

What Kind of Theory Do We Need for Translation?

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1. Introduction

A theory can be explained as a lens with which we can view something. It is a way of viewing what seems to be a coherent field of data calling for explanation. But because of our limited human perspective, our theories, like a lens, are only able to focus on certain parts of the object of study, and leave other parts out of focus. A theory might help one see some things clearly, and see other things fuzzily or not at all. As Albert Einstein has suggested, “Whether you can observe a thing or not depends on the theory which you use. It is the theory which decides what can be observed.”

As philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn has pointed out (1970), throughout history one theory sometimes replaces another. This happens when it becomes obvious that the dominant theory (which might not be recognized as a theory at all) is not able to explain some important facts. A “scientific revolution” takes place, and the old theory is trumped by a new one that can explain these facts. Or there are other times when a theory arises out of a context where there is no agreed-upon way of understanding something, which Kuhn describes as a pre-paradigmatic state. In the situation where one theory replaces a former dominant theory, Kuhn describes this as a paradigm shift. Or a theory might coexist with other theories, jockeying for dominance. Kuhn would call these co-existing theories competing paradigms.

It is possible to have different co-existing theories each directed toward the same object of study, but each with a different approach and focus. It is possible, for example, for one theorist to emphasize the predictability of certain behaviors, while another theorist emphasizes the unpredictability. Within social studies, including linguistics and communication studies, one theorist may emphasize cognitive factors while another emphasizes sociological factors. Some theories are more structural in orientation, following the tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure, while others are more functional in orientation and have little concern for structure.

Structuralism has been a more powerful influence in the study of human behavior than many people realize. Saussure is generally recognized as both the father of synchronic linguistics and of modern structuralism (though its roots go back at least as far as Plato). Saussure distinguished between synchronic and diachronic linguistics and ushered in the present era of attention to the former. He distinguished between *langue* and *parole* and focused his attention on the former, the system underlying spoken language. He saw phonemes as elements that can only be understood as part of an overall phonological system. Much of our understanding of linguistics is based on the pioneering work of Saussure, and this influence spread to related fields such as psychology, anthropology and literary theory as well.

In the history of modern linguistics since the time of Saussure, there was an emphasis in the middle part of the 20th Century known as the American Structuralist movement. The Transformational-Generative variety of linguistics that rose to prominence in the late 1950s and reached its height during the 1960s and early 1970s grew out of a general recognition that

American Structuralism was not equipped to answer some important questions about language. While Noam Chomsky used the term “structuralists” in a derogatory way to describe his intellectual predecessors, his Transformational-Generative theory of linguistics continued the structuralist tradition. In fact, by distinguishing between surface structure and deep structure, Chomsky’s model took structuralism to new heights. In his book *The Concept of Structuralism*, Pettit cites Saussure, Jakobson and Chomsky as the main structuralist theorists (1975:1).

It is the thesis of this paper that a structuralist orientation has dominated theoretical approaches to both linguistics and translation in modern history, but that an alternate theoretical and methodological orientation can help elucidate important factors in translation studies that a structuralist orientation cannot. What I present here is what I consider a structural-functional model for translation that is sociological or sociolinguistic in perspective, as opposed to the psychological models that are dominant. Note that I will prefer the term “model” rather than “theory,” since there is sometimes disagreement or confusion concerning how the latter term should be used. (Some define a theory such that it must make predictions and is falsifiable, while for others it is a coherent, methodological way of understanding and explaining some subject.) Having said that, what will be presented here is an alternative to other things that have been called theories, such as Relevance Theory or Skopos Theory.

We can take a structural approach to analyzing language and other types of human behavior, or a functional approach, or a mixture of the two. These may not be the only ways of trying to make sense of human behavior, but these are the approaches being compared and contrasted here.

2. Structuralist Models of Communication and Translation

The field of translation has advanced along scientific lines, particularly with the contribution of Eugene Nida, using linguistics as point of departure. Translation has been explained to many people and a technique for translating has been developed and widely practiced using a model that begins with a basic distinction between form and meaning. The basic idea of this approach is that forms and meanings can be distinguished, with linguistic forms being specific to a language while meanings are more universal and capable of being carried across from one language to another. The idea is that a speaker encodes his or her message by putting meanings into linguistic forms, and on the receiving end the hearer decodes the message by extracting the meaning out of the linguistic forms. Michael Reddy (1979) documents how widespread this way of thinking is in our English-speaking culture, and at the same time expresses his profound dissatisfaction with what he calls “the conduit metaphor” as an accurate assessment of what actually goes on in communication. When this conduit metaphor is applied to translation, the conceptualization of the translation process is that it involves the translator decoding the meanings from the forms of one language and encoding those meanings into the forms of another language. See Figure 1 for a graphic illustration of how translation is sometimes presented as a two-step process of decoding and encoding.

The form vs. meaning, decoding and encoding model of translation is an example of what I would call a structural(ist) model of translation. It is simplistic, and in some ways wrong, in my estimation, regarding how language and communication work. Form and meaning are not as clearly distinguishable as this model would suggest. But it is elegant in its simplicity, and the simple decoding-encoding model has given insight to many people trying to get an initial grasp

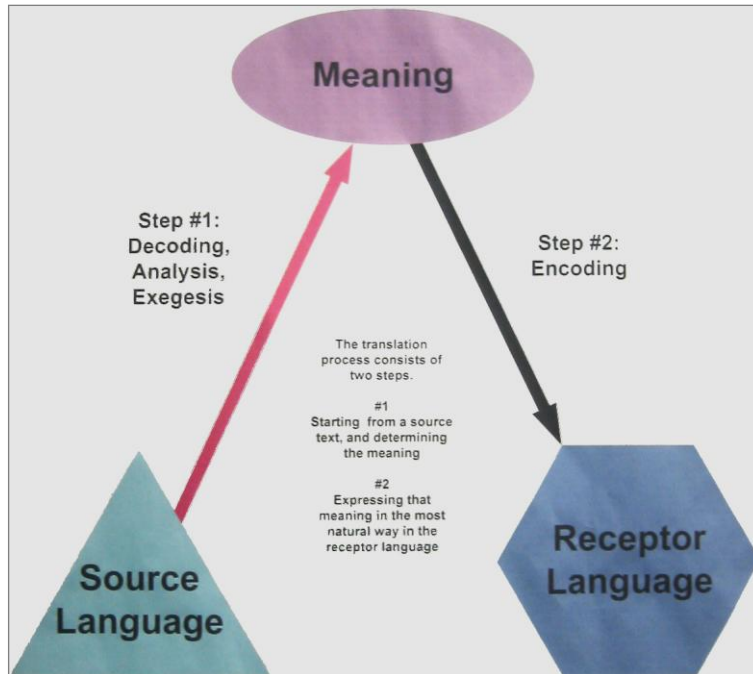


Figure 1: Translation as a Two-Step Process

on what translation is all about. There is a lot that this simple model does not account for by itself, including the role of context and the use of irony and other types of non-literal language.

Relevance theory is another structuralist model of what goes on in translation and other types of communication. A structuralist approach emphasizes what is given or determined in every situation. It builds an explanatory model with the assumption that there is a system of underlying laws that govern the way people act and interpret their world. A hallmark of structuralism is the attempt to divide things up in a binary fashion and deal with the parts separately, or focus on one at present while putting off dealing with the other: *langue* vs. *parole*, competence vs. performance, surface structure vs. deep structure, autonomous syntax, what was said vs. what was meant, analytic vs. synthetic competence, a theory of linguistic competence vs. a theory of communicative competence, the interpretive use of language vs. the descriptive use of language, i-mode vs. c-mode communication, resembling translation vs. interpretive translation, and so forth.

3. Functional Models

A functional approach, on the other hand, gives little or no attention to structures, and focuses instead on meaning, function and purpose. A functional grammar would stand in contrast to a formal grammar. Skopos Theory emphasizes function, integration, unity in translation. It is not an exercise in dividing things up and dealing with them separately. Skopos Theory is right to give emphasis to purpose in translation, but a limitation is that it is so simple, with so much about translation that it does not address, and it perhaps even deals with the topic of function too monolithically.

4. A Structural-Functional or Sociolinguistic Model

Relevance Theory is a structural approach to translation. Skopos Theory is a functional approach. The model being presented here has elements of both structuralism and functionalism. Now imagine a model for analyzing translation that emphasizes function and the interpersonal side of translation, but integrates attention to units and relationships and structures, yet without being abstract and without trying to build a model of what goes on the human mind that cannot be observed directly. This sociological model for translation involves units and relations, distinctions and definitions, but the units are not words, propositions, thoughts, or quotations, but rather people. The key relationships are relationships between people, who can be seen as individual actors and as members of groups. It is such a model that I will attempt to develop in the remainder of this paper.

It is here proposed that there are four main groups of people involved in a translation sociolinguistic context: the translation team, the target audience, the original author, and what I call third-party stakeholders. As Skopos Theory emphasizes, purpose is a key element of translation, but the purpose in any given translation situation is not monolithic. Each of these four basic groups can have its own purpose. And I wish to point out from the start that these four basic groups of people are likely not clear-cut, and there can be more than four sets of purposes for any one translation. But it can be useful to develop a model along these lines, recognizing four main sets of actors, each with their own perspective on the translation and purpose for it.

It is easy and common to think of words and sentences as having meaning. I would rather emphasize an approach that sees meanings as being in people's heads, and not in the words, sentences or texts themselves. That is, language and other types of symbolic behavior are used to express thoughts and convey meanings, but it is an illusion to think that the meanings somehow reside in the words, sentences, texts and actions. In successful communication the communicator may use words and linguistic structures to express what he or she wants to express to another party, but while language is used as a medium of communication, it is only a imprecise metaphor – even if a useful one – to say that words and sentences *contain* meaning. The average literate person may think that words have meanings, and that one can consult a dictionary to find out the true meaning of a word, past and present. Anyone who has worked on compiling a dictionary knows that it is an attempt to capture the conventions of language. Meanings are associated with words and other linguistic units by convention. Language is a complex, socially agreed-upon system of symbols used for the purpose of communication. The relationships between forms and meanings is more arbitrary than many people realize, but it is the conventional aspect of language that makes communication possible. I will give a disclaimer here that, as a linguist, I do not understand human language as being just a more highly-developed form of animal language. Most non-human forms of language are iconic rather than symbolic, though it is possible in some cases for animal language to have symbolic elements. But human language, with its distinction between phonological and grammatical systems, is double-coded in a way that no animal language is. This has been called duality of patterning or double articulation. Phonology and grammar are both arbitrary systems that vary from language to language and work together to make human language the unique form of communication that it is. As Bertrand Russell has noted, “No matter how eloquently a dog may bark, he cannot tell you that his parents were poor, but honest.”

4.1. The Original Author

Now, back to a theoretical model for translation, I will assume that the starting point of a translation is a source text. The source text is an instance of communication between an original speaker or author in a certain social context to a certain audience. The audience may be very broad or very narrow and specific, but the text or other speech act is communicated through the medium of a certain language in a certain time and cultural context. The speaker or writer expresses something that he or she wants the audience to understand and appreciate, and this is done through the conventions of a particular language, which makes communication of this sort possible. For a translation sociolinguistic situation, I will say that the purpose of the original author in communication is a significant factor, but the purposes of the original recipients of the original text are out of focus. The important thing is what the original author intended to communicate.

4.2. The Translator

After the original author, a second major participant in a translation sociolinguistic situation is the translator. The translator has read the original text, and through the ordinary conventions of language has gained an understanding of it, and now wants to construct a new text based on the original, extending the translator's understanding of the original author's text to a new audience. The translator may or may not have been a member of the original audience for this text, but must at least be capable of reading the source text well enough to gain an understanding of it. We would normally think of this newly-constructed text as being in a different language from that of the original text, or else we would not call it a translation. Otherwise it might be called some other kind of speech act, like a performance (of a play), or an oral reading (of a written text), etc. This is a simple, common-sensical explanation of what takes place in translation, that does not involve encoding and decoding, meanings detached from forms, implicature and explicature, and so forth. A more abstract and complicated explanation of translation is not needed for a sociologically-oriented model. An explanation of how someone is able to use the conventions of language and hear or read a text and gain an understanding of it, and then communicate that understanding through the creation of a new text – these are the things that a theory of linguistics helps to explain. Note, importantly, though, that in the model of translation being presented here, there are no meanings that exist apart from people. That is, meanings are not “in” words and texts. Words and texts are conventions that people use to express themselves to, and try to influence, each other. They are not “containers” of meaning, the strength and prevalence of the conduit metaphor notwithstanding (Reddy 1979).

The work of translation is done with both a purpose and an audience in mind. In fact, purpose and audience are two of the most crucial components of a translation speech act, and the model presented here gives them prominence. Without a purpose, one would not expect the translation to take place. The purpose that the translator has for the translation is a necessary component in shaping it.

4.3. The Audience

Any speech act – any instance of verbal communication – involves at least two participants, and the audience of a translation is one of the major participants in that type of interaction. This

should be clear enough. Successful communication through language entails two or more people who accept that they both are familiar with the conventions of a particular language and they use that language as a medium. None of this is controversial, but what I want to emphasize is that the audience of a translation, if this audience is cooperating with the translator, has a purpose for the speech act as well. In translation, the translator's purpose in providing a translation interacts with the purposes of the audience and other participants in this sociolinguistic situation.

4.4. Third-Party Stakeholders

A translation involves an original author with a purpose in communication, and a translator and an audience with their own purposes, but it also involves other interested parties with their own purposes who can and often do have a role in shaping the translation. An obvious example would be an individual or organization that sponsors the translation. Other examples are individuals or groups who serve as critics in the translation process, or who the translator imagines will eventually judge the translation and whom the translator wants to please. These other parties could be called third-party stakeholders – unless you count the original author among the three primary participants in a translation speech act, in which case perhaps the sponsors and critics should be called “fourth-party.” But for the sake of convenience, the term third-party stakeholder will be used.

A language is community property, and the language community can judge the language of one of its members as being normal or aberrant. Furthermore, texts may be considered community property, and a community of people may well think they have something to say about how that text is treated and communicated, such as in translation. Most translations do not take place in a social context where opinions, understandings, purposes and perspectives of the translator and audience are all that matter. The sponsors, critics or other third-party stakeholders have their own purposes that can and likely will help shape the translation.

4.5. Definition of Translation

Now given the framework that we are starting to develop here, it would be appropriate to give a definition of what translation is, in light of the roles of the major participants and their purposes, and given a realistic, non-abstract and non-structuralist perspective of how language works. **A translation is a text derived from another text in another language, exhibiting qualities of equivalence to that source text, such that the derived text can be taken as a substitute for the original text.**

A translation is a text. It is words arranged in sentences, and sentences arranged in larger structures, in a non-arbitrary way according to the conventions of language, with the purpose of communicating something in particular. A speech actor, which in this case is a translator, constructs this text with a purpose. The translator is referencing another text and aiming to produce something perceived to be equivalent to the original text in some significant way. The translator perceives that an original author intended to communicate something to an original audience, and the translator aims to reproduce something from that original communication in a new context and with a new audience that was not reached by the original, source text. According to the traditional definition of translation, this new communication is in a language different from the original communication.

A successful translation can be considered one in which all the active participants can be satisfied that their purposes have been accomplished. A translation is less than successful to the extent that one or more of the participants are dissatisfied with the results. If a translation is successful, then the audience of the translation will consider that the original text is now “theirs” in a form they can access. The translation now stands as a functional equivalent of the original text.

Many English speakers will say that they have a Bible and read it. Someone might ask, “Oh, do you understand Hebrew and Greek? Those are the languages of the Bible.” The English speaker can say, “No, I read it in English.” Does that mean that the English-speaker is wrong, the they think they are reading the Bible when they are actually reading a translation of the Bible? No, what this means is that the translation was successful, and the result is that the Bible is available in English. The translated Bible becomes the Bible for this audience.

Similarly, it is possible for someone to say they have read *War and Peace* without knowing Russian, or *Oedipus Rex* without knowing Latin. A successful translation of a text that originated in another language is accepted as a substitute for the original.

5. Levels of Focus in Translation

Not all translations are the same. This is partly because of the individuality of the participants in the translation process and the options that are available in communication through language, but it is also because of what I call level of focus. Discussing translation options in terms of levels of focus takes the place of other terms like literal vs. free or formal equivalent vs. dynamic equivalent.

The levels of focus one might take in translating are not clearly defined, but I will illustrate the concept by focusing on four different sample approaches. The first level to be illustrated could be called word level focus in translation. The translator is focused on the words in a text, and determined to carry across the words from one language to what is estimated to be the equivalent words in the second language. This may be called a literal translation, but that term is misleading. A true literal translation is impossible, though it is convenient to sometimes talk as if it were. Instead we will talk in terms of a word level translation that might, for example, seek to translate words in their primary senses from one language to another. A result would be a concordant translation, where one word in the source text can be matched with one word in the translated text.

A variation on the word level translation would be to seek to translate the words of a text from one language to the other, but taking into consideration the different senses of the words. So as the words are focused on and translated, the translator determines the sense of the words in context and attempts to construct a new text with the appropriate word in the receptor language, according to sense in context rather than primary sense.

Either way, if the level of focus is as low as the word level, then the translator will seek to construct a translated text that contains words that are estimated to be equivalent to the words of the source text. In the process, the translator may or may not make other adjustments such as in sentence length and complexity.

Now in a hierarchy of linguistic and semantic levels, a level of focus higher up than the word would be the sentence or proposition. The translator may look at the source text and aim to translate it by processing one sentence at a time. The translator could focus on one sentence at a time and consider how to express something equivalent in the receptor language. In the process, the translator may also aim to preserve word equivalence between languages, but will sacrifice word equivalence where necessary to render the desired proposition or sentence equivalent.

An even higher level of focus would involve attention to units of discourse in the source text. Attention might not be paid to words or sentences, but rather to what the text means to the translator on a higher plane. If the source text involves narrative, the translator would consider how stories are told naturally in the receptor language and re-tell the story in a way that the translator considers appropriate to that language. It would not matter if the words are the same, or whether the sentences are somehow equivalent and in the same order. If the source text is procedural or expository or some other discourse genre, the translator would re-tell the original text to the new audience in a way that is considered appropriate to the genre of discourse involved.

Finally, in terms of this somewhat arbitrary example of four levels of focus in translation, the translator may not even aim to re-express exactly the same text in another language, but rather create a new text on the basis of a prior-existing text that the translator, subjectively-speaking, considers to have significant qualities of equivalence to the source text. The words, the sentences, and even some of the “facts” of the source text might not be recognizable in the translated text. But there is something equivalent about the two texts, and that is what the translator has aimed to express in the translated text on the basis of the source text. Equivalence may be a subjective matter, but if there is *nothing* in the newly-created text that at least the translator considers equivalent to something in a source text, then the newly-created text could hardly be called a translation.

There are two important points to reflect on as one considers the different types of translation that one might do. The first is that **translation is impossible without interpretation**. Not even a so-called literal translation, or one that focuses on word equivalence, is done without interpretation on the translator’s part. All translation is interpretation. That is because all meaning is in people and not in words, and so it is not possible to even carry across the words of the source text to the translated text without interpreting—understanding—them. Translation *always* involves the translator making some kind of sense of the original text, in order to provide something that could be considered equivalent in another language. The labels “literal” or “direct” or “full-access translation” are misleading and will not be used here. But perhaps a word-equivalent type of translation could be considered the simplest. In order to produce a word-equivalent translation, the main knowledge a translator needs is an understanding of all of the words in the source text and a familiarity with what their counterparts would be in the receptor language, at least in terms of primary sense to primary sense. The translator should also have some familiarity with the conventions of grammar of both languages, but would not necessarily have a good sense of what the words mean when put together into sentences and texts in the source language, nor would the audience of the translation necessarily have a good sense of what the words are supposed to mean when put together in a translation.

The second important point regarding the different types of translation one might aim to produce is that it should be recognized that absolutely no translation can express all the meaning of the source text. Every translation involves compromises, and decisions as to what information in the source text is most important to try to re-express in the receptor language. Common perception might be that a so-called literal translation is the most accurate, even if it is not easily understood, but this is not the case. Assuming that we are talking about two languages that are not the same, this means that the conventions of the receptor language are not the same as those of the source language, and the translator has to decide what level of meaning to focus on in order to produce something equivalent in the receptor language. If the focus is on words, then higher-order meanings will fail to be expressed in the receptor language. If the focus is on higher-order meanings, then concordance of words between the two languages will be lost, and concordance is a type of meaning. Every translation involves choices. Two different languages cannot correspond on every level, and two different language communities will not share exactly the same contexts.

From the point of view of the sociological model of translation being presented here, none of the various ways of translating a text would be considered illegitimate or outside the bounds of what could be called translation. Translating by focusing on word equivalence is translating. Translating by focusing on a much broader picture where some of the details of the translated text might not even be recognizable in reference to the source text is still translating, as long as the translator and other parties associated with the translation have some kind of equivalence in mind that applies to the source text in comparison with the translated text. However, there are some constraints relating to what can be considered a happy outcome of a translation effort, and these have to do with skill, honesty and agreement among the various participants in a translation speech act concerning the communication that has taken place, to be explained below.

6. The Politics of Translation

Now back to translation as a sociological act, we will consider the politics of translation. There are different parties associated with any translation, and they each have their own perspective and purposes. A happy or successful translation is one where all the different participants are satisfied that their purposes have been accomplished. This is an ideal, but because different individuals are involved with their different perspectives, we cannot assume that a translation will result that makes everyone happy.

A translator, for example, might not have due regard to the audience's perspective and so produces a translation that is fine as far as the translator is concerned but is not useable or considered acceptable as far as the intended audience is concerned. On the other hand, if the translator did not try to control all the variables, but rather learned from the intended audience what communicates and what the audience needs to see in order to find the translation acceptable and equivalent from their perspective, the result would be a translation that both the translator and audience can be happy with. If only the translator or if only the audience of the translation is satisfied with the result, one could hardly say that a successful communication has taken place.

Now consider the significant role that third-party stakeholders can play in a translation effort. A text can be considered community property, and people who are neither the translator nor the intended audience can put pressure on a translation. A translation may have been commissioned,

and the sponsor of the translation wants to make sure the translation is done a certain way with a certain focus. The sponsor can have something to say about how the translation is done, to meet standards and produce the desired results. The translator tries to understand and cooperate with the sponsor's purposes and standards for the translation, or else the effort breaks down, or at least comes to a less than happy conclusion.

People neither on the producing end nor the receiving end of a translation may consider themselves to have a stake in the integrity of the text being translated, which they want to protect. These third-party stakeholders can encourage and support a translation effort, or they can criticize it and try to censor it. They might consider themselves to be responsible for the standards and want to have a say in how the translation is done. As translator Martin Luther observed, "A current saying says: 'Whoever builds along the road has many masters.' This is happening to me too. Those who have never been able to speak correctly, to say nothing of translating, are now my masters, one and all of them, and I must be the pupil of them all." Luther was probably more resistant than many, to allow someone to tell him how to translate, but there are often pressures on a translator to make his or her work conform to standards and meet expectations of others who are not directly involved in the work.

As an example of the way third parties put pressure on a translation, consider the controversy over the translation of gender-related language, over which much has been written and debated. Those who consider themselves "the church" and responsible for upholding the integrity of the text, the Bible, put pressure on translators to translate in a way that falls in line with their expectations. There may be different third-party factions arguing over how translation should be done, even if they are not the ones actually doing the translation. The translator may be receptive to expert opinions, or may resist them, and in the latter case the translation may be criticized or even censored.

Whether or not the translator responds to pressures put on the translation from outside the translation process, the politics of translation can be an important factor. As we have said already, a successful translation is one where all the parties associated with it are satisfied that their expectations and purposes have been met, and in cases where there is unhappiness about a translation, even if it comes from a party other than the translator and intended audience, this amounts to a less-than-happy outcome.

7. Values in Connection with Translation

This model of translation has presented a range of speech acts that could properly be considered translation, some of which might bear more of an obvious resemblance to the source text than others. Translation involves selecting a focus and making decisions and compromises. No one type among these different types of translation is necessarily more legitimate than another. This is not to say that anything that might be called a translation is legitimate. At this point I will propose three values associated with translation: accuracy, appropriateness and honesty.

The value of accuracy suggests that it is possible to mistranslate. A mistranslation can result when the translator has an inadequate understanding of either the source language or the receptor language. Languages are community property, and both the source language and the receptor language follow certain conventions for associating meanings with linguistic forms. A translator

may get an understanding from a source text that is anomalous with regard to the normal conventions of language. Another way to say this is that the translator understands something from the source text that is not the same thing as what the original author meant to communicate. Or the translator may have an inadequate understanding of the target language, such that the target audience understands the translation to be saying something other than what the translator meant to communicate. However, we will not necessarily consider it a mistranslation if the translator translates in such a way that a third party can find fault. A mistranslation is a matter of the translator's lack of skill with either the source language or the receptor language. Accuracy is valued in a translation, and an accurate translation is one where the translator has understood what the original author meant to communicate, and the target audience of the translation has understood what the translator meant to communicate.

The second value associated with translation is appropriateness. The translator or translation team is responsible for the decision-making in a translation effort, for the most part, even though it is recognized that this is done in connection with the purposes of the other parties associated with the translation. An appropriate translation is one that is made where the translator has rightly gauged the needs of the target audience.

The third value associated with translation is honesty. It is possible to misrepresent a speech act that is called a translation. For example, it is possible for a text to be a translation, based on a different original text, when the translator tries to pass it off as an original communication rather than a translation. Or it is possible for a translator to claim equivalence in a translation where he or she knows better. The philosopher of language Paul Grice lists two among his conversational maxims, "Do not say what you believe to be false" and "Do not say that for which you lack evidence." These maxims can be flouted. In other words it is possible to lie outright, or mislead people in some other way. This is true of various kinds of speech acts, and it is true of translation. In accordance with Grice's "maxims of quality," we will say that an honest translation is one that is what it claims to be. Grice's purpose was not to tell people how they should behave, but he points out what the natural societal expectations are.

8. Theological Dimensions of Translation

With respect to some types of translation, the original author may be out of the picture as someone who takes an active part. The translator would naturally be concerned with what the original author meant to convey, but the author may be dead or otherwise unavailable to clarify what he or she meant, and may not have any input into directing the translation work.

Bible translation may be considered a special case in this regard. That is, God—the one who was behind the original texts directing them to communicate what He wanted to say—is also at work today and still has something to say about what we are doing, in translation and otherwise. In fact, God can be considered to be the one who ultimately commissioned the Bible translation work we are engaged in.

Furthermore, I would like to suggest that Bible translation can be a special case in that the original Author can be actively communicating something more through a translation than the translator may realize. It is possible for God to overcome our limitations as human agents to communicate more through a translation than what we realize. We cannot know the full depth of

meaning of the text we are translating, but God is not limited by that. He can bless the work and communicate what He wants to through it.

As God says in the 55th chapter of the book of Isaiah (RSV), “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Our best attempts to understand God and his purpose and message fall short because of our human limitations. If we as translators think we fully understand the meaning of the text we are translating, we are fooling ourselves. But God is not limited by that. The next part goes on to say, “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”

While we as translators have to use means and techniques and hermeneutics to translate that are limited by our human condition, we do have special resources to use as well. We can ask God to give us understanding and the right words to use. And we can pray that God as the original Author who is still at work today will make the translation say what He wants it to say, and speak to a new audience through the translation despite our limitations as translators, in ways that we may not even fully understand ourselves.

9. Conclusions: So What Kind of Theory Do We Need for Translation?

The lens of a theoretical model or framework focuses in on certain facts in order to understand them better while leaving other facts out of focus. We can assess the worth of a theory in terms of its validity – i.e., whether or not it seems to fit and explain the facts – and in terms of whether or not it is useful. In linguistics and translation and communication and other social sciences, there is room for various theories, and it is not always a matter of paradigm shifts where one theory takes the place of another. The model presented here puts a focus on the sociological, interpersonal aspects of translation. We will consider its usefulness by reviewing what it does and does not do.

The model for translation that has been presented here is not abstract and is not highly structuralist. It is built out of what is common sense and observable. It does not attempt to chart the mysterious world of the mind and is not built using terms like “mental” or “cognitive.” It is not dichotomistic; it does not divide up the social or mental reality into “clearly distinct” components to be handled separately. It does not treat all people as the same under the surface, and all focused on maximum efficiency in their communication. We have looked at the different types of translations that can be produced and some of the reasons why they are different without privileging any one type as being more authentic and more deserving to be conferred the title “translation.” It is recognized that every translation is a compromise, and that there is not such thing as a direct or full-access translation. And yet it does define translation, and does propose a measure of success in translation in terms of the degree of satisfaction among the various participants that their purposes have been accomplished.

Translation does not take place in a social vacuum. Translation is recognized here as a social and political act of communication between different individuals and groups that each have their own

purposes and perspectives. The way that translation has often been taught, it has been presented as a linguistic process that involves the extraction of meanings from the forms of one language and attaching of those same meanings to the forms of another language, almost as though this were a technical job that a computer could handle, if artificial intelligence could be highly-enough developed. This ignores the socio-political dimensions of translation. Too many translators have attempted to engage in cross-cultural communication without being adequately prepared for the social and political implications of what they are trying to do. As a result, they would tend to see any problems in terms of either technicalities or “spiritual warfare.” A structural-functional model for translation such as the one that has been presented here would help the prospective translator appreciate the social complexity of the translation process, and would help prepare the translator to succeed in communication.

The model for translation that has been presented here is not based on structural linguistics, nor is it a psychological model. It could be considered structural-functional, or post-structural. It might be called a speech act theory of translation. It could be labeled as sociological, or sociolinguistic. Perhaps it might be called a practical perspective on the participants, purposes and politics of translation. But it could be judged in terms of how well it can prepare the translator to know what he or she is getting into, and how well it avoids giving the translator a false impression of the nature of the translation task.

Is this or any theory of translation necessary, in order for translation to take place successfully? Probably not. Successful translation has probably been taking place almost as long as there has been a diversity of languages in the world. Like most types of communication, successful translation can take place without being analyzed. As the philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser has shrewdly observed, “To explain why a man slipped on a banana peel, we do not need a general theory of slipping.” If a translator wants to learn practical techniques for communicating meanings in a receptor language that have their source in a text from another language, there are methodologies and textbooks to help that do not rely on any kind of highly-developed translation or communication theory. However, it could be argued that we all have our theories of the world, whether they are conscious or not. A reason for enunciating a theoretical framework might be to clarify our thinking about a particular subject and treat it as an area of scientific inquiry. A model can present us with either a helpful or an unhelpful way of facing a task. The value of the model presented here is that it draws attention to the important interpersonal factors in a translation that can lead to success or failure.

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