A Study on the Quality of Interpretation from the Perspective of Theory of Sense

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Abstract. Theory of sense originated in the late 1960s is one of the important theories of interpretation research, which has a great influence on C-E interpretation research and has obvious guiding significance. Interpretation quality assessment is the measurement on the quality of interpretation activities with specific evaluation subject, content, criteria, methods and means. Based on the theory of sense, this paper expounds the influence of interpreter’s capability on interpreting quality, and then better applies the theory of sense into interpreting practice and plays an active role.

Introduction

The way we interpret linguistic symbols can be divided into three ways: other symbols of the same language, another language and non-linguistic symbols [1]. Interpretation is in the form of a spoken language that translates one language into another. Compared with the translation study, the interpretation research is a little late, since the interpretation is regarded equivalent to the spoken language and only a simple inter-language conversion, which belongs to the category of the psychological cognition and does not have the profound theoretical research value. Contrarily, the translation is involved in many factors such as the text structure, language and culture differences, which appears to be more valuable. Moreover, the process of interpretation is partly the on-the-spot performance of the interpreter, during which hard things are turned simple and the interpreter does not have sufficient time to think and translate. Translation is just the opposite, with enough time to think things over, law to follow, and the language is more visible and correctable. Generally speaking, interpretation is more focused on the interpreter’s psychological cognitive process and his interpretation ability, while translation is more focused on the translator’s language skills.

Theory of Sense

History of Theory of Sense

The research on interpretation can be summarized into four angles: (1) Information-processing paradigm, paying attention to the study of information transfer between source language and target language from the perspective of cognitive psychology. Represents are Gerver and Lambert. (2) Theory of sense represented by Ecole Supérieur d’Interprètes et de Traducteurs and Seleskovich, dividing the interpretation process into three stages: understanding the source language, leaving the original language shell and expressing the meaning in target language. (3) Neuro-physiological approach, represented by the neurophysiologist Fabro and the conference interpreter and interpretation teacher Gran, mainly studying the reflex of the brain nerves during interpreting. (4) The general empirical interpreting research with interdisciplinary input, represented by Gile, an empirical study of interpretation by combining other disciplines such as cognitive psychology, linguistics, sociology, etc. [2].

Theory of Sense is one of the important theories in interpretation research, and it is also one of the most familiar theories in the field of interpretation in China. At the end of 1960s, a school was formed in France to explore the principles and teaching of interpretation and non-literary text
translation, that is, the school of interpretative approach, which holds that translation is an explanation of the meaning of the original text with linguistic symbols and the translator’s own cognitive complements. What translators should pursue is not the equivalence of language units, but the equivalence of the meaning or effect of the original text. In 1968, Danica Celeskovich, a famous French interpretation expert, made an explanation of the meaning of the original text through an article named Interpreter for International Conferences—Conversation and Communication Issues, which is regarded as the foundation of the theory of interpretation. In the next decade, Celeskovich and other researchers of the school of interpretative approach gradually summarized and refined a set of complete interpretation theories, that is, the Theory of Sense, and Ecole Supérieur d’Interprètes et de Traducteurs also developed into an important theoretical research base on interpretation. In 1984, Celeskovich and Ledeley co-published Interpreter pour Traduire, marking the establishment of the Theory of Sense. La Traduction Aujourd’hui-le modèle interpretative written by Ledeley in 1994 marks the maturity and perfection of the Theory of Sense. This theory was introduced into China as early as 1980s, but it was not systematically introduced until the end of 20th century, and then became the theoretical basis of interpretation research and teaching in China.

View Points of the Theory of Sense

According to the Theory of Sense, the translation on word, sentence and article can be divided into two parts: translation of language (words and sentences) and translation of discourse. It can be seen that translation is mainly carried out at the level of discourse, and the object of interpretation is not in the form of the grammar of the source text and the like but the meanings between lines. The translator should try to pursue the equivalence of meaning as much as possible and produce the same effect as the source text. After receiving the source text, the translator should get rid of the external form of the source language, that is, the restriction of the source language. What the translator should do is to interpret the meaning at different levels: word, sentence and discourse, and grasp accurately the writing purpose of the source text. This is also the process of language reorganization in target text on the original thought or meaning of the source text. The Theory of Sense emphasizes that the interpretation is no simple language trans-coding. In interpreting, never forget its purpose is to convey the meaning, never yield to the original phrase structure or the meaning of specific word even the short sentence, because they are only language symbols which indicate the road but not the road itself [3].

Interpretation Quality Assessment

The evaluation of interpretation quality is a measure of the quality and pros and cons of interpretation activities with specific parameter indexes. The complete evaluation system is constructed by a series of evaluation or assessment data [4]. Generally speaking, the evaluation of interpretation quality mainly focuses on six aspects: credibility, simplicity, acceptability, rapidity, adaptability, technology and so on.

There are many factors to be taken into account in the evaluation of interpretation quality, including the specific requirements of the characters, the subjective consciousness of the interpreter and the objective response of the audience [5]. There are three main aspects in the evaluation of interpretation quality: interpreter, target text and audience. That is the evaluation of the overall quality of interpreter. Evaluation on the interpreter includes the interpreter’s language skills, knowledge structure, language trans-coding efficiency, stress-bearing ability, equipment proficiency, pronunciation and intonation and other comprehensive qualities. Evaluation on the target text includes first the integrity and equivalence of information, and then the conciseness and clarity of target language. Evaluation on audience aims to judge whether the target language has the same effect as source language on audience through the audience’s reaction, and in turn evaluate the interpreter’s interpretation quality. The charter of the International Association of Conference Interpreters writes clearly that interpreters should be high-quality bilingual experts, proficient in all
kinds of interpretation skills, in-depth understanding of conference subject and “miscellaneous” with extensive knowledge, as well as stable psychological quality and noble professional quality [6].

Analysis of Interpretation Quality Based on the Theory of Sense

Discourse Interpretation

The school of interpretative approach locates the interpretation object into a multi-level language objects, but does not focus on the meaning of specific word, phrase or sentence. It is clear that the purpose of interpretation is to accurately reflect the inner meaning between lines of the source language and recreate the original thought, thus to realize the writing purpose of source language as much as possible in the target language. Since text or discourse is formed out of specific context verbal, the meaning of the words, phrases and sentences used in the context should be defined by specific context. In other words, the meaning of a word is defined by the words before and after it, which in turn determines the meaning of the other words. The text is not a simple word accumulation but has two functions: organization and coherence. Organization function is that the speaker pre-set the point of view to be expressed according to the knowledge structure of the listener, and then the text is arranged to realize the organization and the grasping of the language. Coherence function refers to the use of some visible coherent symbols, including words, phrases and sentences, to realize the progression of the theme, while there are some invisible contents such as knowledge structure, cultural background and so on in the process of progression [7]. Question put forward by the journalist of People’s Daily and answer given by Wang Yi during the press conference in 2019 are excerpted as example:

Q: The year 2019 marks 70 years since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). What are the most important achievement and experience of China’s diplomacy in these seven decades? How do they inform what you’re doing today?

For the questioner, the information he wanted to obtain focused on the three aspects: achievement, experience and meaning. Therefore, the answer revolves around these three topics in order, and the interpretation of “experience” is taken as an example.

Answer in Chinese: 中国外交的辉煌成就,首先归功于党的领导。这是中国外交最根本的政治保障。70 年来,中国共产党与时俱进,不断丰富发展具有中国特色的外交理论体系,形成了一系列优良传统和鲜明特色。独立自主是中国外交的基石,天下为公是中国外交的胸怀,公平正义是中国外交的坚守,互利共赢是中国外交的追求,服务发展是中国外交的使命,外交为民是中国外交的宗旨。2018 年,中央外事工作会议确立了习近平外交思想的指导地位,这是新中国外交理论建设具有划时代意义的重大成果,为进入新时代的中国外交提供了根本遵循,也为探索解决当今世界各种复杂问题指明了方向。

Answer in English version: Our diplomatic accomplishments are due, first and foremost, to the leadership of the Party, which is the fundamental political guarantee for China’s diplomacy. For seven decades, the Party has advanced with the times, developed a rich body of diplomatic theories with Chinese characteristics and established a fine tradition with distinctive features. They include: independence as a cornerstone of China’s foreign policy, concern for the common good of humanity, pursuit of equity and justice, commitment to win-win outcomes, the mission of facilitating domestic development, and dedication to serving the Chinese people. At last year’s Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy was established as our guideline, an epoch-making milestone in the development of New China’s diplomatic theories. It sets the fundamental course for our diplomacy in the new era and points the way for navigating through the complex array of issues in today’s world.

Around the theme of “experience,” Wang Yi answered from two aspects: Party leadership and Xi Jinping’s diplomatic thought, and the text is progressed on the basis of these two aspects. In order to highlight the important content of the subject, the interpreter has adopted addition, subtraction and conversion of words. To strengthen the mood, “首先” is interpreted into “first and
foremost” instead of simply “first,” which highlights the importance of the speaker’s answer to the first aspect of the subject of “experience.” To realize semantic coherence, manifest implicit semantics and be in line with the integrity of English grammar and semantic structure, “they include” was added to accurately reflect the semantic relationship of the context, since “独立自主”, “天下为公”, “公平正义”, “互利共赢”, “服务发展” and “外交为民” is just the specific content of “鲜明特色.” For E-C interpretation, the addition of words can be summarized as mood addition, cohesion addition and cognitive addition, in which cognitive addition mainly plays an explanatory role. Subtracting words aims to be concise without reducing the source text information. “辉煌” was subtracted, which is the linguistic reflection of the typical confidence psychology. The same is to some humble words and some words indicating categories in C-E translation. Omission of such words will not affect the transmission of the source text information. Transformation of words is mainly the transformation of word meaning, including rhetoric devices, cultural factors and so on. For example, “指导地位” was interpreted into “guideline,” while “重大成果” into “milestone.” From the perspective of sentences, short and simple sentences are frequently used in Chinese, while long and complicate in English. On the basis of the logical relationship between words and sentences, sentences and sentences, the complete sentence “这是中国外交最根本的政治保障” was interpreted into a clause and a series of complete sentences “独立自主是...” was interpreted into successive noun phrases. The interpreter interpreted the meaning from the aspects of word meaning, the relationship between word and sentence as well as sentence and sentence. In this way, he fully highlights the two aspects of the theme of “experience” in text processing, putting the key information in the position of the main components of a main sentence with clear hierarchy. In terms of number of words, there are 255 Chinese characters and 149 words in English, which fully reflects the brevity in length and conciseness in meaning.

On Factors Affecting Interpretation Quality from the Theory of Sense

The school of interpretative approach puts forward a triangular model of translation, the core of which lies in the translator’s interpretation of the thought of source text and translating on the basis of this interpretation.

With this model, the theory of sense shows that the process of language translation is divided into two directions. One is simply word conversion, or namely code conversion, but what is more important is conversion of meanings hidden between the lines or context of the text. Conversion of meanings involves two steps. The first step is to interpret or analyze the source text. This process is no longer limited to the explicit meaning the visible language symbols—word and sentence itself. There will be an inherent meaning that is divorced from the linguistic shell, and translation, sometimes, is the process of meaning transmission by stripping the linguistic shell.

According to the triangular model and six aspects of interpretation evaluation, it can be seen that high-quality interpretation needs solid language skills first. It contains not only the simple language knowledge such as grammar and sentence pattern, but also the understanding of various knowledge fields and cultural differences, which, of course, is closely related to the interpreter’s knowledge accumulation and full preparation before interpretation. Secondly, strong psychological quality and adaptability is necessary. In view of the special circumstances of interpretation, the interpreter may face hundreds or more audiences. In this situation, the interpreter must maintain a stable state of mind, focus attention, and hold a sharp observation accompanied by quick response. Interpretation, different from translation, is the process during which the interpreter is explicit and visible. From the perspective of the proportion of competence, the interpreter’s external performance accounts for more than 60%, while the knowledge only 40%.

Conclusion

The process of interpretation is a complex language conversion process. In addition to the high standard of the interpreter’s self-quality, the study of the interpretation theory has the urgent need. Interpretation quality assessed from the theory of sense can not only improve the theoretical study
of the interpretation process, but also enhance the operability of the theory of sense in the
interpretation practice. In the process of interpretation, besides the understanding and the
reorganization of word meaning, sentence and discourse structure, there are more cultural factors
which are involved in every link of interpretation. It has a positive effect on the expression of both
the language and the translation of the source text. In order to become an excellent interpreter, it is
not only to have a solid bilingual and even multilingual knowledge, but great interpretation skills,
and more importantly, to develop an encyclopedic cultural consciousness and be familiar with the
culture at home and abroad. In the process of interpretation, the interpreter should be highly
sensitive towards culture and choose appropriate expressions with specific means and techniques
avoiding the negative effect of cultural differences, so as to better convey the meaning of the source
text with accurate language and bridge two languages.

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