

Solving Fuzziness in English-Chinese Translation in Light of the Relevance Theory

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Abstract: Relevance is an inherent feature of cognition and communication, while semantic fuzziness is ubiquitous in language. This article intended to explore how to solve semantic fuzziness in English-Chinese translation in light of the Relevance Theory. In the Theory, relevance is characterized as a function between the processing effort and positive cognitive effect. Since the relevance principle of cognition holds that human cognition is geared to the maximal relevance, people tend to pay the least effort to achieve the most effect. As a consequence, in language communication, the speaker/writer tends to give utterances compatible with the abilities and preferences of the receptor, and the receptor tends to stop at the first plausible interpretation of an utterance. As a relay between the source text and the target text, the translator should also do the translation in order to cost the least processing effort from the target language receptor. In case of semantic fuzziness, the translator needs to drive the fuzzy information in the source language towards explicitness in the target language most of the time. Of course, the most positive cognitive effect at the least processing effort is only one side of the story. In situations where more processing effort must be paid, extra positive cognitive effect is expected. In other words, relevance is a balance between the processing effort and the positive cognitive effect. Since the latter case is too complicated, only the former case was explored in the article. Attempts were made to solve semantic fuzziness in English-Chinese translation in order to help the target text receptors process the information at the least possible processing effort. Substitution, contraction, supplementation and conversion between affirmation and negation were suggested as some of the strategies.

Keywords: the relevance theory; semantic fuzziness; English- Chinese translation; solutions

1. Introduction

Fuzziness is unavoidable in that humans need to represent unlimited world realities and imaginations with limited linguistic forms. Moreover, fuzziness is sometimes an aesthetic feature of writing strived for on purpose. Most of the time, fuzziness is not a problem; we can bridge what is missing or unsaid with the help of our cognitive abilities and world knowledge as well as of the

co-text and context. But due to the differences in language structures and culture, we sometimes have to render explicit what is fuzzy in the source text to make sure the target text receptors can understand the information without paying too much processing effort. This paper intended to explore how to lessen and eliminate fuzziness in doing English-Chinese translation in light of the Relevance Theory, esp. the principle of maximal relevance.

The Relevance Theory was put forward by French linguists Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* [1] in 1986 with further revisions in 1995. This paper also referred to *Meaning and Relevance* [2] edited by Deidre Wilson and Dan Sperber in 2011, the latest update of the theory. The theory has become the underlying theory for pragmatics since its publication, and been used widely in discourse analysis, pragmatics, semantics, translation, and so on. According to the theory [1], communication is an ostensive-inferential process, ostensive on the side of the speaker, and inferential on the side of the receptor. The process is constrained by two principles: The principle of cognition and the principle of communication. The principle of cognition says that human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance, while the principle of communication says that every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance [1]. And the presumption of optimal relevance means: (a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it; (b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences [1]. The consequences of the above two principles are: (a) the rational way to go about interpreting an utterance, or any other ostensive stimulus, is to follow a path of least effort and stop at the first interpretation that satisfies one's expectation of relevance; (b) any extra processing effort must be compensated with higher contextual effect [1].

In the Relevance Theory, "context, or the mutually manifest cognitive environment, not only simply means the preceding linguistic text, or the environment in which the utterance takes place, but also the set of assumptions brought to bear in arriving at the intended interpretation. These may be drawn from the preceding text, or from observation of the speaker and what is going on in the immediate environment, and they may also be drawn from cultural or scientific knowledge, common-sense

assumptions, and, more generally, any item of shared or idiosyncratic information that the receptor has access to at the time.

To sum up, language communicators give utterances and understand them by following the principle of maximal relevance or the principle of optimal relevance. Relevance is not a rule forced on communication; rather, it is an inherent feature of it. Relevance is a function of the processing effort and the positive cognitive effect. Other things being equal, the least the effort, the better; other things being equal, the more the effect, the better. In doing English-Chinese translation, the two principles, esp. the principle of maximal relevance, should be consciously strived for. And the focus of this paper is mainly on the principle of maximal relevance.

2. English-Chinese Translation in Light of the Principle of Maximal Relevance

2.1. Procedures of Translation

This section is about the application of the principle of maximal relevance to driving fuzziness towards explicitness in English-Chinese translation. The first step of translation is to make explicit what is fuzzy in the source text. Fuzziness is an aesthetic feature of language, completely different from misrepresentation [3]. Since proper translation is based on an accurate comprehension of the exact meaning of the source text, it is necessary to make explicit in the target text what is hidden or fuzzy in the source text when the fuzziness hinders the understanding of the text. And this process is guided by the relevance-based principles of cognition and communication. Xiong Xueliang [4] expounded the functioning of the two principles of relevance very economically and effectively as: Relevance is a function of processing effort and contextual effect. Of course, contextual effect only refers to positive effect according to the later versions of the theory [5]. In other words, information processing of humans involves a rational allocation of cognitive resources, so only those items of information that are highly salient can attract the attention of people, and only those presuppositions that can achieve enough positive contextual effect can deserve the processing effort of humans. That is, people do not make willful and unconstrained associations. Only those items of information that are relevant to the intention(s) of the speaker, relevant to the context, and are very likely to be retrieved through the first round of inference are the information intended by the speaker/writer and should be retrieved by the receptor.

To sum up, relevance is neither a goal to be pursued, nor a rule to be followed [1]: it is just the inherent nature of communication and cognition. It guides the whole process of discourse analysis, from disambiguation, determination of references, eclipses and deixis, through the judgment of coherence down to the inference and confirmation of implicatures, and so on. And the task at this step is to make sure of the informative message and communicative intention of the speaker/writer.

The second step of translation is to do the conversion from the source text to the target text according to the

above-mentioned theoretic assumptions. Problems often occur where semantic fuzziness exists in the source text. Sometimes it is acceptable to carry what is fuzzy into the target text, but sometimes it is not. That is to say, to lessen unnecessary processing effort on the side of the target text receptors, some fuzzy information in the source text shall be made explicit in the target text, while some will be kept unchanged. In the section below, some strategies were explored. To be specific, it is the principle of maximal relevance that is mainly used in this article. The application of the principle of the optimal relevance was not discussed here for its complexity.

2.2. Strategies to Make Fuzzy Information Explicit in Translation

Bertrand Russel [6] proposed that all of the languages are more or less fuzzy. Although fuzziness may be a virtue, many times it cannot be transferred to the target text in translation either because of the different language structures or because of different cognitive ways of the users of the two languages. To lessen the processing workload of the target language receptors, attempts were made to make explicit some fuzzy information in translation. This paper mainly took sentences for instance from an article “Analog Clocks” published in the *New York Times* on May 10, 2020. Other examples were taken from my own stock which have been accumulated in my teaching career. The sentence quoted was marked as “a”, to be followed by a paraphrasing sentence “b” which was further followed by a suggested translation marked as “c” presented in the Chinese Pinyin. All examples were numbered consecutively. The following are some of the strategies.

2.2.1. Substitution

Substitution is often adopted to use another expression in the place of the fuzzy one. Below are some examples.

[1a] My sister can't read an analog clock.

[1b] My sister can't read a hand clock.

[1c] WO MEIMEI KAN BU DONG ZHIZHENG SHIZHONG.

Comment: “analog” in “analog clock” needs more processing effort without yielding more positive contextual effect. To substitute “hand” for “analog” is more economical because the ordinary receptors are much more familiar with “hand clocks” than with the more formal and less familiar “analog clocks”.

[2a] I could be a minute early or late, depending on my head-tilt.

[2b] *My reading* could be a minute early or late, depending on different angels of my head-tilt.

[2c] WO DU DE SHIJIAN KENENG ZAO YIFENZHENG HUO WAN YIFENGZHONG, ZHE QVJUEYU WO TOU QINGXIE DE JIAODU.

Comment: to understand the sentence, the receptor must activate his life experience about the fuzziness of the reading of a clock for the seamless flux of time. Two words or phrases must be interpreted: I and head-tilt. In fact, “I” does not refer to “I” as a person, instead, it refers to “my reading of the time shown on the clock”, thus

making a metonymy. The other word is “head-tilt”, which implies “different degrees from which I move my head to look at the clock”.

[3a] A simple circle, it is the direct descendant of the sundial, connecting us to the mysteries of our forebears and their weird scientific achievements, to a time when the sky told humans *how to live*.

[3b] A simple circle, it is the direct descendant of the sundial, connecting us to the mysteries of our forebears and their weird scientific achievements, to a time when the sky told humans *when to do what*.

[3c] ...RUHE ANPAI ZUOXI.

Comment: The reference of “how to live” in “when the sky told humans how to live” is too general. The clues provided by “sundial” and the bigger context “clock” bring the *time* shade of meaning to dominance, so it can be inferred that people look at the sky to get the time for doing things, which is a subordinate of the superordinate concept “how to live”. In other words, this is a metonymy involving the use of a general term for a concrete one. But in translation, the process was reversed.

[4a] What could it possibly matter?

[4b] Had I missed anything important?

[4c] WO YOU MEIYOU CUOGUO SHENMO ZHONGYAO D SHIQING?

Comment: In the context the sentence 4a implies the possible result of not knowing the time, and that possible result is the failure to pay attention to and deal with that thing in time. To replace it with a completely different sentence but of equivalent effect will cost much less processing effort from the receptor.

2.2.2. Contraction

By *contraction* it is meant fusing two or more elements in the source text into one.

[5a] A labor inspector took the Disney organization to court this week, contending that the company’s dress and appearance code—which bans *moustaches*, *beards*, excess weight, short skirts and fancy stockings—offends individual liberty and violates French labor law.

[5b] A labor inspector took the Disney organization to court this week, contending that the company’s dress and appearance code—which bans *the hair growing on one’s lower face*, excess weight, short skirts and fancy stockings—offends individual liberty and violates French labor law.

[5c]...HUZI...

Comment: Sometimes some co-ordinate terms are put together to avoid missing a member in a type of thing. But in translation, it is not necessary to list them one by one. Contracting them into one is often adopted.

Beards and *moustaches* are sub-types of the hair growing on one’s lower face, so in Chinese, the word HUIZI is enough.

2.2.3. Supplementation

[6a] The hands got tangled, and the minute dragged the hour with it in a wrenching existential battle.

[6b] The hands got tangled, and *the hand for* the minute dragged *the hand for* the hour with it in a

wrenching existential battle.

[6c] ZHIZHENG CHAN ZAI YIQI, FENZHEN TUOZHE SHIZHEN ZHUANDONG, SIHU ZAI JINXING SHUSI BODOU.

Comment: “the minute” and “the hour” here make metonymy, referring to the hand that tells the minute and the hour respectively. In Chinese, the metonymy is not acceptable, so the Chinese character for “hand” must be put back to make the source text explicit.

[7a] I weep not for the stick shift.

[7b] I weep not for the disappearance of the car with a stick shift.

[7c] WO BUSHI YINWEI BUHUI KAI SHOUDONGDANG DE CHE ER KU.

Comment: “the stick shift” here does not simply mean the part to control the speed of a car; instead, it suggests much more than that, and it needs two steps to get the final meaning: the first step, “a car with a stick shift” (to form a metonymy); the second step, the contextual information “inability to drive such a car”.

2.2.4. Domestication

This strategy is highly advisable when some culture-specific terms appear in the source text and there is the equivalent term to replace it in the target language. In this case, the strategy of domestication is advisable.

[8a] The man is waiting to cross the Styx.

[8b] The man is waiting to cross the Naiheqiao.

[8c] ZHEREN DENGZHE GUO NAIHEQIAO LE.

Comment: In Greek mythology, the Styx refers to the river in the after-life world through which the souls of the dead are ferried. In Buddhism, there is a similar place through which the soul of a dead person has to pass, that is, Naiheqiao. Substitution of Naiheqiao for Styx is highly advisable.

2.2.5. Conversion between affirmation and negation

Sometimes affirmative structures should be converted to the negative ones, or vice versa, to cater to the target language routines, hence costing less processing effort from the receptors.

[9a] I ... could *never* refold a map *without* making a crumpled mess.

[9b] I ... would make a crumpled mess *whenever* refolding a map.

[9c] MEIMEI CHONGXIN ZHEDIE DITU, WO ZONG ZHEDE ZHOUBABA YITUANZAO.

Comment: “could never refold a map without making a crumpled mess” contains a double negation, and to convert it into an affirmative structure will make it much easier for the Chinese receptor to understand.

3. Conclusion

This paper explored some strategies to make fuzzy information explicit in English-Chinese translation under the guidance of the principles of relevance, esp. the principle of maximal relevance. Fuzziness may constitute an aesthetic feature of language, but when it requires more processing effort at the cost of less cognitive effect in translated versions, it will become a weakness and

must be tackled to lessen the processing effort from the target text receptors.

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