On Interpreting Strategies with a Perspective of Game Theory

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Abstract. With the aim of uncovering the motivation and reasons behind the use of specific interpreting strategies by the interpreter, this thesis starts from the game theory and its applications in translation studies. It bases itself on the argument that “interpreting is a goal-directed behavior”, “interpreting is a decision making process” and proceeds to conclude that “interpreting is a game—a game between the interpreter on one side and the speaker, target listener/audience on the other. It holds that the interpreter is not allowed at all times in the interpreting process to maximize his/her personal utilities by handling all kinds of situations in interpreting; therefore he/she must take account of the utility of the speaker, client, listener/audience, etc. by compromises. The author believes, it throws a new light on the nature of interpreting and provides a new perspective for understanding various interpreting phenomena.

Introduction

Accompanied with the fact that China became the second largest economy in the world and became one of the leading countries in emerging economies which drew the world’s attention again. Besides the fast economic growth, China entered WTO and initiated the “Belt and Road Initiative”, communication and trade between China and foreign countries especially the countries along the belt and road have been getting more and more frequent. Interpreters in all areas are in great demand. In order to meet the need, more and more interpreters are cultivated by universities and training centers. However, receiving systematic and scientific training is just a start. Only when interpreters improve themselves by mastering certain strategies, can always help interpreters find the optimal solutions and get twice the result with half the effort. Interpreting strategy research has become a popular subject of the study.

Language Game

The Austria philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein[1] first proposed “language game” in his book in 1953. Czech scholar Jirí Lévy[2], a theorist and historian of literature, was the first person that introduced the rules of game theory to translation. He saw translation as a decision-making process and proposed his “Minimax Strategy”. Consequently, his application of game theory aroused interest of some other scholars like Roger Caillois, Elizabeth Bruss and Michael Cronin. Roger Caillois[3] remarked in his book that “It is unpredictability that makes the game worth playing.” Later, Elizabeth Bruss[4] suggested that the game authors play with their readers be classified into zero-sum, mixed motive and cooperative games, which could also be extended to translation text. Bruss’s proposals made Cronin ponder on the cognitive pleasure and “ludic” potential of translation. Wang Bin[5] explained the inter-relation between game theory and translation, elaborated the applicability of the rules of game theory like prisoner’s dilemma and Nash Equilibrium. Wang Zhihong and Wang Xiaoling[6], Fan Jun and Zheng Zhijun[7], Pan Huaing[8] and Han Jing[9] tried to apply game theory into translation activities and translation process. The author finds that the study on the application of game theory into interpreting is still a blank field.

The goal of this research is to examine the hidden motives that affect the interpreter’s decision-
making rather than how the interpreter specifically chooses each word in interpreting. The interpreter’s games with different players are discussed separately in the thesis, though in reality these games may be played simultaneously and have mutual influence on each other. Every player involved in interpreting activities is rational, for they all seek to maximize their own utilities. All the players would be benefited in the end from these games: the client’s needs are satisfied; speakers are better understood; the listeners/audience get the speaker’s intention and could respond accordingly; Most importantly, in the process the interpreter has gradually developed the competence to deal with tough interpreting task and resolve difficult interpreting problems, finally the interpretation will reach a new level.

Game Theory’s Application in Interpreting
As Eugene A. Nida[10] pointed out, “the real problems of translation are not technical, they are human.” Interpreting is increasingly seen as a form of human behavior. The whole process of interpreting principally involves speaker, client, interpreter, listener/audience, other interpreters and critics. The directions spot how interpreting moves on: the speaker talk to the listener/audience with the help of interpreter’s interpreting, vice versa. This is a base for any occurrence of interpreting; it is a two-way interactive activity. The client might work for the speaker or the listener/audience, he/she is responsible for choosing a qualified interpreter, if the interpreter could not meet the requirements, then the interpreting process would be complete through the work of any other interpreters. The interpretation might be studied and criticized by critics, because of that, the interpreter might do a better job next time, that is to say, the speaker and the listener/audience might understand each other much better. In the whole process, the interpreter as an effective professional communicator with language and interpreting skills as his/her arms is the key player in the game because only by him/her can all players retain their utilities to some degree, and it is him/her that guarantees the completion of interpreting. Thus, in order to achieve a satisfactory goal, the interpreter’s games with other players are inevitable and necessary.

Dual Role of the Interpreter
Holz-Manttari[11] mentioned in her translational action model: It is not about translating words, sentences or texts but is in every case about guiding the intended co-operation over cultural barriers enabling functionally oriented communication. The interpreter can find full expression in his/her dual role as both listener and speaker, both information initiator and receiver. However, he/she is by no means an ordinary listener and speaker but the one with explicit interpreting goal. Interpreters are privileged listeners, they listen in order to produce, decodes in order to re-encode. In other words, as professional communicators, interpreters receive information from speakers as input and initiate digested information as output, bridging the gap between listeners and speakers. As a speaker, an interpreter must not only be proficient in both source and target languages, moreover, he/she should possess the speaker’s language and culture sense, intonation, emotion etc. Therefore, the interpreter can understand and master the quintessence of the speaker’s words, dig out the potential meaning and pay more attention to how to represent the speaker’s ideas. In this sense, the interpreter is both a rational speaker and listener to some extent.

Games in Interpreting
Game theory is the study of the ways in which strategic interactions among rational players produce outcomes with respect to the preferences of those players, none of which might have been intended by any of them. The aim of the game analysis is to predict the rational behavior of the players[12]. Games can be classified into zero-sum games and non-zero-sum ones on the basis of whether the players opposed or mixed motives. Non zero-sum games can be further distinguished as being either cooperative or non-cooperative. Since cooperative games are rather complicated, they have been less investigated than non-cooperative ones. And non-cooperative game can be further catego-
izes into games of perfect information and those of imperfect information. So let’s re-categorize the games into cooperative games of perfect information, cooperative games of imperfect information, non-cooperative games of perfect information and non-cooperative games of imperfect information. Interpreting games are mostly cooperative ones of perfect information because all players know about how the previous players have actually moved or what strategies they have chosen in the sequential moves in action, and they prefer to choose the best strategy in order to maximize benefits. We are going to move eyes onto interpreting games by analyzing a real case.

Games between the Interpreter and the Initiator/Client

Whatever interpreting work he/she does, the interpreter has a initiator or client. That is the organization or individual who hires the interpreter and needs the interpretation. It is probable that the two players have to compete by adopting different strategies to maximize their own utility. Nevertheless, the interpreter and the initiator/client’s game is still a cooperative one because both of them wish the goal of cooperation can be achieved, though the final result depends on the strategies they use. Considering the relationship between the interpreter and the initiator/client, the game is altogether a dynamic, cooperative and variable-sum one. Utility, in interpreting, not only denotes economical interest but also connotes invisible things like reputation, profession and confidence.

The author worked for a local government once and was responsible for reception one guest from UNDP. While having lunch, looking at so many Chinese dishes, the guest asked lots of questions, some of which are related to the table manners, and the author was busy answering questions and explaining. Suddenly she got a message from the office: “do not always talk to the guest, let the mayor talk.”

In this case, as an interpreter, it is sure that she just needs to be the bridge between the mayor and the guest. But under that circumstance, she was also playing a role as a secretary and cannot just ignore the guest’s questions either. So she changed strategies and chose short words and sentences to quickly answer questions, meanwhile use gestures to move the guest’s attention to the mayor. In this game, the two players are the client/initiator and the interpreter. The numbers in the table below represent each player’s payoff/utility. “To remind (the interpreter to not to talk with the guest)” and “to ignore (the interpreter and guest’s talking)” are initiator’s choices, “To answer (the guest’s questions) and explain” and “to ignore (the guest’s questions)” are the strategies the interpreter can choose.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpreting/Initiator</th>
<th>To ignore</th>
<th>To answer and explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To remind</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To ignore</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The assumption of this game is that: the initiator wants to ignore the interpreter’s answer; the premise must be that the interpreter tries to ignore (the guest’s questions). If the interpreter choose “to answer and explain” strategy, then the game is a non-co-operative one because they are both in a dilemma. If the initiator/client was stuck to reminding or even changed a interpreter, a zero-sum game would be seen. According to Nash Equilibrium[13], every player’s mixed strategy must be his/her best choice. Then it is easy for the interpreter to choose the best choice --to ignore (the guest’s questions) from the above table deduction, so that both the interpreter and the initiator are mutual benefited.

Fortunately, in the case, the interpreter adjusted her strategy at the point of dilemma and again came back to a cooperative game, changed strategies and in conclusion maximize both her and the initiator/client’s utilities. However, the guest’s (the speaker) reaction is ignored during the process.
Games between the Interpreter and the Speaker

In the process of interpreting, to listen to the speaker’s words (source language/SL) is a preliminary step for another important game—the game between the interpreter and speaker.

Strategic Games

The two players are the interpreter and the guest. “To answer (the guest’s questions)” and “Not to answer (the guest’s questions)” are the interpreter’s strategies. “To talk to the interpreter” and “To talk to the mayor” are the guest’s choices. From table 2, it is easy to find that both interpreter and the guest can maximize utility when the guest talk with mayor, so at that time, the interpreter chose to ignore some of the guest’s questions and tries to move the guest’s attention to the mayor. In order not to disappoint the guest, the interpreter made compensate explanation on Chinese dishes and table manners during supper which was a relatively informal situation.

Summary

Although game theory has been widely applied to the study of many other disciplines, the possibility of applying game rules to interpreting has not been fully exploited. The author sees the process of interpreting as a decision-making process and tries to reveal the game rules hidden behind the decisions certain interpreters have made. The exploration of the interpreter’s games in interpreting activities is essentially a probe into the nature of interpreting from game theory. All in all, the thesis inquiries into the nature of interpreting in a novel way by exploring people’s quality of being a member of society, which is instructive that interpreting as one part of social work also has its root in society where power and utility are hidden from people. So from a macro perspective, taking a social eye to interpreting activities may be more rational and in turn substantially boosts development of interpreting teaching and training as well.

Table 2. Games between the Interpreter and the Speaker (Case One).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the guest \ interpreter</th>
<th>To talk to mayor</th>
<th>To talk to the interpreter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not to answer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To answer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


