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FUNCTIONAL TRANSLATION UNITS

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The article discusses the old concept of translation unit from a new, functional perspective. Traditionally, translation units have been seen as structurally determined text segments bound to language ranks (from the grapheme, phoneme or morpheme level via words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs up to the text rank). The concept of "functional translation units", however, is based on the idea that the communicative functions and subfunctions of a text can be "marked" on various ranks at a time: irony, for example, may be expressed by a syntactic parallelism + an exaggerating adjective + a particular intonation + the speaker's raised eyebrow. All those markers pointing to a particular function or subfunction form a "functional unit" whose translation should be guided by the same strategy to achieve the intended purpose of the target text.

Keywords: functional translation, skopos theory, translation purpose, text function (phatic, referential, expressive, appellative)

1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The concept of "translation unit" is almost fourty years old and has been an object of discussion ever since it was introduced by Vinay and D a r- belnet in their *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais* (1958). Vinay and Darbelnet defined it as "unité de pensée" (unit of thought) linguistically materialized as "le plus petit segment de l'énoncé dont la cohésion des signes est telle qu'ils ne doivent pas être traduits séparément" (the smallest segment of the utterance, where the cohesion of the signs is such that they must not be translated separately). In a way, Vinay and D a r- belnet were nearer to what I am going to suggest here than many of those who in the years to follow used the concept of "translation unit" in order to describe the units translators actually focus upon when they are translating a text. However, there are two major points in which I would like to interpret Vinay/Darbelnet's definition in a somewhat unusual way, and that is with regard to what they call "segment" and "cohésion".

But let me first give you a few explanations as to the functional concept of translation I subscribe to. In Section 2, I will define what I mean by "functional translation unit", and then I will try to illustrate my hypothesis by means of a few

examples. The main point I am going to make is that in order to produce a functional translation it would be more useful to take a kind of bird's eye view on the whole text and look at the network formed by certain elements than split the text “horizontally” into linear segments.

2 THE FUNCTIONAL CONCEPT OF TRANSLATION

The traditional, equivalence-based, concept of translation considers a relationship of (formal, semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, functional etc.) equivalence between source and target text to be an essential prerequisite for “translation proper”, whereas all those cases where equivalence is not required or not possible (such as interlineal versions or adaptations) are exluded from the reign of translation and regarded as non-translations (versions, adaptations, etc.). The main problem with this concept is, in my opinion, that it does not match with reality: In the professional practice of a translator, there are lots of cases where the translator is asked to produce a “translation”, and the conditions or requirements are such that equivalence simply would not do: e.g. in case of a translation of foreign laws or regulations for informative reasons, where the target texts are not meant to function as “laws” in the target community, in the translation of contracts, school reports, birth certificates, driving licenses, and the like. In these cases, the translation serves to inform the target reader about the source text and/or some of its characteristics, which can be considered as some kind of metatextual function (like that of a text commentary or a review). Even literary translations, which many of the equivalence supporters actually have in mind, cannot be considered as “equivalent” in all respects, since they usually (at least in our days) refrain from substituting source-culture reality by target-culture reality (which alone would warrant an “equivalence of communicative effect”). On the other hand, there are many cases where adaptation is an essential part of the translation assignment: translations of advertisements, of commercial correspondence or the like would not be apt to fulfil the intended functions if they weren't adapted to target-culture norms, expectations, habits, world knowledge and perspective, etc. In these cases, it would not be wise to restrict the concept of “translation” merely to the translator’s *re*producing activities and leave the “rest” to an adaptor or to the translator-as-adaptor, because it is in fact *one* process combining reproductive and adaptive phases, and, anyway, it is precisely the translator's responsibility to decide which “elements” of the text may be reproduced and which may, or have to be, adapted *before* he or she starts on the translation process.

Translation, therefore, can be considered as a process made up of both reproducing and adapting procedures, and the proportions corresponding to either part may vary from one assignment to another. It is important to note, however, that these proportions are not determined by the source text as such, or by the genre it belongs to, but that the decisive criteria are provided by the translation assignment or, as I call it in translator training, the translation brief (see Nord

1997). This means that one and the same source text may be translated in different ways under different assignments. The translation of a foreign law for a lawyer who wants to know how other communities regulate a particular problem need not correspond to the linguistic, semantic and stylistic norms of target-culture laws, but if it is translated for members of a multilingual and multicultural community, it has to exhibit exactly the linguistic, semantic and stylistic features which alone establish the authority of a law for target-culture members.

The essence of the functional concept of translation which was first brought forward by Hans Vermeer in 1978 under the label of "Skopstheorie" and afterwards elaborated by Hönig/Kussmaul (1982),
R e i s s/Vermeer (1984) and others, can, therefore, be resumed as follows. A text should be translated in such a way that it can achieve the intended function or functions in the target culture. This is a fine credo, which does not exclude aiming at equivalence or certain forms of equivalence on particular occasions. In the framework of this concept, the production of equivalence may be one out of various possible aims but not the only one.

The problem with this general formulation of the concept is that we have to agree on what "text function" is and how it can be spotted in a text. Personally, I start from the hypothesis that text function is not something inherent in a text, but a pragmatic quality assigned to a text by the recipient in a particular situation after intuitively or cognitively analyzing both the function signals offered by the situational factors (participants, medium, time and place, occasion) and the linguistic, stylistic, semantic or non-verbal textual markers indicating the sender's intention(s). To be more precise: after the situational markers have produced a particular expectation in the recipient with regard to the function or functions the text is probably intended for, and the recipient then looks for confirmation (or correction) in the text itself. It has been proved by empirical studies that recipients tend to establish coherence between their expectations and the markers they find in the text. This is why in normal text reception we do not even notice faults and errors unless they really cause coherence breakdowns or we find that we have been misled by situational clues. Just imagine a priest in service at the moment when you expect the sermon to begin, who starts off commenting on a football game. You might think this a rare or even inappropriate introduction for a sermon, but, in this case, it serves as introduction for this particular sermon. And then you find out that his eyes which you thought were directed at some distant point between heaven and earth are in fact looking at a television set fixed on the wall behind you and he is really commenting on a football game.... At what point will you be convinced that his words are not meant for some sermon-like purpose?

What I want to point out is that successful communication relies on everybody behaving more or less as expected, and this is precisely the advantage of categorizing texts in genres or text-types, because when you recognize a text type on the basis of some extratextual or intratextual markers, then it will be much easier to "understand", i.e. to assign to the text precisely the function the sender wants you to assign to it.

Now, a text can be intended for a variety of functions. To make things easier in translator training, I suggest a rather simple framework which is based on the models by Karl Bühler (1934) and Roman Jakobson (1960), establishing four basic textual functions: referential function, expressive function, appellative function, and phatic function. I will briefly characterize these functions and some of their subfunctions:

(a) Referential function (i.e. reference to objects and phenomena of the world). Some subfunctions: informative function (object: e.g. a traffic accident), metalinguistic function (object: e.g. a particular use of language), instructive function (object: e.g. the correct way of handling a washing machine), teaching function (object: e.g. Geography) etc.
(b) Expressive function (i.e. expression of the sender's attitude or feelings towards the objects and phenomena dealt with in the text). Some subfunctions: emotive function (expression of feelings, e.g. in interjections), evaluative function (expression of evaluation, e.g. in a political commentary).
(c) Appellative function (i.e. appealing to the recipients' experience, feelings, knowledge, sensitivity etc. in order to induce them to react in a specific way). Some subfunctions: illustrative function (intended reaction: recognition of something known), persuasive function (intended reaction: adopt the sender's viewpoint), imperative function (intended reaction: do what the sender is asking for), pedagogical function (intended reaction: learn certain forms of behaviour), advertising function (intended reaction: buy the product).
(d) Phatic function (i.e. establishing, maintaining or finishing social contact). Some subfunctions: salutational function, "small talk" function, "peg" function (e.g. text introductions).

Except for purely phatic expressions or utterances (as in small-talk about the weather), texts are rarely monofunctional, as I have tried to show in my analysis of titles and headings (Nord 1993, 1995); as a rule, however, we find hierarchies of primary, secondary, etc. functions. Moreover, functions are frequently aimed at by indirect means: e.g., by praising the wonderful effects of a particular washing powder (= expressive function), the sender usually wants to bring home an appellative function.

Dealing with translation we have to distinguish between text functions in direct (intracultural) communication and the functions of translations. The latter can be analysed from a double perspective, focussing on (a) the relationship between the translation and its readers (which can be defined in the same terms as the one holding between any original text and its readers), and (b) the relationship between the target text and the corresponding source text.

With regard to the relationship between target and source text, I distinguish two functional translation "types", which I have called "documentary" and "instrumental" translation (cf. Nord 1989) and which are illustrated by the examples given above. A "documentary translation" (i.e. the case of the law translation for the target-culture lawyer) is a kind of metatext marked as a translation (e.g. by stating the source and/or the name of the translator), whereas an "instrumental translation" is an object-text which can serve any purpose and function an original may achieve as well, although the functions of a translated text need not necessarily be the same as those of the corresponding original. Relating target-text functions and source-text functions we may therefore

distinguish between “equifunctional” and “heterofunctional” or “homologous” translations.

3 FUNCTIONAL TRANSLATION UNITS

The described communicative functions, which are seen from the recipient's viewpoint, correlate with communicative intentions on the part of the sender or text producer. Thus, a sender may have phatic, referential, expressive or appellative intentions (with the corresponding sub-intentions). In order to convey their intentions to the reader, who then turns them into “real” functions, senders provide their texts with function, or rather: intention, markers on various levels or ranks: textual markers refer to the overall construction of the text, structural markers refer to the order and form of paragraphs, syntactic markers refer to sentence structures and grammar, lexical markers refer to words and phrases, morphological markers refer to word formation, phonological markers refer to sound patterns, intonation, focus points etc. One particular function can be marked on various levels, and all those markers pointing to a particular function or subfunction form a “functional unit”. A “functional translation unit” is, then, the sum total of text elements or features which are intended (or interpreted to be intended) to serve the same communicative function or subfunction.

The point is that these units are not structurally determined text segments but combinations of purpose-bound elements spread over the whole text forming chains or even networks. Communicative functions may be assumed to be universal - the means by which they are marked are culture-specific, i.e. they may or may not be used in the same way in the source and target cultures. We may even encounter cases of “false friends”, where a particular stylistic device which is used to achieve a particular function in the source culture has quite different functional connotations in the target culture.

In a given transfer situation, the (professional, human) translator analyzes the functional units of the source text and finds out whether they will serve the intended target-text function(s) defined in the translation brief. Functional units or unit-components which are used in the same way in both the source and the target culture can be transferred to the target language as such. Functional units or unit-components which are specific to the source culture or which are used for different purposes in the target culture have to be adapted in order to meet the requirements of the target situation, unless the translating instructions call for a “documentary translation”, which allows for an unchanged reproduction of (at least some) source-text units.

4 EXAMPLE: MELTDOWN OF THE MIND IN A LANGUAGE CLASS

The text is an excerpt from the article “Meltdown of the Mind in a Language Class” by Ted Gup, staff writer for the Washington Post, published in *The Guardian* on August 18, 1985, before Ted Gup went to the People's Republic of China as a Fulbright Scholar to teach journalism (in English).

> ***Meltdown of the Mind in a Language Class***
>
> The potential for insult is infinite. This is the first lesson in learning Chinese. The teacher walks to the blackboard and writes in chalk the word *ma*. Any carpet-bound one-year-old can master that word, I say to myself. But in Chinese, things are rarely as simple as they seem. *Ma* can mean “mother”, or it can mean “horse”, or “hemp” or “to swear”. It all depends on the tone or inflection with which the word is spoken. Here is an early warning that the best of intentions can spark an international accident.
>
> The class is dumbfounded. My wife and I are scribbling in our notebooks, eying the clock for the next three hours and feeling like the victims of a cruel linguistic prank. During the break we wander the halls shellshocked. Staggered by the unfamiliarity of it all. Weeks pass and the class shrinks from nine to a more intimate foursome.There is no one to hide behind.
>
> “How hard can it be,” I ask myself, “if a billion people have it down pat?” That’s one in four on the planet: as many as speak English, Spanish, French, German combined. It doesn’t seem to help.
>
> I am reminded that I have a tin ear. Between *Ja* and *Cha* is a world of sounds to which I am not yet privy. When called on in class, my tongue plays possum. The sounds I’m supposed to say remind me of childhood games - whistling with a mouthful of saltines or reciting the Pledge of Allegiance with a jawbreaker round-ly pressed against the palate.
>
> Mandarin, the dialect I am wrestling with, has four tones. The first is spoken as if one were castrated, with a highpitched sound. The second tone rises. I think of calling to shore while wading into the waters of Maine. The third tone dips and rises. The fourth is like the shuttlecock in badminton, struck midair and driven downward.
>
> Chinese is less like studying a language than learning to sing a capella.

We might imagine a translation brief specifying that the German translation of this text will be used to illustrate the difficulties a European (or Western) learner has in learning Chinese in one of the introductory chapters of a book on the People's Republic of China intended to provide information in a pleasant, humorous way. Such a brief calls for an instrumental, slightly heterofunctional translation.

In a very personal way, the author describes his (and his wife's) experience when learning Chinese. The referential-metalinguistic function resides in the utterances referring to the fact that the Chinese word *ma* has various meanings which are distinguished by four different tones and that Chinese phonology is extremely hard to learn (*cha* - *ja*). This information serves as an example illustrating the (evaluative) statement implied in the title: *Chinese is most difficult to learn*, which is the basic statement of the text, paraphrased antonymically by *Any carpetbound one-year-old can master...* (3/4) and *How hard can it be...* (18-21). These paraphrases mark irony, a subfunction of the expressive function.

> the word *ma* (3), can mean “mother”, “horse”, “hemp”, “to swear” (5/6), it [= the meaning] depends on the tone/inflection with which the word is spoken (6/7), Mandarin has four tones (22), one is spoken with a highpitched sound (23), the second tone rises (23/24), the third tone dips and rises (25), the fourth... downward (26)

Apart from the more “informative” descriptions of the four tones, three of them are characterized by similes introduced by *as if, I think of* and *like* (22ff.). Similes do not work unless the recipient knows the objects or phenomena in question (the voice of a castrated person, the tone in which somebody calls to shore while wading into the ice-cold waters of Maine, and the way a shuttlecock is struck in badminton). Therefore, similes are markers of appellative-illustrative function. The same applies to the “childhood games” (20ff.) and the concluding statement “Chinese is less like.. than...” (27): the readers cannot grasp the difficulties of pronounciation unless they are familiar with the experience alluded to.
The expressive-emotive function is marked by the first person singular or plural of verbs and pronouns, by an inclusive *one*, by metaphorical use of nouns and adjectives referring to the consequences of nuclear catastrophe (*meltdown*) or war (*shellshocked*), some of them stock metaphors (*wrestling, staggered,* in square brackets), others non-stock (*meltdown of the mind*). Since we cannot assume the reader to be interested in the feelings of some unknown journalist, it is probable that these markers are intended as an indirect means of appellative function: the recipients are asked to imagine the described feelings themselves in order to get an impression of how difficult a language Chinese is.

> I say to myself (4), my wife and I (9), we wander (11), I ask myself (14), I am reminded (16), I am not yet privy (17), my tongue plays possum (19), I'm supposed to say, remind me (19), I am wrestling (22), one (23), I think of (24).
>
> Meltdown of the mind (Title), dumbfounded (9), victims, cruel (10), shellshocked, [staggered] (11/12), no one to hide behind (13), [wrestling] (22)

As far as the phatic function is concerned, I would venture the assumption that it is marked by (a) the title (cf. Nord 1993), which opens up the communication between author and readers, and (b) by the informal style of the whole text, which establishes a symmetric relationship between equal partners or even friends. The informal style is marked by short, paratactic sentences (e.g.,1-5), ellipses (12), the use of the present tense in the description of a past event (9-13), forms like *that's, doesn't* (15, 16), colloquial idioms like *have it down pat* (14), *a tin ear* (17), *I am not yet privy* (18), *plays possum* (19). In this case, we find that even the phatic function can be considered to be an indirect means of directing an appeal towards the readers.

Looking at the distribution of function markers we find that the main overall function of the text is the appellative, to which expressive, referential and phatic functions are subordinate or even instrumental.

In order to find out what this means for translation, we may take the following general rules as our point of departure:

(a) The referential function is object-oriented, that is, it depends on the comprehensibility of the text. This function poses translation problems when source and target readers do not share the same previous knowledge about the objects and phenomena referred to (as is often the case with source-culture

realities, or realia). In our text, the “object” is the Chinese language, which cannot be supposed to be familiar to neither the source nor the target receivers. As far as the described aspects of Chinese semantics and phonetics are concerned, however, the necessary information is explicitly included in the source text and will also warrant comprehension for target-text readers. Moreover, we find that German encyclopedic texts on Chinese (cf. *Fischer Lexikon Sprachen*) also refer to the polysemy of the word *ma* and to the four tones of Mandarin as illustrating examples.

There are only two allusions to source-culture realities which will be unfamiliar to German readers: the Pledge of Allegiance and the waters of Maine. Both allusions are used within similes; therefore, their translation must be dealt with in connection with the appellative function.

(b) The appellative function is the one that depends almost exclusively on the receiver of the message. In order to be able to imagine the difficulties of Chinese pronounciation, the readers must have an experience of the “childhood games” alluded to, and if they are supposed to be amazed at the “world of sounds” that lies between *ja* and *cha* (in English transcription!), they must be able to produce two sounds which to them are almost the same. This means that the important point is their likeness and not their existence in Chinese. The same applies to the childhood games; here, the important point is that the children tried to whistle or to recite some well-known ceremonious text with their mouths full of something that made it difficult to do so.

The only direct marker of appellativity is the warning (7-8): “Here is an early warning...”.

(c) The expressive function is sender-oriented. It poses translation problems if it is merely implied or if the source and the target culture are based on different value systems. In our case, the expressive function is explicitly verbalized mainly by evaluative verbs and adjectives, and the value systems can be considered analogous, at least as far as the difficulties in learning Chinese are concerned. So this would not cause any problems in the translation process. But as we have seen, the expressive function is used as an indirect means of aiming at the appellative function, and therefore, the translation of expressive markers follows the same criteria as that of appellative markers. And this means, for example, that the adjectives referring to the effects of bombing cannot be transferred “as such". For German readers above the age of fifty, war-time bombing will not be a very funny thing to be reminded of in a text like this.

(d) Last, but not least, let us briefly look at the phatic function. This function is the one that depends to a large extent on the conventionality of form. The title establishes the first contact between sender and receiver, and therefore, it should conform to the target-culture standards of form and function for a title of this genre: give the general subject of the text (learning Chinese) in a witty, amusing form. An informal style would be marked in German, as in English, by a high frequency of idioms (although the translator should be careful not to use slang), but with sentences that are slightly longer and more connected (no ellipses) in order to give the text a greater fluency. The abbreviated English forms don't have

equivalents in German (forms like *aufm* for *auf dem* would definitely be too familiar in a written text), but this is no problem from the functional point of view: they would be compensated for by some additional idiom or metaphor (for example, translating the first sentence by "Fettnäpfchen lauern überall") or a syntactic device or they might just be left out. One possibility of strengthening the phatic function in the translation might be to address the readers explicitly at the end of the first paragraph: "Seien Sie bloß vorsichtig: Sie könnten in bester Absicht einen internationalen Zwischenfall heraufbeschwören!"

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis of functional instead of structural units has several advantages. First, it conceives the text as a complex construction in which all parts cooperate to obtain certain global purposes. That means, it is indeed the text that is translated, and yet we do have some smaller, more operable units to work on in the translation process. Secondly, it is obvious that linguistic or non-linguistic means of communication are rarely monofunctional. Correlating functional units with text functions, we may be able to disambiguate polyfunctional elements or to use different translation techniques for function A and function B of the same element. Thirdly, if various linguistic means are used to serve the same global purpose, there is no longer any need to count instances. It may be irrelevant whether the evaluative function is expressed by six or by seven adjectives. Thus, "untranslatability" ceases to be the translator's nightmare, because an "untranslatable" rhetorical figure may be "translated" by another device which serves the same purpose, and even an omission becomes justifiable when the function is guaranteed by other means.

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