

## **Translation: Theory or Practice?**

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**Abstract.** Writing on translation theory and the way it should be taught in schools or universities still appears to be dominated by rules formulated a long time ago on what is mainly typified as a description of a good translation. It is unfortunate that some translation theorists have taken the stance to declare that translation is a craft, ignoring the potentiality of creating a comprehensive theory of translation. In this paper, translation theory is not to be regarded only as an exercise focusing on language learning; it is a discipline in its own right. This paper argues that translation theory is an aid to the translator. It helps him capture the sense and the spirit of verbal and non-verbal elements in texts. Any attempt to teach translation without resorting to translation theory would fail to produce certain elements, which are essential to the effectiveness and efficiency of a text. Therefore, a good translator is one who can link between translation theory and translation practice. Translation theory enriches the translator's knowledge of the text. It provides insights into cross-cultural semantics and pragmatics. Above all, it equips the translator with adequate knowledge and understanding of the techniques and ways of approaching a text.

### **Introduction**

During the past two decades or so, many views have been put forward towards the importance of teaching translation theory to students of translation. Other views advocate the idea that students of translation need only translation practices. In this paper, I would like to look first at translation as an exercise. Second, I would like to argue that translation is a combination of theory and practice; it is neither a practical nor theoretical exercise, but rather a combination of both. The comments made here are not intended to be applied only to the process of translating a text from Arabic into English, but can also be applied to the process of translating all texts.

It is to be noted that graduate or undergraduate translation students, enrolling in a translation course, will definitely benefit from making themselves aware of the principles and rules of translation theory. Such rules involve different kinds of topics such as semantics, contrastive linguistics, communication strategies, and above all, the idea of equivalence. There may be some theoretical arguments

students may capture, but these are at an abstract level [1]. To this effect, translation students may not understand or perceive the link between these theoretical issues and the practical exercise of translating different, non-native texts into their own. Now, translation is taught as a language teaching exercise. The problem-solution technique involved in the process of reading the text and comprehending it inevitably encourages the learning of language. It also promotes learning the vocabularies, understanding syntax, idioms, and style. All these are to be captured from a close analysis of the source text which translation requires. The goal of the translation activities should not be limited to these issues; it should involve other modern language exercises at a professional level.

The objective of translation training is to elicit, from students, activities which do not merely demonstrate the lack of source text comprehension, but which also indicate the appropriateness of the translation as a publishable work. The most important thing, however, is to demonstrate whether linguistics or, in more specific terms, translation theory, helps students in their translation training [1].

### **Theory of Translation**

Definitions of translation are numerous. Some look at it from a semiotic perspective [2]. Others look at it from a communicative perspective in which the translator is interposed between a transmitter and a receiver [3]. For others, translation is always an interpretation [4]. It is the final product of problem-solving [5]. All these views attempt to look at translation as an activity, not as a theory.

Other views are put forward which look at translation as a theory, a set of rules and principles that are helpful in the analysis of texts. For example, the theory of translation is a form of comparative linguistics. Translation is "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)." The equivalence of grammatical categories in the (SL) and (TL) becomes a basis for establishing translation correspondents [6].

Basing translation theory on transformational generative grammar, translators must go beyond explicit text-structure [7]. They should not look at a text as a mere comparison of corresponding structures. The view of language as a generative device is important; it provides the translator first with a technique for analyzing a text. It is not only a technique used in the process of decoding the source text but also a procedure for describing the many and suitable generated corresponding structures in the TL.

From a pragmatic perspective, what is called a translation theory is not a scientific and/or systematic way of looking at a particular text. It is an 'ology'. It is not only a framework of principles and strategies but also a background for

problem solving. Translation theory's main concern is to determine appropriate translation methods for the widest possible range of texts or text categories [8].

The approach of contrastive linguistics is useful enough to deal with choices and decisions of the source language text. The contrastive linguistics approach is mainly concerned with the mechanics of the text, the technical aspects of the text. "Translation theory is concerned with choices and decisions, not with the mechanics of either the source language text (SL) or the target language text (TL) (my underlining) [8].

In view of the above, the invalidity of the contrastive linguistics approach is asserted, simply because translation activity is an entirely different activity from contrastive linguistics; the purpose of the contrastive linguistics approach is to focus on the differences between one language and another especially in a language teaching context. It does not focus on establishing a set of rules, principles, and appropriate methods of handling a particular text.

Furthermore, the contrastive linguistics approach is different from translation activity in the sense that it is a text-oriented activity. That is, the contrastive linguistic approach focuses on language, whereas translation activity focuses on text [8].

Along these lines, translation has been viewed as an important pedagogical device, especially where a foreign language is being learned. Translation is an effective means of learning a language [9]. Taking this into account, one may consider the practicality of the contrastive linguistics approach in improving student's performance in language learning. In other words, the contrastive linguistics approach is a technique for teaching languages and not for teaching translation activities.

Despite what has been stated against the contrastive linguistics approach, it should be pointed out that this approach is not to be entirely avoided [1]. At the language level, generalizations, supporting translation principles and rules, can be made. Any consideration of these rules is indeed helpful for making necessary changes in certain contexts. They are also helpful in demonstrating the necessary loss of information contained in structures whose constituent parts are not in a one-to-one correspondence. This can simply be manifested in the different grammatical categories of the two languages. For example, in an Arabic text where anta "you" and antum "you" (singular & amplified) are used, especially when taking place in a conversation between two people, there is an inevitable loss of information when translated into English. Both Arabic pronouns are translated as "you" in English. In the same way, when 'you' in English is used, there is a gain of information when translated into Arabic, as it can be translated as anta (masc.), anti (fem.), antum

(singular amplified), antum (plural), antuma (masc. Dual), and antunna (fem. Dual). Other issues like gender (absent or present), etc. in various languages may give rise to the same problem.

Along these lines, languages are not different in what they can convey; they are different in what they must convey [10]. Therefore, the contrastive linguistics approach emphasizes these non-equivalences as such, and the theory of translation attempts to demonstrate how these issues are compensated for in certain situations.

### Unit of Translation

It should be made clear that, to the translator, the minimum unit of translation is not a word or a phrase, but a text. Any attempt to look at translation in terms of words or phrases would definitely yield unacceptable results. Some suggest an approach in which one can analyze words into their main components. This method is known as the 'componential analysis' method [8]. Unfortunately, however, this method has some drawbacks, some of which are represented in its unsuitability to the training of translators. Second, this approach focuses on semantic distinctive features isolated from context. Also, this method is of limited applicability, simply because a word taken in isolation from its context is not a translation unit. In this connection, it has been suggested that the relevant language unit for translation is not the individual word, but rather the text [11;12].

### Impact of Translation Theory

It was stated that text is the minimum unit of analysis in translation. Any analysis of the source text consists of inducing information about form and content together with information regarding source, authorship, and aim. The relevant branch that focuses on the analysis as well as the description of texts is called pragmatics. Here, pragmatics refers to the relationship between the sender of the message, the message itself, and the receiver of the message. The relation is represented in Fig. 1.

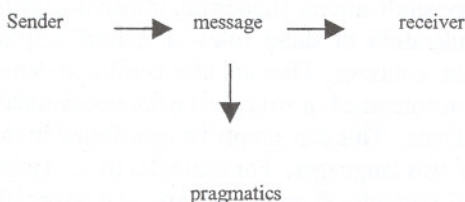


Fig. 1. Representation of sender-message-receiver relation.

There is a constant interaction taking place between the sender, message, and receiver. The aim for which the text is written, and the readership for whom the text is addressed establishes the characters of any text. Here the translator should be able to know whether or not the text is religious, political, literary, journalistic, legal, or technical. Once the text is characterized, the translator is not only identifying the text subject matter, but also delimiting the social context in which the text is produced. Therefore, situating a text in a particular context, and familiarizing himself with the text and its English equivalents is indeed the translator's first priority.

After establishing the domain of the text, features such as tone, function, and feeling are to be taken into account. Awareness of these will have a great bearing on the translator's rendition of the text. Emphasis should also be placed on the formal features that are significant to the make-up of the text. Such features are important in terms of the text-linguistic and text-function categorizations, i.e., whether the text is persuasive, narrative, descriptive, etc. [1].

Within text-function, awareness of the referential meaning of lexes is also significant in determining the nature or domain of the text. Emotive and associative meanings, in Yule's sense [13], will partly account for text-function. The way words are put together are all means of indicating the field, function, and tone of the text. For example, the uses of contracted forms are pointers to informal English. The use of infinitives is also indicative of instructional texts. These issues are pointers to the texture and structure of the text through which a number of 'speech acts' can be recognized. Understanding the conditions represented for an utterance may give an insight into how language is used.

In terms of the linguistic categories of text, a scientific text may exhibit a series of acts or definitions, classifications, generalizations, and/or qualifications, forming larger communicative units such as explanations, descriptions, and reports [9]. The translator may analyze a text in a way in which its formal features are demonstrated. However, an experienced translator may not need to do that; he may intuitively draw these conclusions. Therefore, a translation exercise should make the translator more aware of the multi-faceted nature of translation. It should also enable him to instinctively single out the text's linguistic features.

Based on the above, any analysis of text may yield information relevant to text-structure. Once this is achieved, the text-message becomes very clear. It is this message that has to be rendered effectively and communicatively, simply because it may lead us to a particular translation method. However, the question remains as to whether we should look at this message in terms of its literal vs. free sense, or formal or dynamic equivalence, or whether emphasis should be placed on form or

function. For example, an Arabic translator may translate Ahmad kicked the bucket, as tuwuffiya ahmad. The translator here renders this expression functionally, making the 'meaning of the message' or its function his point of departure. If the translator adheres to form rather than function, his translation would be unacceptable or irrelevant.

Sometimes the translator may resort to adherence to the form of the text. This is applicable to literary translation. In these texts, the main concern of the translator is to highlight the effectiveness of the same semantic and syntactic structures of the source text. Important features should be accounted for such as tone, rhyme, rhythm, order, etc. because these are all essential elements to the make-up of texts.

Within literary translation, the textual and contextual pressures are not only semantic. The visual or physical presence of the text and its intonational qualities are also significant. The non-correspondence between either prosodic or semantic structures does not necessarily imply the impossibility of translating a given unit [5]. On the contrary, it can be an opportunity to actualize the potential structures manifested in the original text, and recorded in the translation of the text that will be semantically dependent and rhythmically independent.

Furthermore, repeated lexical items, nominal vs. verbal sentences, etc., may not remain acceptable items or sentences when translated into English, and this is due to the fact that English has a particular style that does not sometimes conform to Arabic. What seems to be acceptable in Arabic may not be acceptable in English. This results from the fact that Arabic and English are linguistically and culturally remote languages. In order to produce some publishable work, the translator has to assess the text textually and structurally, and then find the best strategy and style that would yield adequate translation.

### Output Assessment

Assessing the final product of a particular text is the translator's main concern. Such an assessment is manifested in what is called 'a translated text'. Looking at a translated text, I have tried to trace such text from its authorship to its final product. One significant feature to be accounted for as a final product is its acceptability or readability. Acceptability and/or readability have to be assessed according to the text-producer's intention. To increase the familiarity of significant aspects of translation, one has to view this along with the communicative theory, as this theory has an important role to play in bringing up the theoretical course. It also introduces the student translator to the information theory, i.e., what is important or what is not in a message. It is possible that some of the natural

linguistic and cultural trivialities may be avoided if not lost in translation, thus bringing forth the important information [1].

When evaluating a text, the translator should take into account the intention of the ST and its impact on the reader. The relationship between author and reader has to be checked. Also, does the translation aim at a reader or particular readers? In any kind of translation, the translator's main aim is to produce a text that is equivalent in response to the ST.

From a pedagogical point of view, the student translator may find comparing the original text and target text significantly useful. This activity does not involve finding the translator's mistakes, but analyzing the problem and finding the solution. Similar exercises are also helpful in terms of enabling students to differentiate between important and unimportant information.

### Conclusion

I have tried to argue in this paper that teaching the theory of translation to students of translation is extremely important. If theory stops short at studying the semantic, syntactic analysis of language, student translators may find themselves unable to render a text effectively and communicatively into the target language [1]. Those who are aware of the theory of translation may envisage and appreciate the link between theory of translation and practice. Any attempt to avoid application of theory to actual texts may yield unacceptable results. Theory and practice must be linked together in any translation exercise simply because one contributes significantly to the other in the sense that theory of translation makes students of translation aware of language complexities; it gives them a sense of creativity and intellect.

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## الترجمة: نظرية أم تطبيق؟

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**ملخص البحث.** تحاول هذه الدراسة أن تبين أن عملية الترجمة ليست فقط نشاطا عمليا يقوم به المترجم، إنما هي علم ونظام قائم بحد ذاته. كما وتحاول أن توضح أيضا أن الربط بين نظرية الترجمة والتطبيق أو الممارسة أمر مهم جدا لا يمكن تجاهله، وذلك لأن عملية الربط هذه تساعد المترجم على فهم وتحليل العناصر أو الظواهر النصية وغير النصية الموجودة في النص. وتؤكد الدراسة أخيرا على أن المترجم الجيد هو الذي يربط بين النظرية والتطبيق أو الممارسة، ذلك لأن نظرية الترجمة تزيد من رؤية وإحساس المترجم بالنص وفهمه للعناصر ذات الطابع الثقافي والبرامجاتي المكونة له، مما يسهل ويساعد المترجم على فهم النص ووضع الحلول المناسبة لمعالجته.