Towards a Text-World Approach to Translation and Its Pedagogical Implications

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ABSTRACT

Although it is widely acknowledged that translation is a cognitive process, there is scarcely any study establishing connections between the text and mental representations and giving a systematic and comprehensive explanation for this pivotal yet magical mechanism. Illuminated by Text World Theory, this study proposes a text-world approach to translation studies and addresses its implications for translator training. Translation is regarded as a cognitive communicative process of reproducing texts as worlds. The (in)coherence among text worlds as they are represented in translation provides a legitimate criterion for the evaluation of translation competence. To view translation as a cognitive-linguistic process of text-world construction and presentation may promise a more proactive approach to translator training by encouraging translator trainees to pay special attention to the expansion of their knowledge structures.

KEYWORDS

Mental Representations, Text World Theory, Translation Process, Translator Training

INTRODUCTION

Since concepts from cognitive studies were brought into the study of translation, the process of translation has become a heated topic for discussion (see Dank et al., 1997; Shreve & Angelone, 2010). Although a “reformulation stage” (Delisle, 1988, p. 69) has been widely acknowledged when the source text is comprehended and then re-verbalized in the target text, there has not been a comprehensive and systematic theoretical explanation for this pivotal-yet-magical process.

Characterized by its comprehensive application of cognitivist principles in analytical practice, Text World Theory is a cognitive-linguistic model for discourse analysis. Text-world theorists believe that it is text worlds, i.e. our mental representations of discourse, that play an essential role in our understanding of utterances and expressions of ideas (Werth, 1999, p. 7). As such, when relating to translation, we may assume that it is text worlds that function as the media linking translators’ comprehension of the source text and their production of the target text.

Illuminated by a text-world model on translation studies, this paper will discuss translation at the interface of language and cognition, probing into the matching of linguistic expressions and mental representations in translation. To this end, Text World Theory not only provides a theoretical basis for our understanding of the cognitive process of translation but also has pedagogical implications for translator training.

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AN OVERVIEW OF TEXT WORLD THEORY

Text World Theory is, in general, a cognitive-linguistic model that brings cognitive psychology into discourse analysis. The notion of text worlds was developed by Paul Werth in the 1990s with an aim to reveal the cognitive processes of human minds in language processing. It was further developed into a theory and elaborated by Joanna Gavins (2007) in her monograph *Text World Theory: An Introduction*.

According to Text World Theory, when people have verbal communication, either in the written or spoken form, the receiver, aided by knowledge-frames previously accumulated, constructs mental representations, i.e. text worlds, for comprehension and knowledge incrementation. In this light, text worlds in this study are regarded as the key to the cognitive communicative process of translation, during which texts are comprehended and reproduced as worlds. “World” is an essential concept in Text World Theory. It is a “conceptual domain representing a state of affairs” (Werth, 1999, p. 206). There are three world levels that are of special interest to a text world theorist—the discourse world, the text world, and the sub-world.

The discourse world is the situational context when people communicate with one another. This notion is similar to situationality, one of the seven features consisting textuality of any given text as proposed by Neubert & Shreve (1992, pp. 84-88). Their difference is that situationality focuses on the sociocultural context in which a text is located, whereas the discourse world emphasizes the “states-of-affairs conceived of by participants” (Werth, 1999, p. 84). Discourse world might be more easily defined in interpreting given the face-to-face nature of the interaction. The identities of the speaker and listener as well as their relationships and the surrounding context are usually clear and certain. In addition, the body language, facial expressions and tones of the speaker will also aid interpreters in understanding the discourse so they can translate appropriately. In the translation of written texts, however, due to the separation of discourse world participants (including the writer, the translator, and both the source text reader and the target text reader) in most cases, the source text is in many cases the main source of discourse information.

The “precise structure and cognitive effects of individual mental representations” (Werth, 1999, p. 10) are examined through “text worlds”, which is the main focus of our discussion. Subordinate to the text world it springs from, a sub-world has similar componential elements to those of a text world. Attitudinal sub-worlds reflect the attitudes of participants in the text world, such as their desires, beliefs and purposes. Modal sub-worlds are related to participants’ assessment of factors such as truth, probability and reliability. It is worth noting that relevant topics on attitude and modality are also covered in Systemic Functional Linguistics under the discussions of “process” and “mood” (see Halliday, 2004; Eggins, 2004). While Systemic Functional Linguistics focuses on the metafunctions of language, Text World Theory, by viewing the relevant expressions as triggers to world creation, is more helpful in disclosing the language processing mechanism in human mind. A clearer delineation of the world layers could facilitate our comprehension and production of texts.

Given its strong explanatory power and practical feasibility, Text World Theory has been applied to the analysis of a variety of discourse genres including both literary texts and practical writings (e.g. Ma, 2008; Marley, 2008; Semino, 2009; Cruickshank & Lahey, 2010; Whiteley, 2011; Jia & Zhang, 2013; Lei, 2014; Long & Han, 2014). It has also been applied to foreign language teaching (e.g. Obregon et al., 2009; Giovannelli, 2010; Mohammadzadeh, 2017). Nevertheless, the application of the theory to translation studies is still limited.

A TEXT-WORLD APPROACH TO TRANSLATION

In Text World Theory, a discourse is taken as a dynamic cognitive process when the content of the discourse, i.e. the text, is comprehended as mental representations, or text worlds. In this connection, translation can be regarded as a cognitive communicative process of reproducing texts as worlds in
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