Relevance Theoretic Analysis on College Students’ Mistranslation

Jie ZHAO¹ and Meng-yuan GUO²

¹North China Electric Power University Science and Technology College, Ruixiang Street No. 282, Baoding, China
²North China Electric Power University English Department, Huadian Road No. 689, Baoding, China

Keywords: Relevance theory, College English translation, Mistranslation.

Abstract. The cultivation of College students’ translation ability is of great importance, and it is necessary to probe into the causes of mistranslation. From the perspective of relevance theory, the main reason for students’ errors in the translation process is their failure to take enough processing effort and achieve the optimal relevance. Their insufficient language competence and contextual knowledge reserves should be one factor, while the effects of negative transfer of the first language can not be ignored. Furthermore, lacking pursuit for preciseness, adopting a halfhearted attitude and absolutely seeking for the smallest effort can also explain the phenomenon.

Introduction

Nowadays, with economy developing rapidly, foreign trade and communication expanding continuously, and especially with the Belt and Road Initiative proposed, our society increasingly raises demands for English communicative competence of college students. Meanwhile, college English teaching objectives are being improved for the comprehensive development of students’ abilities of English listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. These abilities are mutually restricted and promoted. As an advanced skill in foreign language learning, translation not only affects other aspects, but also serves as a necessity for college students to obtain employment or to sustain their studies. Additionally, the reform of the CET-4 and CET-6 examination also shows that more importance is given to the cultivation of translation ability.

However, college English translation teaching has not kept up with the pace of the reform. From the perspective of college students’ English level, the unevenness has formed a greater challenge to college English teaching, especially to the translation teaching which is more difficult. And the students suffer from a lack of extracurricular reading, a poor accumulation in vocabulary, the relatively narrow range of cultural knowledge, leading to a variety of mistranslation phenomena in the translation process. Therefore, it is necessary to probe into the causes of mistranslation and to find the corresponding countermeasures.

Relevance Theory and Translation

Relevance theory advocates establishing an inferential model of communication relying on cognitive processes. Communication can be achieved through the communicator providing the behavior basis for his attempt, and the receiver deriving the communicative intention according to the behavior. The conclusion of inference is somewhat uncertain, so there is a possibility of misunderstanding and being rejected, which is called the “risk of interpretation” [1]. The principle of optimal relevance in relevance theory advocates achieving the maximum cognitive effect with minimal processing effort. Speakers must abide by the principle of relevance and try to make discourse and context as relevant as possible. The listener can use the relevance principle to guide the inference and draw the conclusions about the intention of the utterance according to the old and new information. The degree of relevance depends on the contextual effect and the processing effort when processing the utterance.

Ernest August Gutt is the first scholar who introduced relevance theory into translation and proposed relevance translation theory. He pointed out that translation is an inferential process
involving the brain mechanism, and a behavior of language communication as well[2]. In the framework of relevance translation theory, translation behavior contains two inferential processes, namely two manifestation processes. The whole process of translation is the verbal communication of inference, involving three communicative objects, namely the original author, translator and target readers. In the first communicative process, in which the translator understands the original text, the translator with a reader’s identity combines the manifest information of the original text with his own speculation, derives the implied communicative attempt to find out the optimal relevance between the information of original text and context. In the second process of communication in which the translator caters to for the target readers, the translator with an identity as a communicator effectively conveys the manifested information and communicative attempts of original author to the target readers in the translation of the original text to the reader through translation, so that the target readers can achieve optimal relevance with minimal processing efforts. In this process, the translator is the subject of communication, and readers are receivers.

In translation, the relevance theory is adopted throughout these two communication processes in which the translator participates with different identities. But the optimal relevance is always the pursuit of the translator. However, whether maximal relevance can be achieved and translation can be consistent with the original text is closely related to efforts taken by the translator.

**Mistranslation from the Perspective of Relevance Theory**

Mistranslation refers to mistakes made in translation due to the translator’s lack of knowledge, deficiency in language level, or insufficient understanding of language connotation or cultural background of the original language [3]. Gutt argues that translation is itself a pragmatic concept [2], so misinterpretation is actually a pragmatic failure. According to British linguist Thomas, pragmatic failure is divided into two categories: one is the pragmatic failure of the language itself, that is, the pragmalinguistic failure, caused by translator’s improper understanding of the correct language expressions and language codes; the other is social pragmatic failure, caused by the translator’s lack of understanding in cultural differences between the communicator and the receiver of communication[4]. Therefore, the translation process not only reflects the subjective initiative of the translator as the translation subject for language operation and cultural attainment, but also keeps restricted by the translator’s own language skills, cultural background knowledge.

For non-English-majors, their linguistic competence, bilingual cultural competence and intercultural knowledge reserve are important factors that restrict the optimal relevance of translation. Translation process can fully reflect the ability of students in these aspects. As we all know, non-English majors often suffer from poor cultural capacity and low cross-cultural knowledge reserves, contributing to a variety of translation errors in the translation process. In order to understand the mistranslation of non-English majors, a test paper was designed for the freshmen, including English-Chinese and Chinese-English sentence-translation together with paragraph translation. With the full mark of 100 points, the average score of 50 students who participated in the test was 63.36 points with 36.64 points lost. Through analysis and induction on different types of errors, the data obtained are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item (Process of understanding)</th>
<th>Error Types</th>
<th>Population Losing the Scores</th>
<th>Percentage of Losing-Score Population</th>
<th>Total Lost Points</th>
<th>Average Lost Points</th>
<th>Percentage of Lost Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Errors in understanding original language due to carelessness</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors in understanding due to deficiency in misunderstanding of language</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>341.5</td>
<td>11.38</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relevance Theoretic Analysis on College English Mistranslation

Error Analysis on Process of Understanding

Understanding the original text is the communication between the translator and the author of original text, and the first communication process in translation as well, which is a step most critical and most vulnerable to the problem. Only by fully understanding the manifest information of original text and the optimal relevance, can the translator flexibly and pointedly adopt translation strategies and properly manifest in the translated text, so that the target readers can also manage to achieve the optimal relevance in the translated text, to grasp the original to the maximum degree. Pragmatic failure in the first communication process in translation can be reflected in two aspects. First, from the aspect of pragmatic linguistics, in the process of understanding the original, the translator aimlessly assumes and infers the manifestation of the author, owing to his carelessness or lack of understanding in English expressions, sentence patterns, idioms, etc., and then result in mistranslation. Second, from the aspect of social pragmatics, despite managing to grasp the surface information of language and understand the literal meaning of the text, the translator fails to find out the optimal relevance of text and contextual assumptions because of ignorance of cultural connotations within the language, leading to mistranslation.

In the process of translation, the translator first acts as a reader of the original text to implement the cognition and inference to grasp the original author’s attempt according to manifest information of the original text. The attitude and bilingual cultural competence of the translator directly determines whether the translator can effectively grasp and infer. In the test, 30% of students made mistakes caused by carelessness and negligence in understanding.

Relevance theory points out that people tend to take the minimum effort in the course of discourse comprehension to get the maximum contextual effect. But if this effort is not enough to meet the requirements of the optimal relevance, it is likely to produce a wrong understanding. The translator’s attitude is one of the factors that affect the processing effort made in understanding the original when translating. The carelessness shown in the test illustrate that students didn’t take enough effort to process information they obtain and made mistakes in understanding because of this attitude.

In addition, the data show that the mistakes of students understanding the original derive from the lack of language and cultural knowledge. Poor vocabulary and reading accumulation is the main factor for this phenomenon. Especially the lack of cultural knowledge directly leads to students’ misunderstanding of the original. Language is the carrier of culture, so every language inevitably possesses a deposit of the national culture. Translation, as an activity to understand and interpret another language, together with the mistranslation made in this activity which is namely misunderstanding of another language, should be inevitably defined as a kind of cultural phenomenon rather than an absolute language phenomenon. Therefore, in addition to understanding the original

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process of Expressing</th>
<th>Misunderstanding of culture</th>
<th>23</th>
<th>46%</th>
<th>215.5</th>
<th>9.37</th>
<th>25.6%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Errors in expressions due to carelessness</td>
<td>Translation errors in language</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>7.65</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Translation errors in culture</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors in expressions due to deficiency in language and culture competence</td>
<td>Translation errors in language</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Translation errors in culture</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
semantic information, the translator should break through the constraints of language forms and understand the cultural connotations behind the language[5]. In daily translation practice, the translator needs to improve his knowledge, not only by promoting his understanding and accumulation of the original culture but attaching same importance to cultural knowledge of his first language as well. Only in this way, can he accomplish grasping accurately the optimal relevance provided by the original author in the first communication process. In the test, the misunderstanding of cultural aspects includes barriers in both English culture and Chinese culture.

**Error Analysis on Process of Expressing**

While understanding is the basis of translation, expressing should be top priority of the translation. In relevance translation theory, the process of expressing means that the translator can effectively convey the original author’s manifest and communicative attempt to the target reader in the second communication process on the basis of the first communication process, so that the reader can obtain the optimal relevance through inference. In this process, the translator is the subject of communication, and the target reader is the communicative receiver. The translator needs to take full account of the reader’s cognitive environment, accurately assess the reader’s expectations and combines the original author’s attempt, to filter and select the optimal relevance and choose appropriate translation methods and strategies to create the translation.

In addition to the errors due to translator’s own lack of language and cultural knowledge, the translator also makes mistakes in the second communication process if he is unfamiliar with the use of target language or if he fails to make a proper assessment of target reader’s knowledge reserve, which may lead to interpretation without real understanding, unconsciously and subjectively. In the test, there were 82% and 58% of the students, who made expressing mistakes respectively in language form and cultural background. Among them, the expressing errors in language form constitute the largest part of the lost points. Many of the students’ errors made in the process of Chinese-English translation indicate that they were affected by the expressions of their first language and failed to take enough effort to process the given information. This has led to a lack of information from the original text or unnecessary additional information to it, or even the errors in most basic expressing ways such as word order, sentence pattern, etc. In addition, the students neglected the cultural connotations of the target language, only paying attention to the literal correspondence. For example, when the students translated some Chinese idioms with which Chinese readers are quite familiar, they adopted word-to-word literal translation, which could make English readers confused. As is shown by the translation of *dui niu tan qin* (to cast pearls over swine) and *tian wang hui hui* (The mills of God grind slowly yet surely), the literal translation will not convey their connotations nor achieve the optimal relevance, because English readers can hardly echo with the Chinese ancient instrument or the web of heaven, which do not exist in English language and culture.

**Summary**

To sum up, from the perspective of relevance theory, the main reason for students’ errors in the translation process is that they can not take enough processing effort and achieve the optimal relevance. Their insufficient language competence and contextual knowledge reserves should be one factor, while the effects of negative transfer of the first language can not be ignored. Furthermore, lacking pursuit for preciseness, adopting a halfhearted attitude and absolutely seeking for the smallest effort can also explain it. Therefore, in addition to improving students’ basic language level and cultural knowledge reserve, students’ awareness should be promoted that translation is precise and should be done carefully and seriously and that the optimal relevance should be achieved not only in the first communication process when understanding the original text, but also in the second communication process when translating and expressing with taking into account the target readers’ knowledge reserve.
Acknowledgements

This research was financially supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (No. 2015MS136): Studies and Cultivation of Undergraduates’ Translation Competence from the Perspective of Pragmatics; and by the Research Program of Higher Education Teaching Reform in North China Electric Power University Science and Technology College: Applied Study on Self-built Translation Corpus in College English Teaching (104055).

References


