

Strategies of Translation

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The term “strategy” in “translation strategies” is often used synonymously with such terms as “procedure,” “technique,” “method,” “tactic,” “approach,” and so forth. Their meanings overlap, and translation researchers define them in various ways. Despite the terminological confusion, discussions of translation strategies can be traced back to Cicero’s advocacy of sense-for-sense translation in 46 BC, and are widely covered in translation textbooks for their pedagogical significance. This topic also relates to broad theoretical issues in translation studies.

Researchers have attempted to distinguish translation strategy from its synonyms, and to develop their own classifications from different perspectives. For example, Lörscher’s (1991) classification is based on a cognitive approach, while Chesterman’s (1997) differentiation uses a textual approach. Yet, the conceptual confusion has not been dispelled. This entry tries to distinguish translation strategies, techniques, and procedures, and to consolidate existing classifications.

It seems that clear-cut definitions of these terms might not work as well as prototype definitions. Most researchers would agree that the two prototype translation strategies are literal translation and free translation. The former focuses on the level of words, while the latter goes beyond the word level and emphasizes the creation of a target text that sounds natural in the target language. These two strategies are described in a variety of oppositions: word-for-word translation versus sense-for-sense translation; source-oriented translation versus target-oriented translation; direct translation versus oblique translation (by Vinay and Darbelnet); adequacy versus acceptability; formal equivalence versus dynamic equivalence (by Eugene Nida); semantic translation versus communicative translation (by Peter Newmark); overt translation versus covert translation (by Juliane House); documentary versus instrumental translation (by Christiane Nord); foreignization versus domestication (by Lawrence Venuti), and so on. While these binary oppositions have much in common, they reflect different perspectives and emphasize different translation aims and effects. For instance, word-for-word translation and sense-for-sense translation are text-level or segment-level strategies. Nida’s (1964) formal equivalence versus dynamic equivalence is mainly from a linguistic perspective and involves reader response. The domesticating translation versus foreignizing translation pair, proposed by Venuti (1995), reflects a cultural interventionist perspective. The two strategies affect the choice of text for translation as well as the translation process. Venuti advocates the foreignizing strategy in order to “register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text” (1995, p. 81) and combat the cultural dominance of readers in dominant cultures such as the USA.

The “literal versus free” debate has been one of the central issues in translation theory and criticism throughout the ages. However, it is now generally believed that this dichotomous debate is relatively sterile, as the two strategies are part of a continuum (Hatim & Munday, 2004, p. 230), and the selection of a strategy is a function of the theoretical assumption of “what is a translation” text type (e.g., serious literature, children’s literature, technical texts, print advertisements), domain (e.g., IT, legal), function (e.g., for publication, information, or light entertainment), prestige of the source text (e.g., the Bible, pulp fiction), motivation (e.g., payment), and other factors (or constraints).

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Having discussed the two prototype strategies, let us turn to the definitional question: what is a translation strategy? Lörscher (1991), Chesterman (1997), and other researchers agree on a few defining characteristics of a translation strategy: (a) it is goal-oriented, (b) it is problem-centered, (c) it requires making coordinated decisions, (d) it is potentially conscious, and (e) it involves text manipulation. The aforementioned two prototype translation strategies have these characteristics. Since a translation strategy involves problem solving, a categorization of translation problems would correspond to a categorization of translation strategies. The difficulty with this, however, is that there are a number of ways in which problems can be categorized. For instance, the categorization criterion can be the prior knowledge required to solve them, the nature of the goal involved, and the complexity of the problems involved (Robertson, 2001, p. 6).

Problems, according to their scale, can be divided into global (or general) problems and local (or specific) problems. Jääskeläinen (1993, p. 116) makes a corresponding distinction between global strategies (i.e., “the translator’s general principles and preferred modes of action”) and local strategies (i.e., “specific activities in relation to the translator’s problem-solving and decision-making”). Global strategies might be dictated by or with the commissioner while local strategies are up to the translator. In addition, local strategies are designed to handle specific problems and need to be consistent with the chosen global strategy. Jääskeläinen found that global strategies are much more frequently and consistently used by professional translators than by nonprofessionals.

From Jääskeläinen’s perspective, literal and free translation strategies are global strategies since the translator has to think about the goal of the translation and how the target text should affect the readers. The global strategy chosen will affect the translation process. Since local strategies are immediately followed by specific techniques, which affect the translation result and the micro-units of the text, and are classified by comparison with the source text (Molina & Hurtado Albir, 2002, p. 509), local strategies are basically translation techniques. As translators grow in competence, some former translation problems will no longer present an obstacle to them; some of their local strategies become semiconscious or unconscious, and the use of certain techniques to cope with certain problems is automatized.

Vinay and Darbelnet’s (2000) taxonomy of translation techniques (which they call “procedures”) has a wide impact. They did a comparative stylistic analysis of French and English, and divided the seven procedures they discovered into two general strategies: direct/literal translation and oblique translation. The former includes: (a) *borrowing* (i.e., borrowing a word or expression from the source language, such as the Chinese word “kung fu” in modern English); (b) *calque* (which is a kind of borrowing whereby the structure of the original word or phrase is maintained but its morphemes are replaced by those of the target language; for example, the Chinese word “motian dalou,” literally “sky-scraping big building,” is a calque of skyscraper); (c) *literal translation*. Oblique translation includes: (d) *transposition* (i.e., changing the word class or grammatical structure without changing the meaning of the message, as in rendering a noun in the source text into a verb in the target text); (e) *modulation* (i.e., changing the point of view or cognitive category in relation to the source text, as in rendering a negative construction into a positive one: “not complicated” becomes “easy”); (f) *equivalence* (e.g., translating “to kill two birds with one stone” into Chinese as “to kill two eagles with one arrow”); (g) *adaptation* (i.e., a shift in cultural reference when the type of situation being referred to by the source text is unknown in the target culture, such as using the word “seal” for sheep when translating the Bible into Inuktitut).

Among local translation strategies, Chesterman (1997) distinguishes between comprehension strategies (for understanding and analyzing the source text) and production strategies (for the production of the target text). From a linguistic perspective, he divides production strategies into mainly syntactic/grammatical, mainly semantic, and mainly pragmatic, with

each category containing 10 techniques. Syntactic strategies involve purely syntactic changes, manipulate form, and include such techniques as calque, transposition, and sentence structure change. Semantic strategies mainly pertain to changes concerning lexical semantics. They manipulate meaning and contain techniques such as synonymy, emphasis change, and paraphrase. Pragmatic strategies have to do with the selection of information in the target text, and often involve syntactic or semantic changes as well. Pragmatic strategies include cultural filtering, explicitness change, information change, transediting, and so forth. Some of these techniques are obligatory during translation in a given language pair, while most are optional.

Many researchers (e.g., Lörscher, 1991) believe that a translation strategy is a procedure or a sequence of actions. However, this is not consonant with the dictionary definitions of strategy. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, strategy refers to “a plan for successful action based on the rationality and interdependence of the moves of the opposing participants,” while procedure is defined as “[t]he fact or manner of proceeding with any action, or in any circumstance or situation; a system of proceeding; proceeding, in reference to its mode or method; conduct, behaviour.” Krings (1986, p. 268) defines translation strategies as “potentially conscious plans for solving a translation problem.” Strategies involve adopting procedures to solve problems, and the chosen procedure will influence the result.

Now let us turn our attention to translation procedures (referred to as “translation strategies” by some researchers) and procedural steps. Gerloff (1986) identified the following text processing strategies: (a) problem identification, (b) linguistic analysis, (c) storage and retrieval, (d) general search and selection, (e) inferencing and reasoning strategies, (f) text contextualization, (g) editing, and (h) task monitoring. In his empirical studies, Lörscher (1991) recognized 22 elements constituting translation strategies (or procedural steps), including nine original ones and 13 potential ones, such as realizing a translational problem, preliminary solution to a translational problem, and the mental organization of source-language text segments. During the translation process, these elements are combined by translators into *basic structures*, *expanded structures*, or *complex structures* of translation strategies. He found that professional and nonprofessional translators differ in the distribution and frequency of the strategies employed, but do not differ qualitatively; that is, their mental processes do not reveal significant differences. He concluded that it is impossible to ascertain “[w]hen faced with problem X, [translators] employ strategy Y,” but we can find out “[w]hen several [translators] are faced with a problem X, many or most of them employ similar or the same types of strategy” (p. 280). Darwish (2008) identifies four distinct translation procedures employed in translating: recursive strategy (i.e., a circular and revisional process), waterfall strategy (i.e., a sequential unit-by-unit process), stop-and-go strategy (i.e., a block-by-block process), and mixed strategies (i.e., a combination of the previous three strategies).

In some translation textbooks (e.g., *Thinking German Translation: A Course in Translation Method* by Hervey, Loughridge, & Higgins, 2006), “translation method” is often used as a cover term for “translation strategy,” “translation technique,” and even “translation procedure.” For instance, there are literal and free translation methods. Compared with translation strategies, which are highly individualistic, translation methods are supra-individual and well tested (Lörscher, 1991, p. 70). However, “translation method” in English is often associated with such modes as machine translation and computer-aided translation. The term “translation approach” is often used in a vague sense, while “translation tactic” is rarely used.

Discussions of translation strategies before the 1980s were primarily prescriptive, and researchers tended to argue for one translation strategy against another. Since the 1980s, empirical research into translation strategies, techniques, and procedures has become

increasingly common. There are two major empirical approaches in this regard: product-oriented and process-oriented. The former approach mainly refers to corpus-based contrastive analysis: a parallel corpus consisting of source texts and translations is built for analyzing the frequency of shifts (i.e., textual differences between source text and target text) and the various translation strategies and techniques employed. The factors to be considered can include text type, domain, synchronic and diachronic variation in language features and translation norms, idiosyncrasy, certain language features (e.g., metaphors, allusions), among others. In a process-oriented approach, translators are usually asked to translate a passage while thinking aloud, and the process will be recorded and then analyzed. The factors that might influence the frequency and distribution of translation strategies and procedures may include translation competence (e.g., novice translators versus professional translators), language direction (i.e., from or into the mother tongue), text type, domain, translation brief, translation difficulty level of the test passage, time pressure, and so forth. These factors need to be manipulated or kept constant in an experiment in order to make meaningful comparisons.

In PACTE's (2003) translation competence model, strategic competence (for solving problems and optimizing the process) is the most important sub-competence among five sub-competencies (i.e., bilingual, extralinguistic, knowledge about translation, instrumental, and strategic). Investigating translation strategies will have significant pedagogical implications and may benefit research on machine translation.

SEE ALSO: Cognitive Approaches to Translation; Functional Approaches to Translation; Norms of Translation; Text-Based Approaches to Translation

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Suggested Readings

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