

Study on Context in College English Translation from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract: Relevance theory which was first put forward by Sperber and Wilson expounded linguistic activities in the framework of cognition. Some scholars applied this theory to translation studies and gained an inspiring result. It was once pointed out that translation is not merely a communicative activity, but also a cognitive activity. Context plays a vital role in our understanding of the text. An effective translation requires translators to reason based on the dynamic context, which is largely dependent on the relevance of the language and environment. As a matter of fact, the process of translation is a process of context reasoning and selecting, which is dynamic and developing with the circumstances changing. When translating, the main task of translators is to figure out the relevance, particularly the optimal relevance between the language and context. According to the principle of relevance, translators can understand the original text accurately, and then render it into target language properly by composing and reasoning the most suitable context. Study on context from the perspective of relevance theory provides a new view to practice translation in college English.

1. Introduction

In college English teaching, teachers are liable to encounter a thorny problem: students are deficient in their capability of translation [1]. This is a problem indeed difficult to deal with, because students have no language environment and sense of language since childhood. This is a congenital deficiency. However, this problem is by no means insurmountable. We can see that there are a lot of talents in English majors in the society, and they are able to communicate with international friends. How are these talents cultivated? After investigation, we will know that the application of correct teaching strategies plays a crucial role in promoting students' ability. In order to avoid the decline in the quality of English talents, teachers are supposed to actively learn advanced experience. From the original classroom teaching to online teaching, college English translation will enter the tide of new media context through our teachers' own efforts.

It is of tremendous significance to cultivate English translation talents with scientific methods. College English translation teaching in the context of new media can best improve teaching efficiency and has positive significance. It is imperative for contemporary teachers to complete the transmission of information with the help of multimedia interactive system relying on computers. In reality, teachers should not only cultivate students to have a solid theoretical foundation, but also

pay attention to using systems to improve students' practical abilities, avoiding simply staying in a pure binary combination state [2].

2. Current Situation of College English Translation Teaching

The teaching of English translation must emphasize practicality. But at present, the teaching is not optimistic, which undoubtedly makes the professional quality of the students we cultivate unqualified. Currently, international communication is becoming increasingly close, and the demand for English professionals is increasing. However, problems in teaching are still existing. Although schools continue to export students to society, these students fail to meet the standards required. They are just putting on airs without real skills. It is impossible for them to engage in foreign language translation work. There are various reasons for this situation. We cannot simply attribute the problem to one aspect. We all know that there are great differences between Chinese and Western cultures, for which reason there exist significant differences between Chinese and English texts. Due to the fact that they didn't grow up in a specific cultural context, they are unable to understand logical relationships in English. Hence, they are translating works in a mandatory manner. Their translation seems to be very eccentric. Observing students, we can find that they have common problems in translation. The entire translation has become the text of English, but the structure of Chinese. Although compared with previous stages, college students' understanding abilities have improved, their language proficiency is rather limited. Their translation is very rigid.

In fact, to English major students, they are expected to take translation as an indispensable part of their life. Translation teaching should be turned into native language teaching. Nevertheless, the current translation teaching is no different from foreign language teaching. The result is that students still have misconceptions. They fail to develop abilities through learning.

3. Principles of Relevance Theory

As long as a certain information or discourse achieves any contextual effect under certain conditions, it has relevance [3]. The greater the contextual effect is produced, the stronger the relevance will be. Hence, the conditions for obtaining relevance for new information can be summarized as follows.

Under certain contextual conditions, new information interacts with existing contextual assumptions to produce contextual implications.

Under certain contextual conditions, new information reinforces or validates existing contextual assumptions.

Under certain contextual conditions, new information conflicts with existing contextual assumptions.

The first principle (cognitive principle): Human cognition tends to coincide with maximum relevance.

The second principle (communicative principle): Every discourse or ostensive communicative act should assume its own optimal relevance.

The distinction between maximum relevance and optimal relevance is the main content of relevance theory. Maximum relevance refers to the listener's effort to achieve the maximum contextual effect while understanding the discourse. In contrast, optimal relevance is to obtain sufficient contextual effects after paying effective reasoning efforts when understanding the discourse. Generally, human cognition coincides with maximum relevance, so we can only expect communication to produce an optimal relevance.

To achieve optimal relevance, discourse must meet the following two conditions.

The contextual effect of discourse is sufficient to attract the attention of the listener.

The listener makes reasoning efforts to achieve contextual effects.

According to the above relevance hypothesis, if a discourse has optimal relevance, it must first have maximum relevance.

4. Reflections on College English Translation Teaching

4.1 Making reasonable selection of teaching materials and arrangement of course content

Textbooks are an important carrier for disseminating knowledge. In order to improve classroom teaching effectiveness, we need to reform the existing teaching materials. It is of great importance to select English translation textbooks that are innovative and suitable for the development of the times, while also close to life and social reality, in order to highlight the practicality of the textbooks and improve students' enthusiasm and initiative in English translation teaching. In addition to selecting appropriate teaching materials, we also need to reasonably arrange the course content and strengthen the design of the course content. Due to the relatively small number of class hours in English translation courses in various universities, we can organize more extracurricular activities to make up for this. Teachers can also use high-tech information technology to make the course content more visual and concrete, making it more multi-angled, richer, and three-dimensional.

4.2 Improving the construction of teacher team

In order to effectively improve the quality of English translation teaching, great importance should be attached to the improvement of teachers' translation ability and strengthen the construction of English translation teachers' team. Among the teams engaged in English teaching, specialized foreign language translation teachers account for only a small proportion, and some even are novices. Therefore, it is necessary to continuously strengthen the study and research of translation theories and skillful methods for teachers engaged in English translation teaching. English teachers engaged in the teaching of English translation should not only have a high level of English, but also have a high level of Chinese language, and have an understanding of the cultures of various countries around the world. Colleges and universities should actively engage well-known guest professors in English translation teaching to guide college students in English translation. According to different training objectives, hiring translators with rich experience in interpretation and translation to conduct practical case teaching can help college students walk out of the classroom and cultivate their practical abilities.

4.3 Improving students' comprehensive language ability

The current teaching of English translation needs to correct students' understanding of translation learning, and it cannot be considered that translation is not as important as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, nor can it be considered that a high level of English is equivalent to a strong ability of translation. It is of significance to correct college students' attitudes towards English translation learning and improve their language proficiency. In English teaching, it is necessary to continuously expand the accumulation of vocabulary, strengthen the learning and mastery of translation knowledge and skills, and understand the cultural background, cultural differences, semantics, and context of English and Chinese languages [4]. Improving students' comprehensive language ability is the only way to boost their English translation capability.

5. Discussion on Context from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

5.1 Static context and dynamic context

Many Chinese linguists and translators believe that the traditional context is static, and in the process of translation, it is only necessary to synthesize the context for literal translation. But as a matter of fact, static research on context cannot meet the needs of dynamic communication processes. Halliday believes that the implicit meaning of context is not only determined by the text, but also by some factors of the communicator itself that can attract people's attention. The meaning of the context changes as the communicator's negotiating factors change. He believes that pragmatics is the study of interactive meaning. In her view, the context is dynamic and changes with factors such as event background, character emotions, and cultural differences [5].

As is known to all, there are many constituents for context. These constituents are equivalent to a knowledge shared base, which is of great importance for the understanding and expression of discourse or text. However, not all contextual constituents can be considered contexts. Only those constituents that are closely related to the current context can form a context. Professor Zhu Yongsheng points out that all subjective and objective factors that may have an impact on context will not constitute context if they lose their relevance to language communication [6]. Usually, people view language communication as a gradual process of information dissemination, with all participants playing the roles of the speaker and listener. But Frank Dance holds different views on this. He believes that the process of communication is a thinking process of transformation and upgrading, while language communication is a gradual process of transformation and development [7]. Every successful transformation of information and meaning means that communication will reach a new level. Otherwise, if one participant does not understand or misunderstands the true meaning of the other participant, the information dissemination will be blocked or returned. In other words, language communication is dynamic, and there is a causal, transitional, and conflicting relationship between the initial information and the latter type of information. In this way, the context will change as the information or plot evolves. Therefore, context is both a static concept and a dynamic communication.

From the perspective of college English pragmatics, static context is absolutely important, but we place more emphasis on dynamic context, because communication is based on the generation and interpretation of interactive meaning on the one hand, and dynamic negotiation and interpretation based on context on the other, and all communication starts from a relevant given context, and follows a surface reasoning model to dynamically and effectively draw invisible implicit premises and conclusions. In fact, the process of understanding a discourse or text is the process of selecting contextual perspectives, propositions, and theories. Listeners should choose some relevant contextual components to form a communication environment within a limited time, so that people can understand the discourse or text faster and more effectively. For dynamic context, context is not always seen as a shared knowledge base related to discourse, but rather as a constantly evolving process that reflects the dynamic relationship between the communicator and the environment. On the one hand, communicators should be limited by the context and atmosphere, which means that only translations that adapt to a specific context and atmosphere are meaningful. On the other hand, communicators can intentionally manipulate contextual elements to form a context conducive to their language communication. In other words, the communicator is not only subject to the context, but also by the text.

5.2 Cognitive context

From the perspective of relevance theory, context is a psychological concept. Context originates

from a psychological construct of the translator or reader, which is a subset of their assumptions about the world [8]. So for relevance theory, context does not refer to certain parts of the external environment of the communicator, which are unrelated to the discourse environment, reality, cultural factors, natural and social environments before and after. Instead, it refers to what they call assumptions about the world or a part of the cognitive environment. Hence, cognitive context is a discussion of context from the perspective of relevance theory and within a cognitive framework. The concept of cognitive context considers various external factors, but the focus is on the information they provide and their psychological availability in the interpretation process. Just as Sperber and Wilson noted, “A person’s cognitive environment may contain a large amount of potentially diverse information [9]. This includes not only the information perceived by a person in the physical environment, which can be retrieved from the brain, but also the information obtained from previous discourse and any cultural or other knowledge stored there.” Since any of these information can serve as a potential context, the most important question for successful communication is: how can the listener or translator try to choose the actual, speaker expected hypothetical environment from all the assumptions they can use? Take the following as an example:

A: Do you like Western food?

B: I am an Italian.

From the example above, A raised a simple question in hope that B would give a direct answer like “yes” or “no”. However, B gave a confusing and irrelevant answer, which was beyond A’s understanding. Under this circumstance, A needs to make some efforts to guess or reason about the actual meaning of B. After a series of assumptions and searching in the mind, A may acquire the information: Western food originated from Italy and almost every Italian often eats Western food. Until then, A may have known the actual meaning of B: of course, I like Western food.

Take another example:

A: Do you want to go with me to Sanya trip?

B: I like the weather in Sanya.

In this situation, A was wondering if B could go to Sanya with him for a trip. Hence, A raised this question in the hope of a definite answer. Nevertheless, B didn’t give A the definite answer as he expected. Instead, he gave A an irrelevant answer. Of course, A would feel confused about what B was implying. Did it mean B wanted to go to Sanya? At this point, A should guess and infer the actual meaning of B based on some contextual elements, such as time, location, situation, B’s personality and emotions, and the relationship between A and B. If B said Sanya is too hot, then B’s true meaning was “No, thanks”. If B said he liked the weather there, then B’s true meaning was “I am willing to be with you.”

As illustrated by the example above, the same sentence may have different meanings or implications. The key lies in how to choose the correct or appropriate sentence meaning under certain circumstances. Any discourse has different meanings in different situations. The speaker should express crucial points through contextual reasoning, guiding the audience to infer the actual situation in the correct direction. Humans have a natural interest in improving their understanding of the world around them, which is composed of their assumptions about the world and memory. That is to say, humans like to internalize the external environment and form cognitive contexts based on their own experiences, which can help them correctly understand the true meaning of discourse and texts. Thus, cognitive context is not established before understanding discourse, but rather through continuous selection during the process of understanding.

The process of processing and selecting the optimal context is the process of finding the optimal correlation between discourse and context [10]. But the selection of context will definitely expand the context. In the research results of traditional relevance theory, cognitive context is static, fixed, and isolated, but many translation scholars have proven that context is actually a dynamic concept

in the development of language information. In order to make the discourse more logical and realistic, it is necessary to add more relevant assumptions to the context.

The context is dynamic and cognitive, consisting of a series of assumptions that people come up with in order to correctly understand the discourse. For text, context is the carrier of human thinking activities, and the key driving force that affects people's understanding of discourse is their cognitive ability to the world. The implementation of the dynamic characteristics of context enables us to re-examine the concept of communicative competence, which not only refers to the ability to possess knowledge and generate appropriate communicative behavior, but also includes more knowledge. In order to have communication skills, people should also be able to actively manipulate various aspects of the context to attain their communication goals and effectively interpret meaning by creating appropriate contexts for the interpreter. In theory, the key to discourse understanding is how to find contextual relevance from a dynamic cognitive context.

6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, discussing translation context from the perspective of relevance theory opens up a new perspective for the perfection and specialization of the translation. In this theory, translation is actually a process in which cognition and assumptions are constantly inferred and supported. The relevance translation method regards translation as the author of the target text, and it can be said that the translator is a medium between the author and the reader. By searching for cognitive and dynamic contexts, translators can easily find the optimal correlation between language and context, and then accurately convey the author's true meaning to readers.

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