TRANSLATION AND RELEVANCE

Cognition and Context

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First published 1991

Basil Blackwell Ltd
108 Cowley Road, Oxford, OX4 1JF, UK

Basil Blackwell, Inc.
3 Cambridge Center
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Gutt, Ernst-August.
Translation and relevance: cognition and context/by Ernst-August Gutt.
p. cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-631-17857-0
1. Translating and interpreting. I. Title.
P306.G88 1991
418'.02—dc20

Typeset in 10 on 12 pt Palatino
by Graphicraft Typesetters Ltd., Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by T.J. Press Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall.

Contents

Preface

This study is the outcome of a growing personal concern over the theoretical foundations of translation. As a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), I have become closely involved with matters of translation. My linguistic work in Ethiopia under the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of the Addis Ababa University from 1976–8, 1978–2, and 1983–7, and the attempt to deal with a trilingual situation in my own family (English, Finnish, and German) provided much practical experience in translation and its problems.

It was in 1981 that I first tried to formulate some of my concerns about the nature of the principles, rules and methods advocated in translation and especially about their validity; much of the methodology seemed to make sense, some of it seemed questionable – but the worrying thought was that it remained unclear what reality, if any, these reactions reflected and how they could be dealt with objectively. Initially I tried to express my concerns in a textlinguistic framework, but the results were not satisfactory.

During my studies for an MA degree at University College London in 1982–3 I was introduced by Deirdre Wilson to the relevance theory of communication, which she was developing together with D. Sperber (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986a). The cognitive basis of the theory combined with its concern for both comprehensiveness and explicitness appealed to me, and in the years that followed I began to apply relevance theory to a few aspects of translation (Gutt 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988). The results were very encouraging, but it became quite clear that the complex nature of the issues involved required a prolonged period of concentrated research. So in 1987 I had the opportunity to return to University College London for doctoral studies under the guidance of Deirdre Wilson.

The results of my research surprised me; I had expected that relevance theory would help me to formulate a general theory of translation. However, within a year it became increasingly clear that

relevance theory alone is adequate – there seems to be no need for a distinct general translation theory. Accordingly, the main thrust of this study, which is a revised version of my doctoral dissertation (Gutt 1989), is to explore a range of translation phenomena and show how they can be accounted for in the relevance-theoretic framework.

Chapter 1 begins with a sketch of the status quo and a critical evaluation. Chapter 2 introduces basic notions of relevance theory as found in Sperber and Wilson (1986a), and goes on to explore further what is generally involved when utterances are used interpretively to represent other utterances.

Chapters 3 to 7 examine various views of translation, and at the same time show how relevance theory can handle the translational phenomena involved. Chapter 3 deals with instances of 'translation' where the relationship to the original seems incidental rather than crucial to the communication process. Chapter 4 examines the idea that translations should preserve the meaning of the original. Chapter 5 argues that much of translation can be viewed adequately as 'interlingual interpretive use', noting, however, that on this view the notion of translation would cover a very wide range of phenomena. Chapter 6 examines the possibility of a much narrower view of translation designed to preserve also stylistic features of the original. For this purpose the notion of 'communicative clue' is introduced. Chapter 7 rounds off the discussion by showing that both the wide and the narrow view fall out naturally from the relevance-theoretic framework; it also investigates prerequisites for successful communication by translation.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to my colleagues at the Addis Ababa University who made it possible for my family and me to have the privilege of working and living in a linguistically and culturally rich environment. I especially thank the Silt'i people of Ethiopia who allowed us to live with them and to get first hand experience of both the enrichment and problems caused by cultural and linguistic diversity.

I want to express my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to Deirdre Wilson, my supervisor. It has been a great privilege and joy to work under her guidance and with her encouragement. I thank her for opening my eyes to the wonders of two of the most precious gifts we have: the human mind and the ability to share what is in it with others. My research has brought home to me in a new way the truth that we are 'wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14).

I thank Neil Smith for his encouragement and for his comments on the dissertation which underlies this book. I thank Regina Blass, Ron Olson, Clinton Robinson, Ronald Sim, Dan Sperber, the staff and fellow-students in the Department of Linguistics, University College London as well as other colleagues for their feedback on my research. Of course the responsibility for the shortcomings of this book is entirely my own.

I want to express my gratitude for the financial help I received from my colleagues in the Eastern Africa Group (SIL) and from the Corporation Academic Scholarship Fund (SIL) in 1987–8, and for the University Postgraduate Studentship which I was awarded by the University of London for 1988–9. And for all their assistance in the publication of this book I warmly thank the staff at Basil Blackwell, in particular Carol Busia, the desk editor.

Finally, a very special thank you goes to my wife Eeva and my children Hannele, Hannu and Hedi for supporting a husband and father whose mind was not always free to give them the attention they needed. It is my pleasure to dedicate this book to them.

Translation and Relevance

1 The State of the Art – Some Critical Observations

It is becoming commonplace for works on translation theory to acknowledge that there is a vast body of literature on translation, offering a wealth of observations and views on the subject.[1] Almost equally commonly this acknowledgement is followed by some sort of a caveat – expressed with varying degrees of candour – to the effect that the volume of the literature is not necessarily indicative of the degree of understanding reached. Steiner (1975) expressed this in the following words:

> ... despite this rich history, and despite the calibre of those who have written about the art and theory of translation, the number of original, significant ideas in the subject remains very meagre. (p. 238)

Discontent seems to focus in particular on the lack of a comprehensive approach to translation that is both systematic and theoretically sound. For example, back in the sixties Levý observed:

> Only a part of the literature on the problem of translation moves on the theoretical plane. Until today most studies and book publications, especially on literary translation, have not gone beyond the limits of empirical deliberations or essayistic aphorisms. (Levý 1969, p. 13, translation my own)

By the end of the 1970s, the situation seemed to have changed little, because Kelly (1979) introduces his history of translation theory and practice with the recognition that '... a comprehensive theory of translation has proved elusive.' (p. 1)

And so it has continued into the 1980s; in Bassnett-McGuire's (1980) view, '... the systematic study of translation is still in swaddling bands' (p. 1); drawing an analogy to literary studies, Wilss (1982) sees the literature on translation as amounting to a 'mass of uncoordinated statements':

> Slightly modifying the phrase used by Bertolt Brecht to describe literary scholarship as 'a mass of opinions', it could be said that the many views expressed on translation in the past centuries amount to a mass of uncoordinated statements; some very significant contributions were made, but these never coalesced into a coherent, agreed upon, intersubjectively valid theory of translation. (Wilss 1982, p. 11)

More recently still, Bell (1986) has addressed this issue in a paper with the significant title 'Why translation theory is in a mess and what we can do about it'.

Many different explanations have been proposed for this disappointing situation. One is that translation theorists were preoccupied for too long with debating unfruitful issues, such as whether translation should be literal or free, or whether translation is possible or not. Another suggestion is that the understanding of translation has remained inadequate because it has never been studied in its own right, but merely as a subdomain of some other subject, such as literature or foreign language teaching. Some scholars have suggested the simple, if radical, explanation that translation simply is not open to scientific investigation because it is an art or a skill. By contrast, still others have suggested that our scientific understanding of translation is so poor because it really has not been studied in a proper scientific manner.

This last suggestion is perhaps the most important in that it poses a positive challenge, which has already resulted in new research initiatives on translation.

A New Initiative

Hofmann (1980) introduces his study of the problem of redundancy in translation as a response to this challenge:

> The choice of research topic was determined by the recognition that attempts to formulate a comprehensive theory had to fail because of insufficient basic research into the most important

> invariants and variables of literary translation.... The most urgent task is ... to describe the nature of those factors operative in the process of translation, to identify them precisely, as far as possible, and to formalize them for application. (p. 1, translation my own)

Such empirical studies pay particular attention to matters of method, and this is indeed seen as one of the distinguishing marks of modern approaches to translation:

> What distinguishes the modern science of translation from previous considerations of translation theory is its interest in knowledge of methodology and its keener awareness of the problems involved. (Wilss 1982, p. 53)

As Wilss goes on to say, this interest in sound scientific methodology has led to a multidisciplinary view of translation science:

> Its [modern science of translation, E-AG] efforts to establish a clear idea of its field of study ... have meant that in addition to linguistic points of view, aspects associated with the science of communication, with psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, textlinguistics, speech act theory, philosophy of action (Handlungstheorie), the study of literature, and – last but not least – with teaching, have taken on relevance for the science of translation. (1982, p. 53)

Schulte (1987) observes that although the interdisciplinary nature of translation had been noted for some time, it '... has received very little attention during the last decade' (p. 2). Yet this aspect is seen as very important:

> Translators do not engage in the mere transplantation of words; ... their interpretive acts deal with the exploration of situations that are constituted by an intense interaction of linguistic, psychological, anthropological, and cultural phenomena. (1987, p. 2)

So it seems that we have entered a new era of empirical, multidisciplinary research on translation:

> We believe strongly that the time is ripe – indeed, long overdue – for a wholehearted commitment by linguists (broadly

defined), other human scientists, practising translators, language teachers and translator-trainers in a multidisciplinary approach to the description and explanation of translation; as both process and product. (Bell 1986, p. 7)

Reservations

The Risk of (Multidisciplinary) Disintegration

Yet, positive as this sounds, reservations have increasingly been expressed, not only by those who believe that translation falls outside the domain of scientific investigation, but by those advocating such investigation. Thus Wilss concedes that '... there are serious difficulties involved in designing a paradigm for the science of translation which would withstand the test of the theory of science and which would be capable of furnishing verifiable results' (1982, p. 65). Crucially, he sees the root of the problem as lying in the multidisciplinary expansion itself:

> The ensuing problems of objectification can be explained primarily by pointing out that translation cannot be termed a purely 'linguistic operation' ... but rather must be thought of as a psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmalinguistic process ... which lends itself to an exhaustive scientific depiction only with the greatest difficulty. (Wilss 1982, p. 65)

Thus one problem seems to be that the multidisciplinary approach to translation brings with it a serious threat to the very aim for which it has been demanded: that of developing a science of translation.

De Waard and Nida (1986) describe the problem diplomatically as follows:

> Translation is also a science in the broad sense of the term, for it is an activity which may be systematically described and related meaningfully to various disciplines. In the strict sense of the word, however, translating is not a science but a technology, for it is built upon a number of scientific disciplines, including psychology, linguistics, communication theory, anthropology, and semiotics. (p. 185)

Thus one of the main problems with the scientific investigation of translation seems to lie in the fact that not only linguistic factors, but many other factors need to be taken into account. Since these factors belong to a variety of different areas of life, there is a question whether a comprehensive account of translation in the form of a coherent and homogeneous theory can ever be achieved.

The Problem of Determining the Domain of the Theory

A second major problem concerns the question of what a general science of translation is to be about, that is, what its domain should be. The obvious answer is that it should be about translation – but the problem is that it is not clear a priori what translation itself is. Krings (1986) comments that the notion of translation is used to refer to a variety of rather different phenomena such as 'intralingual *vs* interlingual translation, translation of isolated words or sentences (e.g. in foreign language teaching) *vs* translation of whole authentic texts, translation *vs* interpretation (consecutive *vs* simultaneous interpretation), translation as process *vs* translation as product of that process, translation from one language to another *vs* translation from a natural language into another system of signs (e.g. Morse code), translation *vs* transliteration (translation into another writing system, for example from Cyrillic to Roman script), human *vs* machine translation, translating from (the foreign language) *vs* translating into (the foreign language), translation *vs* free paraphrase or imitation' (p. 5, translation my own).[2]

There have been three major lines of approach to this issue. One has relied on shared intuitions about the domain of the theory without any attempt at defining it in any systematic way. Historically this has perhaps been the line taken most often. The second approach is for the translation theorist to delimit the domain by definition. Thus, having listed a number of definitions of translation, Krings (1986) points out that one of their functions is '... to establish a consensus as to what translation is taken to be, or more importantly what it is taken not to be' (p. 4, translation my own). The third approach is a culture-oriented one: translation will be what a culture takes it to be.

The obvious weakness of the first approach is that it does not lay a very good foundation for an explicit science. The second approach has been criticized as being potentially normative: by defining what translation is, it implicitly sets a norm, excluding from consideration

all phenomena that do not meet the criteria of the definition. Thus van den Broeck (1980) states:

> Much of the theorizing about translation, in our time as well as in the past, has however largely neglected this relativistic point of view. Most of the definitions given are prescriptive rather than descriptive; they serve as norms for translation practice – or rather, for a certain kind of practice – and fail to account for the description of existing translations, in as far as they pay no regard to norms operative in areas and times other than those for which they were designed. (p. 83)

One reaction to this has been the formation of the 'Descriptive Translation Studies' approach to translation, which claims to have achieved, among other things, '... a considerable widening of the horizon, since any and all phenomena relating to translation, in the broadest sense, become objects of study' (Hermans 1985, p. 7).[3] The way this is achieved, according to the proponents of this view, is by taking the third, culture-oriented approach. This approach starts with a corpus of target-language texts suspected to be translations, and tries to discover '... the overall CONCEPT OF TRANSLATION underlying the corpus' (Toury 1985, p. 20, capitals as in original). A crucial step in this process is that of setting up the corpus, because it will determine the domain of the investigation, and hence also its results. Toury himself raises this question:

> How ... are translations to be distinguished from non-translations within the target culture, if such a distinction is to serve as a basis for the establishment of corpora, appropriate for study within DTS [Descriptive Translation Studies, E-AG]? (1985, p. 19)

He replies:

> The answer is that, if one does not wish to make too many assumptions which may prove difficult or impossible to maintain in the face of the empirical data, one really has no fool-proof criterion for making such a distinction a priori. The only feasible path to take seems to be to proceed from the assumption that, for the purpose of a descriptive study, a 'translation' will be taken to be any target-language utterance which is presented or regarded as such within the target culture, on whatever grounds.... (1985, pp. 19f.)

What are such grounds on which a target-language utterance may be regarded as a translation? Toury suggests a number of possibilities, '... ranging from its explicit presentation as one, through the identification in it of textual-linguistic features which, in the culture in question, are habitually associated with translations, to the prior knowledge of the existence of a certain text in another language/culture, which is tentatively taken as a translational source for a certain target-language text.' (1985, pp. 22f.)

This last criterion, that is, the existence of a text in another language from which the target language text could have been translated, is emphasized by Toury in that it allows translation studies even in '... cultures which do not at all distinguish – on the product level, that is (since *the translation procedure should be regarded as universally acknowledged in situations where translating is indeed performed*) – between original compositions in the target language and translations into it'. (1985, p. 23, italics my own)

This explanation seems rather surprising in view of the claim that 'Descriptive Translation Studies' is concerned with discovering 'the nature of the prevailing concept of translation' in the target culture: it would seem that such a discovery presupposes that the target culture *has* a concept of translation yet Toury explicitly states that this is not a necessary condition: 'Descriptive Translation Studies' can be carried out even if the people do not distinguish translations from other target-language texts.

Toury's answer is, of course, to be sought in the italicized statement. However, this statement reveals that Toury's approach is, in fact, not culture-determined but does make a priori assumptions about translation, or rather about 'translating': it is assumed that people of any culture universally realize that they translate when they translate. Thus Toury does after all, in the last resort, rely on a universal concept of 'translating' as a process, if not of 'translation' as a product.

Indeed, it is difficult to see how 'Descriptive Translation Studies' could otherwise be applied to any language other than English: only in English are texts regarded as 'translations', and in the absence of any further *intercultural* assumptions there is no a priori reason for relating and English 'translation' to a German 'Übersetzung' or to an Amharic 'tïrgum'.[4] In other words, the study of translations as an intercultural discipline cannot be carried out on purely culture-specific assumptions; it must include intercultural assumptions as well.

Thus the culture-specific approach does not really resolve the problem of defining the theoretical domain: either it leads to the

abolition of the intercultural study of translation or it does in fact rely on non-culture-specific criteria for determining its domain.

The Problem of Evaluation and Decision-making

Another major problem area that is regarded as making the scientific study of translation difficult is that of evaluation and decision-making. Wilss (1982) comments on this as follows:

> Owing to its structure, it is more difficult for the science of translation than for the more strongly system-oriented linguistic disciplines to acquire an epistemological foundation and arrive at a description of translation which adequately deals with the problems involved. *This is because the translation process involves a decision-making process in a great variety of texts that are of practical importance to translation.* (p. 13, italics my own)

The need for decision-making arises from the fact that the target-language rarely allows the translator to preserve exactly what the original conveyed. Levý (1967) illustrates this by considering how the title of Brecht's play 'Der gute Mensch von Sezuan' could be translated into English. He observes that in English '... there is no single word equivalent in meaning and stylistic value to the German "Mensch"' (p. 1171): English *person* would be equivalent in meaning, but belongs to a different stylistic level. If the translator tried to maintain the same level of style, he would be faced by the fact that in English the range of meaning of *Mensch*, 'denoting the class of beings called "homo sapiens", '"... is covered by two words: "man" and "woman"' (1967, p. 1171). So, since none of the options considered captures *all* that the original seemed to express, the solution is not self-evident but requires a non-trivial decision on the translator's part.

In one of his most recent books Wilss notes that despite its importance this aspect of translation seems to have been largely neglected:

> In view of the complexity of decision-making in translation one would expect the science of translation to have launched an intensive discussion of the nature of the decision-making processes in translation, but no such discussion of any degree worth mentioning has taken place. In the vast technical literature on the science of translation, the notion 'decision-making process' occurs only three times in the title of a publication ... (Wilss 1988, p. 93)[5]

With regard to evaluation, too, he notes: 'The teaching of translation methods in most cases points out only *that* one has to evaluate and weigh, but not *how* to do it.' (Wilss 1988, p. 97)

Non-theoretical approaches

One possible reason for this neglect may lie in the fact that while recognizing its importance in practice, some have denied that this aspect of translating should or could be covered from a theoretical or scientific point of view.

For example, Steiner argues that the 'precisions' to be achieved in translation '... are of an intense but unsystematic kind', and he concludes from this that the study of translation as a whole is not really a science: 'What we are dealing with is not a science, but an exact art.' (1975, p. 295)

Newmark is also sceptical about an objective approach to evaluation in translation:

> Translation shares with the arts and other crafts the feature that its standards of excellence can be determined only through the informed discussion of experts or exceptionally intelligent laymen ... After mistakes have been 'proved' by reference to encyclopaedias an dictionaries, experts have to rely on their intuition and taste in preferring one of two or three good translations of a sentence or paragraph. Their final choice is as subjective as the translator's choice of words, but they must be ready to give reasons for their choice. (Newmark 1988, p. 18)

Like Steiner, Newmark is sceptical about the scientific treatment of translation as a whole:

> In fact translation theory is neither a theory nor a science, but the body of knowledge that we have and have still to have about the process of translating ... (Newmark 1988, p. 19)

This is, of course, a possible position to take – but obviously not helpful to scientific penetration of the subject.

Equivalence

However, at least with regard to translations as products, many theorists have attempted to deal with evaluation. Traditionally, this was often done in terms of such notions as 'faithfulness' and 'fidelity', but currently the dominant evaluative concept in translation is that of 'equivalence': the quality of a translated text is assessed in terms of its equivalence to the original text. While this general maxim is widely agreed upon, the problem is that in itself it says hardly anything:

> The concept of equivalence postulates a *relationship* between source-language text ... and target-language text.... The concept of equivalence does not yet say anything about the *nature of the relationship*: this must be defined in addition. The mere demand that a translation be equivalent to a certain original is void of content. (Koller 1983, p. 186, italics as in original, translation my own)

In other words, the notion of 'equivalence' is meaningful only with regard to a conceptual framework that spells out what aspects of the texts are to be compared and under what conditions equivalence is thought to pertain.

This has turned out to be a major problem, because different scholars have proposed different frames of reference: Kade (1968a) restricts his approach to the content level, Koller (1972) refers to 'textual effect', Nida and Taber (1969) to audience response, and Koller (1983) proposes five frames of reference (denotation, connotation, textual norms, pragmatics, and form), to name but a few. The most widely accepted frame of reference for translation equivalence now is probably that of 'function', which amounts to the claim that a translated text (or element of a text) is equivalent to its source language counterpart if it fulfils the same function (Levý 1969, House 1981, de Waard and Nida 1986). Yet even here basic questions remain as to the types of functions that need to be distinguished and as to whether a text can have one or several functions at a time. Furthermore, as we shall shortly see (cf. below), a number of translation theorists have already rejected the notion of 'functional equivalence' as inadequate. As Svejcer has put it: 'Equivalence is one of the central issues in the theory of translation and yet one on which linguists seem to have agreed to disagree'. (Svejcer 1981, p. 321)

The problem of over-specification

One of the sources of disagreement is that texts are not only very complex structures in themselves but are also complex with regard to the uses to which they are put and the effects which they can have in a given situation. This means that translation and original can be compared with regard to a very large number of factors, any of which can be significant for some detail in the text, and hence needs to be taken into consideration when establishing equivalence.

Wilss gives an illustration of how very specific expectations of the recipients can affect judgements of equivalence:

> The importance of the TL [target-language] recipient comes out quite clearly in a translation example by Neubert concerning the German translation of a passage in John Braine's novel *Room at the Top* (1968, p. 32f.):
>
> (12) I came to Warley on a wet September morning with the sky the grey of Guiseley sandstone. I was alone in the compartment ...
> (13) Es war an einem regnerischen Septembermorgen mit einem Himmel wie aus grauem Sandstein/Guiseley-Sandstein, als ich in Warley ankam. Im Zug hatte ich das Abteil für mich gehabt ...
>
> Neubert argues that the decision on the rendering of 'Guiseley sandstone' by 'Sandstein' or 'Guiseley-Sandstein' is determined by the interest of the recipient. If this interest is exclusively focussed on literary aspects of the original, the translator can confine himself to the reproduction of 'Guiseley sandstone' by 'Sandstein', without offending against important TE [translation equivalence] postulates and without shortchanging the SLT [source language text]. If, on the other hand, the translator must reckon with additional interests of the reader in area studies, he must react accordingly, because in a case like this only a translation containing an explicit reference 'Guiseley sandstone' would meet TE expectations and thus could be regarded as adequate. (Wilss 1982, p. 145)

In the light of such problems, Wilss concludes:

> ... TE [translation equivalence] cannot possibly be integrated in a general translation theory (...), but must be looked upon

> as part of specific translation theories which are at best text-type-related or, even more restrictedly, single-text-oriented. (1982, p. 135)

It is surprising that Wilss does not discuss the further implications of such a view for the whole enterprise of constructing a theory of translation. One of the main points of theory-construction is that it should allow us to account for complex phenomena in terms of simpler ones: that is, one of its main motivations is to make *generalizations* about phenomena. But if it turns out that each individual phenomenon – which here is not only each text, but potentially each instance of translating it for a particular audience – may require its own theory of equivalence, then this means that these phenomena cannot be accounted for in terms of generalizations at all, and that they actually fall outside the scope of theory. Thus recognition of the potential need for single-text based 'theories' of translation equivalence entails a possible *reductio ad absurdum* of the notion of 'theory' itself.

Is 'equivalence' an evaluative concept?

Another problem is that the notion of 'equivalence' may not be truly evaluative in nature. To see this, let us take a closer look at House's (1981) treatment of equivalence in translation, which offers one of the more detailed models of functional equivalence.

House starts from the assumption that '... in order to make qualitative statements about a translation text (TT), TT must be compared with the source text's (ST's) *textual profile* which determines a norm against which the appropriateness of TT is judged ...' (pp. 51f., italics as in original). Such 'textual profiles' are detailed analyses that allow the classification of texts on the basis of their linguistic characteristics along eight different dimensions; three of these are 'dimensions of language users': geographical origin, social class, time; the other five are 'dimensions of language use': medium, participation, social role relationship, social attitude, and province.[6] In terms of this model, the evaluation seems to be straightforward enough: the profile of the original text provides the norm against which the profile of the translated text is to be compared.

However, in the course of the presentation, it becomes clear that the matter is much less straightforward, because for an evaluation it is not sufficient to note similarities and differences; one also has to place a value on them. When the profiles of two translations differ from that of the original along the same dimension, the problem is not so difficult:

> In that two TTs [translated texts] may show mismatches on the same parameter(s), their relative adequacy is clearly a function of the relative degree of mismatch on the particular parameter(s). (House 1981, p. 208)

Thus their relative adequacy can be evaluated by quantification: the text whose profile shows fewer mismatches with the profile of the original is the more adequate one.

But what if two translations differ from the original in more subtle ways? House discusses a theoretical example where one translation has very few '... dimensional mismatches, but contains many overtly erroneous errors' and the other '... has several dimensional mismatches but no overtly erroneous errors' (1981, p. 208). She suggests:

> It seems to us that a comparative evaluation of these two TTs can only be arrived at from a consideration of the individual texts and the individual translations themselves. We may, however, hypothesize ... that the subgroup of overtly erroneous errors which we called 'mismatches of the denotative meaning' will be marked as a more serious detraction from the quality of a TT than dimensional mismatches whenever the text has a strongly marked ideational functional component, e.g. mismatches of the denotative meaning of items in a science text are likely to be rated higher than a mismatch on *Social Attitude*. (1981, pp. 208f.)

Then she points out again:

> A detailed hierarchy of errors for any individual case can, however, only be given for a particular comparison of two or more texts depending in any particular case on the objective of the evaluation, ... (1981, p. 209)

This position is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it seems to show that House's model for quality assessment provides a basis only for systematic *comparison* – but *not* for *value judgements*: those will follow from an assumed 'detailed hierarchy of errors' which is specific for the set of texts to be compared and will depend 'on the objective of the evaluation'.[7] Thus for the actual evaluation

no general framework is provided but we are directed towards text-specific 'hierarchies'.

Secondly, it raises the suspicion that apart from House's particular model the notion of 'equivalence' itself may not be truly evaluative in nature but merely comparative, in that it allows only statements about 'sameness' and 'difference'. Such statements are, of course, useful but do not in and of themselves constitute value judgements: they can be turned into value judgements – but *only on the further assumption* that the more 'equivalent' a translation is, the better it is. But this assumption is problematic in that it shows that for evaluation equivalence is not the most basic notion of translation – it rather needs to be related to a theory of values. It is not, therefore, surprising that equivalence-based theories have been seriously challenged; thus Reiß and Vermeer (1984), Hönig and Kußmaul (1984), and others have argued that a translation is not necessarily the better the more equivalent in function it is to the original.[8] So it seems that the notion of equivalence itself is inadequate for evaluating translations.

Hierarchical solutions

This brings us to a third noteworthy aspect of House's position as illustrated in the above quotation. It reveals a very general trend in current translation theory: where problems of evaluation arise, the solution is assumed to lie in some hierarchical structure that determines the priorities between different categories and parameters.

This idea was already important in Levý's (1969) functional approach to translation. Levý saw it as crucial for a reliable translation that in the decision-making process '... the relative importance of the values in a piece of literature are recognized' (1969, p. 103, translation my own), and he suggested the following approach for determining the importance of a given 'value' or 'function' in the text:[9]

> In general, one can say that with words that have several expressive functions, the function in the semantic complex of the higher order is the more important one, be it the context (the sentence, the paragraph etc.), be it the character of a person, the fable or the philosophical objective of a work. The highest complex of expression, sometimes referred to as the idea of the work, its world view, dominates the solution of problems in some lower unit, e.g. when choosing the stylistic level, and this in turn determines the solution of problems of detail. (1969, pp. 104f., translation my own)

Levý himself gives only a very brief sketch of the sort of hierarchy of functions envisaged. As we shall see in chapter 5 (cf. pp. 108–9), the glimpse he gives of that hierarchy raises a number of questions, and it seems fairly clear that such a hierarchy would have to be very complex in order to be adequate.

The following statement by Hofmann – almost twenty years later – gives a clearer idea of the degree of complexity required, especially when one considers that Hofmann, too, is addressing only a subset of translation problems, those concerned with redundancy of information in drama. For Hofmann it is part of the 'highest obligation' for the translator of drama to develop '... a scheme for ranking those elements that contribute to the aesthetic effect perceived' (1980, p. 23, translation my own), and this process should be systematic:

> In doing so it is important for the translator to subject his intuitive creativity ... to a *systematic* method of analysis. (Hofmann 1980, p. 23, translation my own, italics as in original)

Hofmann spells out:

> To each unit of meaning on the level of sentence and sub-scene a grid should be applied which will determine, for a selection of the relevant expressive means, the position of the effective elements
>
> 1 descriptive-quantitatively and
> 2 by qualitative evaluation with regard to the content and meaning to be transferred;
>
> in this way the grid will offer strategies for resolving the unavoidable conflict of the expressive means that compete with one another and with the invariant elements/variables of content/semantics, pragmatics (effectiveness on stage). (Hofmann 1980, p. 23, translation my own)

The list of aspects that need consideration in this is long, including, for example, 'rhythm, metre, verse, rhyme, nominal-verbal style, choice of words, proverbs, puns, metaphors, illustrations, euphony and cacophony, grammatico-rhetorical figures, syntactic means ... intonation, tempo, pauses' and a few others (Hofmann 1980, p. 23, translation my own).

Developing a translation theory along these lines is a truly formidable task: it involves not only developing a framework comprehen-

sive and detailed enough to capture all these different aspects, but also relating them in terms of hierarchical structures that will rank them all according to their relative importance in a systematic way.

However, there is another, more important concern than the feasibility of constructing such complex hierarchies, and that is the question of what reality lies behind them. In other words, what is it that makes translation equivalence with regard to property X rank higher in some sense than equivalence with regard to property Y?

This question is rarely addressed explicitly. Levý talks in terms of three oppositions – 'general-individual', 'whole-part', and 'content-form' – and suggests that the translator should emphasize the general, the whole and the content.

He gives no further explanation as to why the first member of each pair should normally be considered predominant, and makes clear that even these rankings are not absolute – the second member of each pair is not to be suppressed, '... especially not in cases where it turns into its antithesis: form must be preserved where it is the carrier of the semantic (stylistic, expressive) value, uniqueness where it is a component part of a more general value, that is, of the nationally and historically specific' (Levý 1969, p. 108, translation my own). Thus not only does the basis of his ranking scheme remain unclear, but it also seems to be open to the possibility of a dialectical reversal of rankings.[10]

Hofmann appeals to pragmatics, which '... embraces the purpose and goal of the translation' (1980, p. 27, translation my own) declaring it to be the 'invariant' dimension. Yet, as we shall see in chapter 5 (pp. 118–9), there are exceptions to this ranking as well.

One of the most developed and explicit attempts to set up an evaluative framework for translation that goes beyond statements about equivalence is the action-theoretic approach developed by Reiß and Vermeer (1984). Having argued that equivalence is not the most basic concept in translation – there is no aspect of the original that will necessarily have to be preserved in translation – they suggest that equivalence is, in fact, only a special case of a more general notion: that of adequacy. Adequacy in turn is always linked to the notion of purpose ('skopos') – and it is this notion that dominates translation:

> As the highest rule of a theory of translation we propose the 'rule of skopos': An action is determined by its purpose (is a function of its purpose). (1984, p. 101, translation my own)

Thus it seems that the notion of purpose provides the evaluative dimension for translation. However, a closer look shows that this is not actually the case, because Reiß and Vermeer postulate that there is a set of purposes, and furthermore that this set has a hierarchical structure: 'Purposes are hierarchically ordered' (1984, p. 101). In other words, what looked like a final answer to the problem of evaluation turns out to be only another intermediate step, raising the question of what that further dimension or principle is that determines the hierarchical ordering of purposes.

Thus, instead of solving the problem of evaluation, Reiß and Vermeer only add another layer of theory to an already overwhelmingly complex framework.

A Problem of Scientific Method (Research Programme)

In summary, it seems that the 'modern' science of translation has yet to solve some rather fundamental problems. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that these problems are not just particular difficulties that will be overcome by further research. It rather seems that these problems are not unrelated, and that they are at least partially conditioned by two basic methodological factors: one is the reliance on a descriptive-classificatory approach to science, and the other is the choice of the domain.[11] In this section I want to show how these two issues relate to the problems surveyed above.

Starting with the descriptive-classificatory approach, its basic aim is to provide an orderly or systematic description of the phenomena in its domain. It starts from the observation that no phenomenon is totally different from every other phenomenon, but that sets of phenomena seem to be similar in some respects. These similarities can be exploited for purposes of description: they allow the theorist to describe the phenomena in sets or classes rather than individually – which lends generalizing power to the theory. To the extent that phenomena with similar properties tend to behave in similar ways, this approach is also vested with a certain amount of predictive or explanatory power, though this is not usually seen as its first interest.

This explains why translation theories have tended to set up classification schemes at every level, from linguistic features via text typologies to sets of purposes: this approach relies on classification schemes because they are the only basic theoretical tools it has. All the generalizations are made in terms of classes, hence in order to be covered by the theory, each phenomenon in the domain must be assigned to a class. This in turn means that the classificatory framework must be comprehensive enough to include all phenomena in its domain, and this explains why the number of classes

and classification schemes in translation theory have kept increasing as new sets of phenomena were found to be relevant to translating: for these phenomena to fall under some generalization they must first be assigned to classes – which requires the setting up of additional appropriate classification schemes.

The resulting proliferation of classificatory frameworks is further aggravated by the choice of domain, which is seen as consisting either of translated texts viewed in direct relation to the original texts (the product perspective) or of the processes and operations that lead from the original to the translated text (process perspective).

Viewed from the product perspective, translation theory faces the problem of a virtually infinite task: since there is no upper limit to the number of different texts a language can produce, and therefore to the number of translations that can exist in a language, corpus-based description of translation will hardly be able to exhaust its domain.[12]

From the process perspective there seem to be two alternatives, depending on whether the aim is to deal explicitly with the evaluative aspect of the translation process or not. Krings tries to do so. For him the task of empirical, process-oriented research on translation starts with '... the screening of the psycholinguistic structure of the translation process on the basis of data taken from concrete translation events ...' (1986, p. 24, translation my own). However, when it comes to theory formation, he falls back on classification, because the theory will be concerned with '... how this structure of the translation process varies depending on the characteristics of the translator (e.g. his degree of translation competence), the characteristics of the text (e.g. text type), and the languages involved (e.g. closely related *vs* typologically distant languages)' (Krings 1986, p. 24, translation my own).

Holz-Mänttäri's (1984) action-theoretic model does not fall back on classification: in fact it points out some of its weaknesses (see below). However, it does not really address the problem of evaluation either; the author keeps emphasizing that translators must aim at 'functional adequacy' ('Funktionsgerechtheit'), but leaves this notion undefined. In fact, this exclusion of the evaluative aspect seems to be deliberate:

> The methods, models and schemata presented are intended to make visible these [functional] dynamics. They are not meant to over-regulate, to choke intuition or to automatize processes.... According to each case and need they can be used either meticulously or with generous selectiveness. *For it is the expert that decides about the use of his instruments.* (p. 127, translation and italics my own)[13]

Thus while this procedural model avoids the problems of classification, it does not explicate how the translator is to make the decisions necessary in the translation process; this is left to expert intuition.

The multidisciplinary ambitions of translation theory can also be seen to follow from this descriptive orientation: in order to take into account non-linguistic factors that clearly have a bearing on translation, the descriptive-classificatory framework has to be extended to other domains like psychology, sociology and culture in general.

Returning to the descriptive-classificatory approach, another of its problematic consequences is the following: since its generalizations are made in terms of classes, the theory is geared to dealing with sets of similar phenomena rather than with individual phenomena. However, this is not satisfactory because the translator needs to deal with individual problems, as Holz-Mänttäri points out:

> Typification does show up the typical but has the serious disadvantage of always ignoring just that which is decisive for the case in hand. But this is the very problem which the translator has to be able to solve and for which he must be given higher-order rules based on a theory. (1984, p. 16, translation my own)

This means that either the classificatory approach has to be satisfied with approximate rules that deal with sets of phenomena rather than with individuals, or its framework has to be refined to a point that allows the unique classification of every phenomenon in the domain. This not only further complicates the theoretical framework but leads to a loss of generalizing power: the smaller the class of phenomena to which a statement applies, the less its generalizing power, and statements that refer to single-member classes are no longer generalizations. Thus the problem of over-specification which we looked at above (see pp. 11–12) can also be seen as a natural consequence of the descriptive-classificatory approach.[14]

Finally, it seems that the problem of evaluation in translation can also be traced back, at least to a large degree, to the descriptive-classificatory approach. In the final analysis this approach is capable only of setting up and matching categories: it can categorize the phenomena in the source text, it can categorize those in the translated text, it can categorize functions etc., and make statements

about matches and mismatches between phenomena in terms of the classes to which they have been assigned. Beyond that, however, *it has no other principle to offer*. The postulation of hierarchical structures is an attempt to incorporate value judgements into the classificatory framework, but strictly speaking does not have a methodological basis in that framework, which exhausts itself in classifying phenomena in terms of their intrinsic properties. Evaluation and decision-making, however, cannot be accounted for in this way: the value, significance, importance etc. of a phenomenon do not lie in its inherent properties, but in its relation to human beings.

Changes in Scientific Method

If this analysis is correct, then two basic changes in approach seem to be prerequisites for further progress in the study of translation: a shift in the domain of the theory away from 'translational behaviour' (van den Broeck 1980) – either as 'product' or 'process' – and a shift away from the descriptive-classificatory approach. I believe that both these shifts have become possible with the development of the relevance theory of communication by Sperber and Wilson (1986a).

A Shift in the Domain of the Theory

Relevance theory approaches communication from the point of view of competence rather than behaviour: it tries to give an explicit account of how the information-processing faculties of our mind enable us to communicate with one another. Its domain is therefore mental faculties rather than texts or processes of text production, and it is the aim of this study to explore the possibility of accounting for translation in terms of the communicative competence assumed to be part of our minds.[15]

This does not mean that the host of different factors noted as important in recent years are ignored: they are naturally covered in the only way in which they can have an influence on translation anyway – and that is as part of our mental life; no external factor has an influence on either the production or interpretation of a translation unless it has entered the mental life of either the translator or his audience. Its mere existence 'out there' is not enough to influence the translation.

A Shift from Description to Explanation

Relevance theory is not a descriptive-classificatory approach. It does not try to give an orderly description of complex phenomena by grouping them into classes, but tries instead to understand the complexities of communication in terms of cause-effect relationships, which, applied to our mental life, are taken to mean computational, and particularly inferential, relationships.[16] Furthermore, because it is tied in with a psychological optimization principle, relevance theory provides a natural basis for an empirical account of evaluation and decision-making.

Translation as Communication?

Before introducing relevance theory in more detail, it is worth pointing out that the application of relevance theory entails that translation is being looked at as part of communication.

This step may not seem unproblematic at this point in the history of translation theory, mainly because of the strong feeling, noted above, that translation covers issues too wide for any one discipline.

However, this is not necessarily a valid objection, for two reasons. Firstly, as just indicated, the motivation for a multidisciplinary approach is largely tied in with the choice of behaviour as the domain of the theory. If we can develop an account of translational competence that can accommodate the influence of a wide range of factors without describing and classifying them with respect to their various domains, then there is no a priori reason for a multidisciplinary approach, and hence no a priori objection to a communication-based approach.

Secondly, the reason why communication-theoretic approaches have been felt inadequate is strongly related to the particular model of communication used. So far, virtually all attempts to treat translation within communication theory have relied on some variety of what Sperber and Wilson (1986a) call the 'code model' of communication, that is, a model that considers verbal communication to be essentially a matter of the encoding, transmission and decoding of 'messages'. In recent years a number of translation theorists (e.g. Reiß and Vermeer 1984, Krings 1986, Wilss 1988) have questioned the adequacy of this model, and in view of the basic inadequacies observed by Sperber and Wilson (1986a), these criticisms seem well justified.