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Approximation strategies for explaining text comprehension processes in translation theory

ABSTRACT

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This article outlines the two (only seemingly competing) theoretical approaches operative so far in translation theory to explain text comprehension processes. First, it gives a short description of the hermeneutic approach and the analytic approach. Then, it explains how both approaches can be linked together on the base of the translation-oriented text analysis scheme from Nord. The article ends with an overview of the benefits from this linkage for translation didactics and practice, including CAT-tools and MT.

Keywords: textual meaning, textual understanding, hermeneutics, behaviourism, translation-oriented text analysis

Preliminary reflections

When we speak of translation, the key facet of this human activity is the transfer of a certain content in the form of a text from one language into another. We consider texts to be multidimensional cultural objects ("mehrdimensionale Kultur-gegenstände", Lux 2014: 51), as from a theoretical perspective, it is impossible to capture and describe all text dimensions in one single theory:

> […] der Aspektenreichtum von Texten [kann] nicht durch eine einzige Theorie beschrieben und erklärt werden […], sondern nur durch mehrere Theorien, die jeweils ganz spezifische Aspekte von Texten abbilden […]. (Heinemann / Viehweger 1999: 276)

As a consequence of the multidimensional character of texts, it is not possible to transfer all of its dimensions into a translation. In any case, priority has to be given to textual meaning.

Shift of focus: from textual meaning to textual understanding

Textual meaning in itself is a phenomenon that is not verifiable on the intersubjective level, because there are no direct objective criteria to exactly determine the meaning of a text.[1] The only way of capturing textual meaning would be introspection, but Albrecht explains that for scientific purposes, introspection cannot be a useful method in most studies: "Bedeutungen können so, wie sie sich dem Menschen unmittelbar darbieten, nämlich als Inhalte des eigenen Bewußtseins, nicht als Gegenstände wissenschaftlicher Untersuchungen zugelassen werden" (Albrecht 2013: 3). He distinguishes between two different types of reaction to this problem (ibid.): "Es gibt, je nach wissenschaftstheoretischer Grundüberzeugung, zwei mögliche Reaktionen auf diese Schwierigkeit." Both are based on a shift of focus. Instead of textual meaning, textual understanding gets the objective of investigation.

Language as a social phenomenon

The starting point for both approaches to theoretically capture the functioning of textual understanding lies in the fact that language as the central instrument of human communication is a social phenomenon. Schleiermacher (1838: 213/214) describes the twofold nature of language, that on the one hand is bound to public traditions of expression, but on the other hand can be transformed by any individual who, by taking part in communication, takes influence (more or less unconsciously) in the process of transforming language traditions:

> Jeder Mensch ist auf der einen Seite in der Gewalt der Sprache, die er redet; er und sein ganzes Denken ist ein Erzeugnis derselben. Er kann nichts mit völliger Bestimmtheit denken, was außerhalb der Grenzen derselben läge; die Gestalt seiner Begriffe, die Art und die Grenzen ihrer Verknüpfbarkeit ist ihm vorgezeichnet durch die Sprache, in der er geboren und erzogen ist; Verstand und Fantasie sind durch sie gebunden. Auf der anderen Seite aber bildet jeder freidenkende geistig selbstthätige Mensch auch seinerseits die Sprache. […] In diesem Sinne also ist es die lebendige Kraft des einzelnen, welche in dem bildsamen Stoff der Sprache neue Formen hervorbringt, ursprünglich nur für den augenblicklichen Zweck ein

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1| In this context, Albrecht (2013: 2) mentions: "Die Unmöglichkeit der direkten Beobachtung von Bedeutung bzw. die Unmöglichkeit, intersubjektiv verifizierbare Kriterien für die Bestimmung der Bedeutung anzugeben."

vorübergehendes Bewußtsein mitzutheilen, von denen aber bald mehr bald minder in der Sprache zurückbleibt und von andern aufgenommen weiter bildend um sich greift.

Albrecht (2005: 36) points out that in human communication these two essential characteristics of language cannot be separated from each other, but for theoretical purposes it is possible to focus either on those communication aspects linked to the individual use of language, taking the human being as bearer of language, or to its collective function. In the latter case, language itself becomes the object of investigation (cf. Albrecht 2005: 25).

Theories explaining the mechanism of textual understanding

From this two types of language functions derive two different theoretical approaches of dealing with the issue of textual understanding: The hermeneutic approach, based on the subject-driven perspective on language, and the analytic approach, taking language as an object of investigation (cf. Albrecht 2005: 33; Albrecht 2013: 3/4).

a) Hermeneutic approach

Albrecht (2013: 3) defines hermeneutics as a general theory of understanding ("allgemeine Theorie des Verstehens") that developed from the reflections on the art of text exegesis ("Kunst der Auslegung von Texten", ibid.).

Similar to Albrecht, Grondin (2001: 33) speaks of hermeneutics as a theory ("Theorie der Interpretation") that aims to explain the meaning of an object (text): "Das Interpretieren ist somit ein Verständlichmachen oder ein Übersetzen von fremdem Sinn in Verständliches […]" (Grondin 2001: 34).

The generally known model of the hermeneutic circle has been transformed in several different ways, because the investigative focus changed, moving from the individual subject and its text reception in general to the fact that a text can be received from a single individual several times. This leads to different interpretations in each case, as the reader's horizon of understanding expands and changes. With Spaller (1999) we have to take into consideration as well that every text can be read and therefore understood by various readers. Both aspects together – the individual that reads a text several times and the variable number of readers of a text – result in a potentially unlimited number of text interpretations (thought of as "inner translations"): „Ein Text als festgelegte Kombination von Worten wird zum Ausgangspunkt für unendlich viele Texte" (Spaller 1999: 74). Therefore, the former circular model can be "opened", and in translation studies the concept of interpretations as "inner translations" can be understood as translation per se:

text 1 (moment 1) => reader 1 (translator) => interpretation => text 1' (transla-
tion) => reader new (translator) => interpretation => text 1'$^{(new)}$ (translation) =>…
text 1 (moment 2) => reader 2 (translator) => interpretation => text 1" (translation)
=> reader new (translator) => interpretation => text 1"$^{(new)}$ (translation) =>…

Summing up, textual meaning understood in its pure and independent es-
sence, consists of the intention of the author as well as all potentially possible
interpretations of all potential readers. Therefore, by replacing the circular model
by a linear multi-level model, it is possible to broaden the focus, passing from the
interconnection (Gadamer speaks of "dialogue" in *Wahrheit und Methode* (1986))
between the author and the individual reader at a given time to the concept of
a readership, consisting of an unspecified number of individuals that receive the
text in different moments of their existence. With this theoretical modification,
we are already on the way to bringing both approaches of explaining textual un-
derstanding together, as will be explained more detailed further down.

b) Analytic approach

This approach is based on the main principles of structuralism and behaviourism.
The analytic perspective tries to achieve an approximation to textual understand-
ing by reducing textual complexity (see Albrecht 2013:4). Language is treated as
a phenomenon that can be observed and examined scientifically by observing the
reaction of the readership to a text as a result of comprehension.

With regard to translation, Nida / Taber (1969: 23) state that a successful
translation evokes a reaction equivalent to the reaction of the readership of the
original text:

> Diese Reaktion kann nie völlig gleich sein, dafür sind die kulturellen und histori-
> schen Hintergründe zu verschieden, aber einen hohen Grad von Gleichwertigkeit
> der Reaktionen muß es geben, sonst hat die Übersetzung ihren Hauptzweck verfehlt.

An adequate translation is characterised by functional equivalence between
the translation and the source text, as Reiß / Vermeer (2013: 127/128) explain:

> With regard to the translation of a source text (or any of its elements), adequacy
> shall refer to the relationship between a source text and a target text, where con-
> sistent attention is paid to the purpose (skopos) of the translation process. […]
> On the other hand, equivalence refers to the relationship between two factors
> which have the same value or rank in their respective systems and belong to the
> same category. This leads us to propose the following definition: Equivalence is the
> relationship between a target text and a source text which (can) achieve the same
> communicative function at the same level in the two cultures involved.[2]

2| German wording of the first publication from 1984: "Adäquatheit bei der Überset-
  zung eines Ausgangstextes (bzw. -elements) bezeichne die Relation zwischen Ziel- und

Therefore, functional equivalence is a precondition for equivalence on the level of the translation's effect on the reader, as well as for an equivalent situation of text reception.

Summing up, the concepts of equivalence and adequacy are the central factors to reach an approximation to textual meaning in the analytic approach, as applied in translation studies.

Comparison of the two approaches

Generally speaking, both approaches focus on different aspects of the complex process of textual understanding. In hermeneutics, the concept of intention forms the centre of investigation in a twofold manner: The intention of the author and the intention of the readers. Therefore, the context and the specific contextualization of a text at a certain point in time, as well as the horizon of understanding of the readers, are the main factors for the examination of textual meaning.

The analytic approach, on the contrary, works on the base of a comparison between the (presumed) reactions of the source text readership and the readership of the translation. Central factors in the investigation of textual meaning in this approach are the concepts of equivalence and adequacy.

Methodological consequences

As we have seen above with Albrecht (2013), both approaches are generally considered to be competing theories. In my opinion this is valid for translation studies in a certain phase of its development, because this field of investigation emerged from different academic disciplines. Therefore, the question of whether translation theories should preferably focus either on the hermeneutic approach or the analytic approach should be seen as an interim problem of translation studies. Nowadays the field of translation studies is transforming into an independent discipline due to the fact that translation studies cannot be merely reduced to the investigation of translations as the result (product) of a human communicative activity, but have to consider this highly complex human practice in itself. Therefore, the field of translation studies will highly benefit from a holistic point of view that intends to connect both approaches to each other and links them

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Ausgangstext bei konsequenter Beachtung eines Zweckes (Skopos), den man mit dem Translationsprozeß verfolgt. […] Äquivalenz bezeichnet demgegenüber eine Relation zwischen zwei Größen, die den gleichen Wert, denselben Rang im je eigenen Bereich haben und derselben Kategorie angehören; in unserem Zusammenhang läßt sich also folgende Definition aufstellen: Äquivalenz bezeichne eine Relation zwischen einem Ziel- und einem Ausgangstext, die in der jeweiligen Kultur auf ranggleicher Ebene die gleiche kommunikative Funktion erfüllen (können)" (Reiß/ Vermeer 1984: 139,140).

together, especially when it comes to multilevel translation modelling and translation didactics. This means all the cases where not only the author of the original or the reader is taken into consideration, but the translator as well, or whenever there is a special focus on the translator's complex tasks and multifunctional role (receptor of the source text, emitter of the translation, contractor/employee, etc.).

Ways of interaction of both approaches

Besides the possibility of amplifying the respective approach on the theoretical level, as described above with Spaller's (1999) idea of opening up of the classical hermeneutic circle and by that including in it not only the individual reader but the readership (thought of as the potential of all possible individual readers), we already find a kind of (implicit) methodological combination of both approaches in the translation related text analysis scheme developed by Christiane Nord.[3]

In her explanations of the theoretical preconditions for such a translation-oriented text analysis, Nord reflects on the role of the translator:

> Professional translators read every new ST [source text] in the light of their experience as critical readers and translators. This experience forms a framework into which they integrate the findings of each new ST reception. In translator training we therefore have to set up the basic structure for such a framework (Nord 2005: 12).

In terms of hermeneutics, we would speak of the *interpretation* framework forming the base of textual understanding. When it comes to capturing the intention of a text, Nord points out that, generally speaking, "the reception of a text depends on the individual expectations of the receivers" (Nord 2005: 17). What has to be understood as the text's intention changes from reader to reader, because the readers' expectations "are determined by the situation in which they receive the text as well as by their social background, their world knowledge, and/or their communicative needs" (ibid.). Due to the fact that every reader perceives the text from her/his personal point of view, it is necessary to distinguish between the author's intention and the reader's intention:

> Receivers cannot […] assume that what they infer from the text is actually the sender's intention. However, even if the sender's intention has been realized unambiguously in the text, receivers may read the text with an intention (or rather, an expectation) of their own, which may be entirely different from that of the sender (Nord 2005: 17).

3| First edition of *Textanalyse und Übersetzen* in 1988, 4th revised edition in 2009, 2nd revised edition in English in 2005: *Text Analysis in Translation: Theory, Methodology and Didactic Application of a Model for Translation-Oriented Text Analysis*; the following considerations are taken from the 2005 edition.

This leads to a potentially infinite number of intentions underlying a text, as its readership consists of a potentially infinite group of receptors, whose intention after reading the text will be potentially different with every new act of perception. When we compare this to the description given above of the opened hermeneutic circle we can see once more that, with slight changes in terminology, there are clear similarities between the 'potentially infinite number of intentions based on the potentially infinite number of acts of reception' and the 'potentially infinite number of interpretations based on the potentially infinite number of reading acts'. In the words of Nord:

> As a product of the author's intention, the text remains provisional until it is actually received. It is the reception that completes the communicative situation and defines the function of the text. We may say that the text as a communicative act is completed by the receiver. […] This leads to the conclusion that a text can be used in as many functions as there are receivers of it (Nord 2005: 18).

Up to this point, we have seen that, if we replace certain analytic key concepts (receiver, intention) in Nord's explanation of the translation-oriented text analysis by hermeneutic concepts (reader, interpretation), we can bring them together. But beyond this conceptual closeness of Nord's text analysis scheme to the hermeneutic approach, her work already bears the nucleus of a fusion of both approaches, present in Nord's distinction between intention, function und effect. In *Text Analysis in Translation* Nord (2005) describes these "three concepts [that] are three different viewpoints of one and the same aspect of communication" as follows:

> It may seem difficult to distinguish the concept of intention from that of function and effect. […] The intention is defined from the viewpoint of the sender, who wants to achieve a certain purpose with the text. But the best of intentions does not guarantee that the result conforms to the intended purpose. It is the receiver who "completes" the communicative action by receiving (i.e. using) the text in a certain function, which is the result of the configuration or constellation of all the situational factors (including the intention of the sender and the receiver's own expectations based on his/her knowledge of the situation). The question "What is S aiming at with the text?" can therefore not be assigned to the factor of text function, […], but belongs to the dimension of intention." […] Text function is defined "externally", before the receiver has actually read the text, whereas the effect the text has on the receiver can only be judged after reception. It is, so to speak, the result of the reception and encompasses both external and internal factors (Nord 2005: 53).

Nord clearly distinguishes between intention, function and effect on the one hand, but brings these concepts together in her analysis scheme on the other, and therefore sets an example of how to merge the central element of the hermeneutic

approach (the author's / the reader's intention) with that of the analytic approach (the effect of an act of communication). The nexus applied by Nord to link them together is the concept of function:

> Ideally, the three factors of intention, function and effect are congruent, which means that the function intended by the sender (=intention) is also assigned to the text by the receiver, who experiences exactly the effect conventionally associated with this function. Methodologically, the three factors have to be distinguished because their separate analysis allows for a different treatment (preservation, change, adaption) in the translation process. If the intention has to be preserved in translation, we must often be prepared for a change in function and/or effect. […] Of course, a sender may well have more than just the one intention. Several intentions can be combined in a kind of hierarchy of relevance. For pragmatic reasons, this hierarchy may have to be changed in translation (Nord 2005: 53).

Nord's method of dealing with the central concepts of both approaches in a clearly differentiated and therefore transparent manner has to be considered as the starting point for bringing both approaches together effectively. Especially from Nord's remark on the "different treatment" of texts during the translation process cited here, we can draw the conclusion that what at first glance might appear to be a mere question of labelling the translator's toolbox with some sophisticated sounding expressions from a theoretical background of free choice, e. g. when talking of 'source texts' instead of 'original texts', etc., is in fact imperative for the reflection on translator's practice, and even plays an important role when it comes to computer assisted translation and machine translation.

Consequences for translation practice and technology

As we have seen in Nord's remarks on the methodological distinction between intention, function and effect, it is important to connect both approaches on the methodological level because this way we can bridge the gap between translation theory and practice. This means that we can better include questions of translation didactics in translation related investigation as well as the professional field, where we especially have to think of the technological tools mentioned above (CAT-Tools and machine translation (MT)).

With regard to translation didactics there are several benefits from teaching both approaches and by that emphasizing their connections. Especially in the initial phase, students usually struggle hard with the problem of how literary they have to translate a text or where they can or even must apply a free version. In familiarizing them with the details of both approaches we provide them with important knowledge on the base of which they can take sound translatoric decisions, because they can systematically analyse the translation situation based on standard schemes

about how to distinguish between the intention of the author, the textual comprehension of the readership, the student's own horizon of textual understanding and the horizon of the ideal translator. Nord (2005: 18) describes the component of textual understanding in the translator's role as a multilevel process:

> Translators receive the text on various levels: (a) on the level of SC [source culture]-competent receivers (in their own [translation] situation), (b) on that of an analyst who puts her or himself in the situation of both the intended ST [source text] receivers and possible real ST receivers, and (c) from the standpoint of a TC [target culture]-competent receiver, reading the ST "through the eyes" of the intended [target text] audience and trying to put her or himself in their shoes as well (Nord 2005: 18).

Due to the complexity of the – continuously transforming – role of the professional translator, students should be enabled to reflect on the different facets of textual understanding to be able to deal with the complexity of all the tasks related to multilingual text-management (as Rösener (2018:199) resumes the new professional profile of the modern 'translator'), as these tasks go far beyond the mere translation process, and to keep pace with the changes in the professional field that in many cases result from technological changes.

When we look at CAT-tools and MT, both translation instruments (partially) produce a kind of text that could be included in the model of the opened hermeneutic circle as introduced above. Generally speaking, CAT-tools work on the base of statistic operations and the contextualization of chunks from the original that are transformed into translation units the computer programme proposes to the translator. MT programmes are already able to process whole texts. Especially the new generation of MT programmes include deep learning algorithms, i.e., structures based on associative operations. This means that computer algorithms are already capable to give approximate results in the communicative area of *intention* and *function*, but they still cannot process those communicative aspects belonging to the area of *effect*. Knowing how the translator's technology-based tools "understand" a text will help to improve the application of those tools in the most effective way.

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