

Relevance-Theoretical Account of Pragmatic Enrichment in Translation

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Abstract. The fully propositional meaning of an utterance can not be achieved without some pragmatic enrichment of the linguistically encoded semantic meanings. Successful interpretation is actually a contextual-oriented inferential work as specified by the Relevance Theory. Pragmatic enrichment is triggered by the search of optimal relevance in constructing an interpretation of an utterance. It is important to follow a path of least effort in the interpretation process and stop when the expectation of relevance is satisfied.

Introduction

Language interpretation is more than the process of encoding and decoding semantic representations or their logical forms, nor a process of searching for prototypicality. It is essential for addressees to engage in some context-based development of logical forms, which is the process of “pragmatic enrichment”. The aim of pragmatic enrichment is for addressees to modify those linguistically-specified word meanings so as to get fully determinate thoughts of the speaker and therefore arrive at the propositional form of the utterance. As Wilson and Sperber (2001) comment in this regard: “although the logical form of an utterance is recovered by decoding, its fully propositional form is obtained by inferential enrichment of the linguistically encoded logical form. It is the propositional form of an utterance, not its logical form, that determines the proposition expressed.”

As a special form of linguistic communication aiming at equivalent communicative effect between source text and the target language, translation deals with not only the denotative meaning of words, but also context-dependent communicative thoughts of the author. This forces translators to resort to pragmatic enrichment of the logical form in order to derive the intended, fully determinate, propositional form. A translator needs to make the correct inferential comprehension of the author’s thought so as to yield a fully-fledged author’s meaning and achieve the author-expected cognitive effects among his target audience. It is therefore highly necessary for us to understand the forces that trigger the pragmatic enrichment in communication and the degrees and directions of enrichment.

Pragmatic Enrichment

It is pretty common that a word or a linguistic structure has multiple dictionary meanings or prototypical meanings, and some words have the property of generalization or vagueness. The addressee is therefore required to apply the mechanism of pragmatic enrichment in the process of comprehension in order to decide on the first acceptable contextual meaning of the word or structure. Basically, enrichment involves pragmatic narrowing and broadening of certain words, linguistic structures or even the whole utterance under a given context.

The lexical narrowing is the process of finding the designated referent or the contextual meaning of an encoded concept under specific context by narrowing down the range of its denoted senses. This method is often applied in the understanding of polysemic phenomenon. The word *bird* has to be interpreted as a specific connotative meaning rather than its literal meaning in *at Christmas, the bird is delicious* and *the birds circled above the waves, searching for fish*. The first *bird* refers to the poultry such as chick or goose; and the second *bird* refers to a seagull.

Under a lot of circumstances, a speaker want to convey a more general sense of certain words instead of their logical meanings or literal sense in the dictionary, nor the combination of encoded meanings of each individual word. Which may consequently lead to the widening of the linguistically specified denotation. This is described as pragmatic broadening. There exists the pragmatic weakening or extension of its lexical prototypical meaning. In the utterance “我说两句” the literal meaning is *I want to say two sentences*, but what the speaker want to express is *I have some words to talk to you*. A hearer usually chooses the extended sense or non-literal sense to get the communicative information. Approximation, hyperbole, metaphor, puns, metonymic and synecdoche can all be considered to be covered by pragmatic broadening.

Relevance Theory

Context-based pragmatic modification is required in lexical broadening, extension and narrowing. Considering the importance of pragmatic enrichment in linguistic interpretation, a translator is definitely expected to engage himself in some context-oriented inferential work. The relevance theory, which starts from a detailed account of relevance and its role in cognition, has a huge impact on the practice and theoretical investigation in translation. Relevance is defined as a property of inputs in cognitive processes. Given the ostensive-inferential property of communication, a speaker, by the very act of addressing someone or making sth. ostensive to him , creates an expectation of optimal relevance. The hearer’s goal in comprehension is to find an interpretation that satisfies this expectation of optimal relevance. Seeking relevance to the speaker’s utterance, explicit or implicit, is deemed as the primary task in language processing. Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance and every utterance communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber &Wilson, 2001). In other words, the aim of the hearer is to find an interpretation of the speaker’s meaning that satisfy the presumption of optimal-relevance. In other words, human being’s perceptual mechanisms tend to pick out the most relevant contextual assumptions, and then make pragmatic inference with the relevant contextual assumptions.

As a core concept in the relevance theory, contextual assumptions are taken as psychological and dynamic. Relevance theory holds that any communicative behavior (utterance or not) is by nature a kind of cognitive behavior. The nature of this cognitive behavior is the understanding of their mutual cognitive environment. Consequently, successful communication depends on the manifestness and mutual manifestness to the interlocutors’ cognitive environment. Mutual understanding of the shared cognitive environment is perceived as the prerequisite for successful communication. Within the framework of relevance theory, a person’s cognitive context is a kind of dynamic and psychological construct composed of the collection of all the assumptions of the world which are perceptible or inferable to him formed along with communication. All the facts and assumptions, whether true or false, are considered cognitive concept of an individual. It is temporarily constructed and formed during the course of dynamic inference and achieved in communication between the speaker and the hearer. 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” (Sperber &Wilson, 2001)

Relevance-Theoretical Interpretation of Pragmatic Enrichment

It is fair to say that the process of language interpretation is literally a process of choosing, modifying and adjusting to contextual assumptions. Based on the relevance-theoretic account of translation, the lexical pragmatic broadening and narrowing are also relevance-oriented. Inferential comprehension starts with the recovery of a linguistically-encoded sentence meaning, which has to be contextually enriched in a variety of ways to yield a full-fledged speaker’s meaning. The hearer, by following a path of least effort, should enrich it at the explicit level and complement it at the implicit level until the resulting interpretation meets his expectation of relevance. To be more

specific, a hearer would follow a path of least effort in achieving cognitive effects:

(a) consider interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference assignments, contextual assumptions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.

(b) stop when the expected level of relevance is reached. (Zuo-wen Li, 2010)

Therefore, pragmatic enrichment is literally a process of seeking relevance. Specifically speaking, a translator should follow the path of least effort, work on the encoded meaning or prototype of the structure and stop at the first overall interpretation that satisfies his expectation of relevance. When a lexicon or a structure have multiple senses available, a translator is supposed to make some lexical adjustment (pragmatic narrowing in this case) to infer the contextual meaning of the word with the relevance-theoretic approach. Consider the following example:

A) 我这副手套是多少钱买的呢? 你看, 就一转身, 我忘了。

B) 你和他赌个什么气? 你看, 你现在是公司里最年轻的科长, 可别拿前途开玩笑。

C) 这几天简直就是忙得不可开交。你看, 我都快成陀螺了, 连轴转。

In communication these discourse markers (nikan, those italicized Chinese characters) are seldom encoded with senses semantically and thus not to contribute to the propositional content of the utterances to which it is attached. Their occurrence is either not a grammatical requirement nor a structural member for semantic link network. In most cases, the function of these discourse markers is to indicate the author's pragmatic intention, leading the readers to the contextual implications embedded in the utterance. The first discourse marker in example A is plausibly interpreted as an exclamation expressing his or her sadness or relieving embarrassment. The second marker is used to emphasize something needs to be considered and the one in the third example is used denoting that you are explaining something later. Accordingly, the correct interpretation of the sentences above should be:

A) *How much did I spend on this pair of gloves? Alas, I forgot it in a blink of an eye.*

B) *There is no point of you getting in a rage with him! After all, you are the youngest chief of the section. Don't dice with your promising future.*

C) *I am up to my neck in work these days. You see, I am almost spinning like a top.*

From the perspective of Relevance Theory, these discourse markers are used out of cognitive demand and pragmatic constraint, which require the translator to keep both the author's ostensive information and the specific context in mind in the process of inference to find an interpretation of the author's meaning that satisfy the presumption of optimal-relevance or the author's expected cognitive effect. To sum up, pragmatic narrowing is a kind of pragmatic information modification for the sake of acquiring the greatest or the most conspicuous cognitive effect, aiming at finding out the explicit and designated meanings of those words that satisfy the author's expected relevance with the help of contextual assumptions.

Likewise, pragmatic broadening or the nonliteral use of language like synecdoche, hyperbole, approximation, metonymy, blends, puns and category extension are also a process of seeking relevance. From the perspective of pragmatic relevance approach, a translator tries to infer or derive the implied communicative information with the help of the explicit and ostensive stimulus (literal sense or the prototype of the word) given by the author and his own contextual assumptions. For example:

D) *This is as important as a game of cricket.*

In countries like Britain, Australia and New Zealand where cricket is popular, a game of cricket is widely used to imply being important. Whereas Chinese readers, for lack of this social background information, fail to get the cognitive effect expected by the author, resulting in some social pragmatic barrier in communication. A translator's primary concern in this case should be the author's communicative information and consequently make some adaptation to the original expression. As for Chinese, eating and sleeping used to be regarded as essential instead of some entertainment activities. Thus the preferable translation is *This is as important as eating and sleeping.*

E) *He was so annoyed that his colleagues nicknamed him magpie*

"Magpie" in the above example indicates "fortune" or "luck" in Chinese reader's cognitive

environment, while it has nothing to do with “luck” in this instance. Considering the differences between Chinese and English readers’ cognitive environment and magpie’s propensity of chirping, it is easy to infer that magpie indicates chattering in Western culture. Therefore, we can interpret it into sparrow accordingly out of Chinese consideration.

Conclusion

Translation is literally a form of context-based pragmatic behavior, which is more than the process of finding out the prototypical semantic representations or their logical forms. Under specific context constraints, a translator needs to make some modifications and adaptations to some words and structures so as to rule out those irrelevant contextual assumptions. It is highly important for us to conduct context-based pragmatic enrichment, adjustment and adaptation to achieve maximum mutual manifestness of their cognitive environment and achieve the author-envisaged cognitive effects among his target audiences, which is the key to successful communication. Consequently, from the perspective of information process, as a way of cognitive behavior, both pragmatic broadening and narrowing require some inferential efforts to obtain the author-expected cognitive effects.

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