

A Brief Introduction of Relevance Theory Used in Translation Process

Xin Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Beihua University, Jilin, 132013, China

Abstract: *Sperber and Wilson proposed the relevance theory. This idea takes a cognitive approach to human verbal communication. Gutt uses the relevance theory to fully achieve the translation process. In translation, the use of ostentation and inference is crucial. The source text should be examined by the translator using the optimal relevance theory. The author of the translation should convey the author's goal in order to convey to the reader what they should understand about the author of the original text. Applying relevance theory to enhance translation quality is extremely important.*

Keywords: *Relevance theory; Translation process; Optimal relevance; Context*

1. Introduction

In the process of translation, there are many ways to analyze it. Different school has different methods or principles to explain the translation. For example, Yan Fu puts forward faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance. Faithfulness is to obey the meaning of the source text and without adding or reducing the content. Expressiveness explains that the translation work should be easy to understand and can be not the same type as the source text. Elegance shows that the target text should be brief and elegant. The way of choosing the wordings should be elegant. This is just one of the translation theories.

Translation studies is the new academic discipline related to the study of the theory and phenomena of translation. It includes a variety of cultural studies and is multilingual, multidisciplinary, and multifaceted. The process of translation shouldn't be mechanical. In other words, it should be relevant. Relevance theory firstly be discussed by Sperber and Wilson(1986) in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Their student, Gutt(2000), researches the translation process by using relevance theory and publishes a book called *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*. In this book, he takes the lead in applying relevance theory to translation studies and proposes that translation is a verbal communication behavior and an inference process closely related to the brain mechanism. It involves not only codes, but also dynamic inference based on dynamic context, which is based on relevance theory. What should be mentioned is an application of relevance theory to the comprehension of the reasons why certain segments of text may be particularly difficult to translate and to the development of solutions, it is important to adopt an analytical method that combines practical, corpus-based insights into the subject with the theoretical framework designed by Sperber and Wilson.^[1]

In this paper, it will introduce the definition of relevance theory and how the relevance theory is used in translation. There are mainly two stages in the process of translation, which are analyzing the source text and expressing the target text. During the process of translation, we attempt to see what extent the translator is able to rely on relevance theory to select the plausible interpretation that assist him/ her to provide the target reader with an effective translation. In the following, some details will be shown.

2. The Definition of Relevance Theory

Sperber and Wilson put forward the relevance theory in 1986 based on Grice's cooperative principle. This principle is proposed by the philosopher and logician Herbert Paul Grice to explain the course of natural conversation, in which implicated messages are frequently involved. His idea is that in making a conversation, the participants must first of all be willing to cooperate; otherwise, it would not be possible for them to carry on the talk. This general principle is called the Cooperative Principle, CP for

short. It goes as follows: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." To be more specific, there are four maxims under this principle. The maxim of quality, quantity, relevance and manner. However, Sperber and Wilson's principle of relevance is a qualitative one. The principle of relevance is neither a maxim nor a convention nor a theorem but a "generalisation about ostensive communication." The theory of relevance is to lay the foundation for a unified theory of cognitive science. It is at the heart of human cognitive processes. Relevance is a far more radical rethinking of the nature of central cognitive process.^[2]

Sperber and Wilson illustrated two main points. At first, they argue about the process of communication which is code process. Then there is a gap in code process. They finally states that communication is a process of inference. The source and the destination are central thought processes, the encoder and the decoder are linguistic abilities, the message is a thought, and the channel is air which carries an acoustic signal. There are two assumptions underlying this proposal: the first is that human languages, such as Chinese or English, are codes; the second is that these codes associate thoughts to sounds. During this period, the source and destination are speaker and hearer. The code in their mind should be the same. They express their utterances through speaking, more detailed is acoustic signal. The code carries the meaning of the speaker and it is encoded. After being transmitted, the code is decoded. After that, the hearer could know the thought of the speaker and the hearer could give his response or answer to continue the communication. Therefore, language is a code which pairs phonetic and semantic. But here is a problem, there is a gap between the semantic representations of sentences and the thoughts actually communicated by utterances. This gap is filled not with more coding, but with inference. The writer has his own intention. It is the inner mind of a writer who is stimulated by the factors inside or outside, which makes the writer starts his work. After recognizing his intention, the intended effect will be achieved.

The relevance theory is concerned cognition in pragmatics. The theory is developed in the following way. A purely cognitive notion of "manifestness" applies to assumptions which an individual is capable of representing at a given moment as true. The concept of "knowledge" could be analyzed as derivative from this concept meaning "both manifest and true". This allows Sperber and Wilson to appeal to a notion of "mutual manifestness" rather than "mutual knowledge". Mutual manifestness is the state in which the participants have the same assumptions and cognitive ability to make and interpret speeches on the basis of ostensive-inferential process. Relevance is defined as proportional to the amount of contextual effects and inversely proportional to the processing effort required to recover these effects. Under this definition there is no single value for the relevance of a manifest assumption. An individual is free to explore the totality of the assumptions manifest to him. Therefore, communicators should share their same cognitive knowledge in the communication. For instance, a person who conducts research on nuclear weapons converses with a person who has never heard of them. They were unable to consistently discuss nuclear weapons in a positive manner. They don't think similarly on that subject. They are willing to choose a shared interest or subject if they want to communicate with each other. Communication among communicators could be easy if they shared the same mental model. Relevance theory has a significant impact not only on pragmatics but also on other disciplines, particularly translation.

2.1. Main Concepts in Relevance Theory

2.1.1. Context

The relevance theory is depended on 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.^[3] Context, according to relevance theory, depends on the cognitive environment of the hearer; it consists of the hearer's assumptions about the world. The same sentence using in different context could have different meanings.^[4] Context in the process of translation is important. It doesn't only involve the extra environment but also the cognitive environment of the writer.

2.2.2. 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 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:

- a) It is relevant enough to be worth the audience's processing effort.
- b) It is the most relevant one compatible with a communicator's abilities and preferences.

Relevance theory states that the happening of communication is by stimulus. That is what the communicators' topic and utterances. These stimulus lead the reader or the hearer to get the actual meaning that the writer or speaker expresses. Although there are many factors that will influence the effect of understanding, the reader needs to search his cognition in his mind to correspond with the writer. That is optimal relevance. The better the effect of optimal relevance achieved, the better communication will be. The connection between the writer or speaker with the reader or hearer will be smoothly.

What should be mentioned is the audience's process effect. The success of communication depends on whether the speaker and the hearer can find the optimal relevance, that is, the hearer can get the meaning the speaker wants to express.^[5] The meaning the speaker wants to express is worth to the hearer's "efforts" and can get enough "returns". When the speaker or the writer expresses his meanings directly, it is easy for the reader or the hearer to know the meaning. However, if the writer uses some skills to express his ideas, for example, metaphor or exaggeration, it is a little bit difficult for readers to understand. Here, it maybe take little effort to make a relevance with the reader. The communication between the speaker or the writer and the hearer or the reader would achieve little effect. In summary, in order to achieve a good effect of communication, the reader or the hearer should make good effort.

3. Relevance Theory in Translation

Translation puts the act of translating before relevance theory. Some scholars place more emphasis on the style and quality of translation. Additionally, the translation principle is mentioned. Studies on the source text or the target text are done by some people. After that, they assess the translation efforts. For example, adequacy describes the relations between source text and target text as a consequence of observing a skopos during the translation process. Before the emergence of relevance theory, translation theories mostly adopted the method of static description to construct their own translation theories, ignoring the role of brain information processing, and translation was regarded as a binary process between author and translator of the source text. Dualism ignores the cognitive structure and process of readers.^[6] Under such circumstance, Gutt combines the relevance theory with translation.

3.1. Communication Is a Process of Inference

Sperber and Wilson's student, Ernst-August Gutt, researches on translation by using relevance theory. He develops the relevance theory and publishes the book *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*. He proposes a new relevance translation theory, which opens up a new way for translation studies.

Relevance theory emphasizes cognition and communication, and translation relevance theory is no exception. Relevance theory looks at communication from the perspective of competence and tries to explain the application of human brain mechanism in communication. The essence of translation is communication, which highlights the cognitive characteristics of translation and the cognitive abilities of translators and readers. According to Sperber and Wilson, the crucial mental faculty that enables human beings to communicate with one another is the ability to draw inferences from people's behavior. The audience should have the ability to infer what the speaker or the writer means, in the term of relevance theory, that is his informative intention. In the cognitive framework, assumed by relevant theory, linguistic expressions are dealt with first of all by a component or module of the mind that specializes in processing language data.^[7] In translation, the relationship between the writer and the reader can be regarded as one way of communication. The translator stands between them. The translator's task is to seek the best correlation between target language and source language in his own cognitive environment and that of target language readers.^[8] Between the author and the reader, the translator serves as a conduit. The translator should be aware of the writer's inference and allow the true meaning to be accurately conveyed. The writer expresses his thoughts or his intentions. The reader might then understand the writer's intended message.

3.2. Reconstruction of Translation Process by Relevance Theory

Relevance theory regards translation as a kind of cross-language communication in two rounds. In the first round, the author of the original work and the translator constitute the two sides of communication, and the translator forms the cognitive psychological picture of the original work through relevance inference. The second round: the translator and the target reader constitute another communication party, and the translator communicates with the target reader through the cognitive schema he has formed.

3.2.1. Understanding of Source Text

The translator is a special reader for the source text. He reads the source text firstly and then he will translate it to a target text. No matter what school of translation, they all support the idea that the premise of translation is a correct understanding of the source language. The understanding of the source language plays an important role. That will influence the readers' understanding. There are 1000 Hamlets for 1000 readers. What the translator understanding of the writer's intention is determined by the relevance. How to combine relevance theory with translation closely is determined by the level of translator. In order to find the connection between the original text and the context in accordance with the author's express, it is necessary to rely on the translator's encyclopedic knowledge as well as a variety of communicative cues provided by the original text, such as logical information, lexical information, cultural information, and contextual information. Then, it continues with thorough cognition and reasoning to all different types of relevant information to determine the impact of the original text's context. Context should be supplied in this case.

For example, the sentence 'That dog is dirty'. This sentence could be analyzed into different meanings. That can be said that dog is needed to have a shower. Another understanding could be that dog is too pathetic. People don't like it. Therefore, translator should read the source text to know the context in the book. The situation that the things happens. In relevance theory context does not refer to some part of the external environment of the communication partners, be it the text preceding or following an utterance, situation circumstances, cultural factors, etc. In the world of human beings, cognitive in one's mind comprises a large number of varied information. It exists so much information model to deal with different news. When communicators talks about the topic that one has mentioned before, the memory of him could be retrieved. What's more, there are so much information in the translators mind. How to get the actual assumptions from all assumptions from our cognitive environment is necessary. The translator are willing to think about the actual assumption of the writer. To start with, relevance theory will give the translator a better idea of the complexities of meaning of the original, making him/her aware of the difference between the expressed meaning and the intended interpretation.^[9] The aware of explicatures, implicatures and varying degrees of strength of communication is important. The aware of the crucial dependence of that interpretation on the availability of the right contextual information. Finally, the awareness that one's interpretation of the original will only be appropriate to the extent that it is based on a complete knowledge of the original context. During the process of ostensive-inferential, the writer express his idea in a direct way or let his meaning make sense. This is the process of ostensive. Then the translator infer the actual meaning of the writer and rewrite for the reader. This is the process of inference. The whole process of ostensive and inferential plays an important role in the translation period.

Of course, misunderstandings are likely to arise when wrong assumptions are used. Gutt said, for communication to be successful the text or utterance produced must be inferentially combined with the right, that is, speaker-envisaged, contextual assumptions. Let us call communication situations where this condition is fulfilled primary communication situations. However, it can happen -for various reasons- that in interpreting a text an audience may fail to use the contextual assumptions intended by the communicator and perhaps use others instead. Such situations we shall refer to as secondary communication situations, and in most cases they will lead to misinterpretations. Therefore, translators are required to have solid language skills and a good understanding of the social life and communicative habits of the source language. Under the guidance of the principle of optimal relevance, the translator should search for the contextual hypothesis that the author wants his readers to obtain and deduce the communicative effect of the optimal relevance that the author wants his readers to obtain.

3.2.2. Expression of Target Text

The translator should be aware of the difference between what is linguistically encoded and what is communicated since translation involves more than just swapping out a set of linguistic units from one language system to another. As a result, the relevance theory should be used by the translator. He needs

to start by decoding the original text. The translator must draw conclusions in order to understand the communicated meaning of the source text, and at the end of the process, he should express that meaning in a way that complies with the conventions and rules of the target language.

After analyzing the source text, the translator will analyze the communicative intention of the source language author, and the next task is to express the communicative intention of the source language author in the target language. The process of expression is to seek the optimal relevance of the source language in the target language. In the presentation of the translation work, the translator should get the optimal relevance to apply this to it. Different countries have totally different culture. Due to the different background of development, the different cognition of the world can be taken for granted. For example, in America, Christmas is a happy and busy day. The degree of celebration is the same as Spring Festival in China. Therefore, the translator should combine these two different cultures together.

In fact, a translator is also a special author who needs to re-create literary works and consider who the audience is. In order to understand the original works better, the translator needs to make a connection between the source language and the target language with the help of the culture of the reader's own nation. In this way, the author's intention can be truly displayed and the readers can understand the author's real intention to express. For example, when a translator translates the sentence: "It is as significant as a game of cricket.", the translator knows the assumption that cricket is important in the cognitive context. Cricket in Britain is a popular exercise. Then the translator infers that it is important. The writer's intention is that he wants to emphasize the importance of that thing. In order to make the reader know the intention of the writer correctly, the translator should translate it into: "It is as significant as eating." When people meet each other, the first thing they ask is, "Have you eaten yet?" Chinese people pay attention to food, because in the past, China was very poor and very short of food, so it is very important for Chinese people to fill their stomachs. This endeavor may be well above the translator's capabilities in cases when there are significant contextual differences that call for the giving of comprehensive information about the sociocultural and historical environment in which the original was written. It may require the development of additional channels of communication accompanying the translation.

In another way, a translator can translate the source text into different types. Here we should combine the skopos theory with the target text. The goal of the translation specifies the procedures and tactics that must be used to generate a functionally appropriate outcome, according to Skopos theory. With different purposes, the target text could be totally different. No matter what the aim of the target text, the translator is willing to use relevance theory to make the target language reader know the exact meaning of the source language. In conclusion, the translated text interpretively resembles another representation, rather than being a direct description of some state of affairs. Based on such cognition, translators need to consider the cultural environment and cognitive environment of readers.

4. Descriptive And Interpretive Translation

Descriptive and interpretive translation are of translation dichotomy. The so-called descriptive translation refers to a translation method that states an objective fact and expresses one's own thoughts and views. Translation is limited to parts of the original text that are suitable for the purpose of translation. Interpretive translation refers to a translation method of paraphrasing other people's thoughts and opinions. Here is an example. John said "Tom is sleeping." As for descriptive translation, the translation could be: He said that Tom was sleeping. This method just retells what the speaker is saying. On the other hand, the interpretive translation will be Jack said that John said Tom was sleeping. Descriptive translation only uses the translator's own translation methods to achieve relevance, while interpretive translation remains faithful to the original text to a large extent. From the perspective of translation and relevance, interpretive translation is the real translation.

5. Literal and Free Translation in Relevance Translation Theory

5.1. The Definition of Literal and Free Translation

Different scholars give us different definitions of literal and free translation. Feng Qinghua put forward that literal translation is a translation method or translated text that preserves both the content and the form of the original text, while free translation is a translation method or text that only

maintains the content of the original text without maintaining the form of the original text. Xu Yuanchong believes that literal translation is a translation method that puts faithfulness to the content of the original text in the first place, faithfulness to the form of the original text in the second place, and smooth translation in the third place. Free translation is a translation method that puts faithfulness to the content of the original text in the first place and smooth translation form in the second place, rather than sticking to the original form. Although there are many different definitions of literal and free translation, the meaning of each part is common. The all purpose that literal translation is correspond with the content and the form of source text, while free translation is required to be keeping with the content of the source text. The form of the target text is not limited.

5.2. The Option of Literal and Free Translation in Relevance Translation Theory

The choice of how to translate the source text depends on the translator. If he or she wants to express the meaning of the writer, he or she will choose literal translation. If he wants to deal with the source text in his own way, free translation is a good choice. The translator should ensure that the original author's communicative intention is reflected in the target text and the target text readers' expectations for the content and form of the target text, so as to maximize the relevance between the target text and target text readers.

Of course, translation literature may influence the process of translation. If it is primary, translators do not feel constrained to follow target literature models and are more prepared to break conventions. If translated literature is secondary, translators tend to use existing target-culture models for the target text and produce more "non-adequate" translations. Therefore, the translator is willing to use his methods to let the reader know the meaning of the source text and have a good feeling. That feeling could be that the readers wouldn't feel that they are reading a translation work. Too much skills or inflexible methods will confuse the reader.

There is an example to show the different way of translation. How to translate "Green Olympics, people's Olympics, science and technology Olympics" is a representation of combining relevance translation. Translation 1: Green Olympic、People's Olympics、High-tech Olympics. Translation 2: Environment- friendly Olympics、Culture-enriched Olympics、Technology-empowered Olympics. The first one is a literal translation. It doesn't get the Chinese meaning and doesn't express the meaning of the source text. It just translates word for word. Word-for-word is the replacement of each individual word of the source text with its closest grammatical equivalent. The second translation is based on understanding and reasoning judgment to find the best correlation. That is "green and environment are related, humanities and culture are related, science and technology are related to the use of high-tech technology". Such correlation resonates with the author cognitively and helps to convey the meaning of the original text more accurately. That can be called sense for sense. The sense-for-sense approach allows the sense or content of the source text to be translated.

In translation, one does not simply express the same ideas that someone expressed, but that one presents those ideas as an expression of what that person expressed. What is there behind this apparent difference between 'saying the same thing as someone else' and 'saying that someone else said'? Relevance theory as developed by Sperber and Wilson offers an explicit answer to this question. It does so with the concept of the 'interpretive use' of language, as distinct from 'descriptive use'.

6. The Importance of Relevance Theory on Translation

This study attempted to investigate the applicability of the RT findings in translation, particularly during the process of source text interpretation. It has 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, relevance theory 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.

The relevance theory primes the translator for his work. The validity of this opinion has to be judged first of all against the fact that translators have been able to apply the relevance theory to their work as well as against the findings of other reviewers, who point out the helpfulness of the relevance-theoretic account for the translator. What's more, it will be noted that this opinion reflects the expectations of the input-output programme of translation research discussed above: it looks for detailed statements about relationships between source text and target text renderings, and failing to find them it concludes that the relevance-theoretic framework has nothing to say to them. Such critics miss the fact that a good grasp of the relevance-theoretic framework not only deepens the translator's understanding of the problems he encounters, but is indeed a prerequisite for the proper application of any rules and principles of translation s/he might come across.

7. Conclusion

As stated above, relevance theory isn't published for translation but it leads translation to a good way. Relevance theory holds that communication is not based on the principle of cooperation. In order to make communication successful, the only common goal of speaker and hearer is to understand and be understood by each other. According to use relevance theory, the translation combine with the cognitive factor to achieve a good effect of translation. Relevance theory, by combining communication with cognition, can reflect people's language competence more truly and explain discourse understanding in language communication better. The process of ostensive-inferential is necessary to be mentioned. The translator is required to relate the context to the translation. If the optimal relevance gets good degree, the reader will understand the writer's meaning which is he want to express. What's more, the process of translation has been discussed. Understanding the source text and expressing the target text is two mainly stages in translation. The translator uses his own method to finish the translation by using relevance theory. At same time, literal and free translation can be chosen. Overall, relevance theory in translation receives positive feedback.

References

- [1] D. Sperber, D. Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* [M]. Blackwell, 1986.
- [2] D. Sperber, D. Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* [M]. 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- [3] Youcef Kouider. *Exploiting Relevance Theory Findings In Translation* [J]. *Revue de Traduction & Langues*, 2018, 17(2).
- [4] Qin Xiaoyan. *On the Contextual Problems in Translation from the Perspective of Relevance Theory* [J]. *Education Teaching Forum*, 2020(20).
- [5] Zhang Liping. *Reconstruction of Translation Process in View of Relevance Theory* [J]. *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*, 2009, 20(5).
- [6] Ernst-August Gutt. *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* [M]. Routledge, 2000.
- [7] Zhang Wenxun. *Relevance and the Study of English-Chinese Translation Process* [J]. *Journal of Yangtze University (Social Sciences)*, 2007, 27(6).
- [8] Sun Zhengfeng. *The Relevance Theory Perspective of Translation Process* [J]. *Neijiang Technology*, 2008(5): 182.
- [9] Basil Hatim, Jeremy Munday. *Translation: An advanced resource book* [M]. Routledge, 2004.