).

Example:

A: John has two brothers and two sisters.

B: John has four siblings.

Processing sentence (B) makes the reader, who is not familiar with the word 'sibling', expending more efforts to understand the sentence (gain contextual effect). On the other hand, sentence (A) does not require considerable effort to be understood (the words brother and sister are more common than the word sibling). Thus, the reader expends less effort in processing sentence (A) than sentence (B). Hence, we say that the reader achieves relevance through sentence (A) and not sentence (B).

3.4. The Principle of Relevance

Sperber and Wilson state that human communication is governed by the principle of relevance in a way that a speaker, by producing an utterance, intends to convey a message that attracts the attention of the hearer. Nevertheless, it is not worth, for the hearer, paying attention to an act of ostensive communication that does not bring new information to his/her cognitive environment or in other words, information that is not relevant to the hearer.

This means that the speaker or the writer who seeks to grab the hearer's attention should produce a stimulus (an utterance or a text) that is consistent with the principle of relevance. Sperber and Wilson (1986:156) claim that "... an act of ostensive

communication automatically communicates a presumption of relevance". A piece of information is considered relevant to an individual when it's processing in a context of available assumptions yields a positive cognitive effect, i.e. a worthwhile difference to the individual's representation of the world (Sperber and Wilson, 2002: 251).

To sum up, new information is relevant to the recipient if it introduces some changes in his cognitive environment, i.e. achieving more contextual effects without making him expending more processing efforts.

3.5. Optimal Relevance

When a speaker or a writer sends a message to a hearer or a reader; the later undertakes an interpretive task in which he seeks to select the appropriate interpretation from the range of interpretations that the stimulus has in the current context. Sperber and Wilson (1986:158) say: "every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance". They state also that a stimulus is optimally relevant to an audience only if:

- It is relevant enough to be worth the audience's processing effort.
- It is the most relevant one compatible with a communicator's abilities and preferences. (Sperber and Wilson, 2002: 256).

Thus, when it comes to interpreting an utterance or a text, the hearer or the reader will expend less processing efforts in constructing an interpretation of an utterance or a text. Once his expectations are fulfilled, he stops the process of interpretation, and selects the interpretation that best satisfy the expectation of relevance. In fact, the selected interpretation depends on two conditions:

- An assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the positive cognitive effects achieved when it is optimally processed are large.
- An assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the effort required to achieve these positive effects is small. (Francisco Yus, 2009: 756).

4. Application of RT 'Framework in Translation

Translation is an act of communication at an interlingual level. It involves two different linguistic systems and the most important two different cultures. Hence, the translator may encounter linguistic and cultural problems during the process of translation. Concerning the cultural background, the translator has to familiarize himself/herself with the target culture. Given the fact that translation is not just a simple substitution of a set of linguistic units from one linguistic system to another one, the translator should be aware of the discrepancy between what is linguistically encoded and what is communicated. Therefore, the translator, relying on the relevance- framework, should first undertake a decoding process of the source text. Taking into account the context, s/he should then make inferences to grasp the communicated meaning of the source text, and at a final stage s/he has to convey the communicated meaning of the source text in a form that should be consistent with the rules and the conventions of the target language.

Through the following translated examples, we are going to explore the findings of RT in translation, and demonstrate to what extent the translator can rely on RT framework to provide the target reader with a translated text that achieves the principle of relevance, i.e. a translated text that does not make the target reader expend considerable efforts in processing the target text in order to understand it (gain contextual effects), and opting for the plausible interpretation of the source text. Thus, we can say that the translated text achieves the principle of relevance.

4.1 Analysis of the examples:

Example N°1:

Let's consider the following advertisement by London transport:

Less bread. No jam (Francisco Yus, 2013: 763).

In order to translate this advertisement, relying on RT, the translator should follow two basic steps during the interpretation process. He should start considering all the available interpretations, and then he should opt for the interpretation that fulfils his expectation of relevance. This is how the process of interpretation, through inference, takes place within the RT theoretical framework.

Thus, the first accessible interpretation:

"London Transport is offering something that involves less bread and no jam, probably some type of food". If the translator relies on this interpretation in translating the above advertisement, he will not provide the target reader with an effective translation:

السفر مع وسائل النقل في لندن: قليل من الخبز ولا مربى.

So, the translator should not stop considering other interpretations because this one is not consistent with the principle of relevance; it makes the target reader expend processing efforts without gaining contextual effects (understanding the advertisement). This translation creates confusion: how can we combine transportation with food.

Given the fact that the first interpretation does not fulfil the principle of relevance, the translator should consider other interpretations to work out the meaning of the advertisement. In fact, relying on the available context, the translator can construct the following interpretation:

"Less bread. No jam"; the word bread means "money" in informal English; hence, "jam" means no traffic jams. So, the communicated meaning is that London Transports offers a service which costs less and involves no traffic jams. This interpretation is relevant even though it requires more mental effort for the translator. Thus, the translator should undertake an interpreting process in which he should select the interpretation that meets the principle of relevance, and then translates this interpretation into the target language.

The translation of the advertisement into Arabic would be:

سافر بأقل الأسعار وبدون ازدحام مع خطوط النقل في لندن.

This translation is consistent with the principle of relevance; it does not make the target reader expend great processing efforts, and it brings new information to his cognitive environment.

Example N°2:

The British tourists prefer travelling to the **continent** to spend their summer holiday.

The word-by-word translation of this sentence into Arabic:

يفضل السيّاح البريطانيين السفر إلى القارة من أجل قضاء عطلتهم الصيفية.

This translation is based on the first accessible interpretation based on a decoding process. In fact, the translation of the word "continent" by "القارة" leads to ambiguity because this translation is just a decoding of the word continent. The target reader (Arabic) will wonder about the word continent which continent is meant by the sentence. This means that the target reader has to expend great efforts in processing the translated sentence. However, if the translator had constructed another interpretation, s/he would have given another translation especially for the word "continent" because it is a context-dependent word in British English; it refers to Europe where British citizens go to every year to spend their summer holiday. Thus, the translation of sentence does not achieve relevance to the Arabic reader because it makes him/her expending considerable processing efforts to understand the communicated meaning. In fact, s/he has to look for the meaning of the word " القارة "according to the context of the sentence. Translating the same sentence, depending on the second interpretation, the translation of the same sentence would be:

يفضل السياح البريطانيون السفر إلى أوروبا لقضاء عطلتهم الصيفية.

This translation achieves the principle of relevance because it makes the target reader gaining a contextual effect which will be added to his/her cognitive environment (British people use the word continent to refer to Europe), and without expending large processing efforts. This translation is consistent with the principle of relevance.

Example N°3:

John is going to lead the discussions with the rival companies. He deserves to represent the company; he is an **owlish man**.

The translation, based on the first interpretation, into Arabic would be:

سيتولى السيد جون إدارة المفاوضات مع الشركات المنافسة. إنه جدير بتمثيل شركته فهو شخص ذو طبع حاد وصعب.

The problem with this translation lies in the translation of the expression ‘an owlish man’ by: **شخص ذو طبع حاد و صعب**

The translation into Arabic shows that the translator has relied on the first accessible interpretation which leads him/her to construct the meaning of the expression "an owlish man" depending on the physical appearance of an owl which gives rise to a wrong interpretation, and the result was a literal translation. This translation does not achieve the principle of relevance because it provides the target reader with a wrong interpretation. The target sentence it is not ambiguous even though its contextual effects are not positive. According to RT, relevant assumption should achieve positive cognitive effects when it is

processed (Francisco Yus, 2013:756)."An owlish man " is a cultural expression in British English, hence; the translator should construct another interpretation: an owlish man is someone who has wisdom and good sense. To meet the principle of relevance and produce positive contextual effects, the translator should be aware that the expression "An owlish man "is a cultural expression and it should be rendered by its equivalent expression in the Arabic culture (**شخص حكيم**)**.** Thus, this translation will be consistent with the principle of relevance and introduces a new cultural information to the cognitive environment of the translator and then to those of the target readers.

The translation that is consistent with relevance would be:

سيتولى السيد جون إدارة المفاوضات مع الشركات المنافسة. إنه جدير بتمثيل شركته فهو شخص يتحلى بالحكمة.

Example N°4:

He has been gone through a harrowing experience. He was **as cool as a cucumber**.

Translating this sentence relying on the first interpretation, based on a decoding process, will lead to a literal translation that does not produce any contextual effect for the target reader. The translation would be:

لقد مرّ بتجربة مريرة ومع ذلك مازال مثل الخيار الطازج.

This translation is nonsense. The source sentence depends totally on punctuation; the use of the particle (**مع ذلك**) shows the contrast between the two clauses but the translation of the idiomatic expression: "as cool as cucumber" is wrong. Thus, this translation is not relevant to the target reader.

In translating this sentence, the translator should look for the interpretation that best conveys the communicated meaning. First, there is a contrast between the two clauses, and then s/he, as a translator, has to wonder about the connection between a harrowing experience and a cool cucumber. At this level, s/he will find out that the intended meaning of "as cool as cucumber" is not a literal meaning. Thus, to provide the target reader with a relevant translation, s/he will look for the equivalent expression in Arabic or at least paraphrasing the meaning in Arabic.

The translation would be:

لقد مرّ بتجربة مريرة إلا أنّه واجهها برباطة جأش.

The second interpretation enables the translator to provide the target reader with a translation that is consistent with the principle of relevance.

Example n°5:

The following examples are extracts from the novel ‘the lady and the gypsy’ of David Herbert Lawrence translated into Arabic by Khaled Haddad and Zaki Al Ustah.

I am fined one guinea. And I with that I **wash the ashes out of my hair** (Lawrence 2005: 29).

أنا محكوم بغرامة جنيه وبذلك أنفض الرماد عن شعري.

This translation by Khaled Haddad is a literal translation that is based on the first accessible interpretation, and it does not meet the principle of relevance because it makes

the target reader expend large processing efforts to understand the communicated meaning. The problem with this translation lies within the translation of the expression **'I wash the ashes out of my hair'.** In fact**,** this expression is a biblical allusion, hence the translator should have taken into account that he is translating to Arabic readers who are in majority Muslims, and are not familiar with such biblical expressions.

'The lady and the gypsy' has also been translated by Zaki Al Ustah who translated differently the same sentence:

a) I am fined one guinea. And I with that I **wash the ashes out of my hair** (Lawrence 2005: 29).

أتغرم جنيها واحدا وبذلك أكفر عن ذنبي.

This translation achieves the principle of relevance because the translator succeeded in conveying the communicated meaning of the expression 'I **wash the ashes out of my hair'.** He paraphrased the meaning of the biblical allusion by:

وبذلك أكفر عن ذنبي

This translation makes the target reader gain contextual effects (understanding the meaning of the biblical allusion) without expending considerable processing efforts. The second translation is consistent with relevance whereas the first one is just a literal translation. Thus, in some cases, and to meet the principle of relevance which is assessed in terms of contextual effects and processing efforts, the translator should be aware of context-dependent words and expressions.

b) So, a woman could eat her cake and have her bread and butter (Lawrence, 2005: 65).

The translation of Khaled Haddad:

هكذا كانت المرأة بإمكانها أن تأكل كعكتها وتحافظ على خبزها وزبدتها.

The translation of Zaki Al-Ustah:

وهكذا تستطيع المرأة أن تستمتع، وتضمن حظها من الرزق.

Khaled Haddad' translation is based on his first accessible interpretation which depends on a simple process of decoding. He just substituted each English word for its corresponding word in Arabic. This translation produces no positive contextual effects; it does not achieve relevance. The translation of Zaki Al-Ustah meets the principle of relevance because he has not relied on the first accessible interpretation. He tried to construct another interpretation in which he used inference to understand the communicated meaning. In fact, he dealt with the expression "have her bread and butter" as an idiomatic expression; it means: being as basic as the earning of one's livelihood (Merriam-Webster dictionary). Therefore, he succeeded in providing the target reader with a good and a relevant translation.

5. Conclusion

We tried in this study to examine the applicability of the RT findings in translation especially during the process of the interpretation of the source text. Thus, we have analysed some translations from English into Arabic under a Relevance Theory perspective. We have noticed that the translations based on the first accessible

interpretation are to some extent nonsense because the translator depends totally on a decoding process and neglects the inference process.

As a result, such translations are irrelevant, and they do not produce positive contextual effects and make the target reader expend considerable processing efforts in understanding the translated sentences. However, when the translator does not rely on the first accessible interpretation and tries to construct other interpretations and selects the interpretation that meets the principle of relevance, he will succeed in providing the target reader with good translations. Given the fact that a good translation depends mainly on the process of interpretation of the source text, RT framework constitutes a solid foundation that can help the translator to select the plausible interpretation among a range of available ones. Thus, the translator should select the interpretation that makes him/her understand the communicated meaning without expending large processing efforts. S/he, in turn, will have to provide the target reader with a target text that meets the principle of relevance.

Contextual effects, relevance, and processing efforts are the main concepts that we have tried to explore in this study. Through the examples that we have analysed, it can be said that RT offers a reliable framework for the interpretation process. Therefore, the translator can apply the findings of RT in order to select the interpretation that fulfils the principle of relevance especially with source texts that are open to multiple interpretations such as literary texts.

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