Using pragmatic theories in translation

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By:

Brian Friel famously said of translations that, “ it is about language and only language.” Could that be true? Is translating from one language to another simply all about the language?

Language is the most important tool that is often used to define a course in one’s life. It is used to communicate, form bonds, build relationships, and live our daily lives. It is the identity of a person, but when translating from one language to another, are there other factors that effect that translation other than language? Are there other any other things to consider when translating, besides just the language? Because of today’s society and openness in communication lines across the globe, we know now that word-for-word translation simply doesn’t cut it. Looking deeply into the how of a conversation proves to be just as important a detail as what is being said. By using pragmatic theories that are beginning to be used in the field of linguistics, specifically, translation, we can form a better understanding of the source language (SL) and source text (ST).

Over the course of the last forty or so years, pragmatic theories have been widely used in the studies of social sciences. So what is the best approach to take when interpreting and translating a language that is foreign to our own? My focus was to look at two (Speech Act Theory and Conversation Analysis) of the many different approaches. Look at their strengths and weaknesses and determine which I consider to be more successful. While both are inherently different, they both use methods of extracting what is being said, what is meant, and what the outcome is in a sentence or phrase. They have each been mutually used to varying degrees of success.

Speech Act Theory (SAT)

Speech Act Theory (SAT) was first introduced in 1962 by Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin, and further developed by an American philosopher by the name of J. R. Searle. It is a subfield of pragmatics that is concerned with the ways in which words can carry out actions, and not just be used to present information. SAT considers three levels of action with which utterances are said to be performed: Locutionary Acts, Illocutionary Acts and Perlocutionary Acts.

A locutionary act is the act of making a meaningfulutterance, a stretch of spokenlanguagethat is preceded by silence and followed by silence or a change ofspeaker—also known as a locution or an utterance act (Nordquist). Locution is the part of the speech that is said and meant.

An illocutionary act refers to the use of asentenceto express an attitude with a certain function or “ force,” called anillocutionary force(Nordquist). Illocution is what was done.

A perlocutionary act is an action or state of mind brought about by, or as a consequence of, saying something, which is also known as perlocutionary effect (Nordquist). Perlocution is what has happened as a result.

Speech Act Theory has become an increasingly important branch of contemporary theory of language in the past thirty years. The theory has stimulated research in philosophy and in human and cognitive sciences simply based on ideas on meaning and communication (Nordquist). It sets language in the context of human action and examines the functions and purposes of human action that can be accomplished by sentences. This viewpoint has many potential useful connections and has been used much in recent years with regards to interpretation and translating.

Locutionary acts are essentially broken down into two main categories: utterance acts and propositional acts. According to the Glossary of Linguistic Terms, “ an utterance act is a speech act that consists of the verbal employment of units of expression such as words and sentences.” Simply, an utterance act is an act in which something is said (or there is verbal communication) that possibly will not have any meaning. On the opposite spectrum is a propositional act, in where a particular reference is made thus giving the word or sentence meaning. A propositional act is clear and concise and expresses a categorical point.

From Searle’s view, there are only five speech acts that speakers can achieve which is the basis for Speech Act Theory: the assertive, directive, commissive, declaratory and expressive illocutionary points. First of the five classifications was the assertive, where the speaker asserts a proposition to be true, using such verbs as confirm, admit, conclude, refute, and detail. The second category is directive, which is when the speaker tries to make the listener do something by using such words as ask, command, dare, insist, plead, request, urge and vow. The third is commissive, where the speaker commits to an action. During the commissive act, the speaker will use verbs such as assure, evince, guarantee, pledge, promise, secure, and swear. The fourth category is Declarations, where the speaker will alter the external status or condition of an object or situation, by making the utterance. For example: I now pronounce you husband and wife; I sentence you to death with no possibility of parole; I confirm this statement to be true. During the declaration, the speaker will affirm or assert a claim. The last classification is Expressives. Here the speaker expresses an attitude about a state of affairs, using such verbs as appreciate, confess, congratulate, denounce, detest, praise, regret, welcome. (Searle, 1976)

The third level of Speech Act Theory involves perlocutionary acts. Being able to distinguish between an illocutionary and perlocutionary act is significant and very important. The perlocutionary act is the outcome or the effect on the listener based on the locutionary or illocutionary act. It is performed, meaning for example: angering, comforting, inspiring, persuading and inciting are considered perlocutionary acts brought about by what has been said or meant. It is a natural act not a conventional one that may have a significant physiological impact on the audience.

So what place does Speech Act Theory have in the field of translating and interpreting? There is a definite relationship between pragmatics and translation. Doing the work of translation not only involves the process of transferring meaning, but also transferring intent between the Source Language (SL) and the Target Language (TL). Meaning is typically understood by what the SL says, while intent has to be derived by a deeper understanding of what the SL intended. Having a firm knowledge of SAT and having an understanding of SAT in pragmatics will help to better understand intent when translating and interpreting.

When applying SAT to translation, it is important to first distinguish the acts involved within a sentence or a phrase. For example, the phrase “ Restricted Area, must have credentials to enter” has all three acts. “ Must have credentials” serves as the locutionary act, this serves as a caution to the reader (the illocutionary act), whether in the SL or TL, to not enter the space without prior authorization. If the reader obeys the warning and does not enter (perlocutionary act) then we would have been successful in the translation and the speech act by persuading the reader not to enter the area.

Now, while applying SAT to translation has many advantages, it has also been widely criticized. Not only with regards to translation, but as a function of pragmatic theory. “ Inspeech act theory, the hearer is seen as playing a passive role. The illocutionary force of a particular utterance is determined with regard to the linguistic form of the utterance and also introspection as to whether the necessaryfelicity conditions—not least in relation to the speaker’s beliefs and feelings—are fulfilled. Interactional aspects are, thus, neglected. However, conversation is not just a mere chain of independent illocutionary forces—rather, speech acts are related to other speech acts with a wider discourse context. Speech act theory, in that it does not consider the function played by utterances in driving conversation is, therefore, insufficient in accounting for what actually happens in conversation.” (Barron, 2003)

What Barron says holds a lot of weight when using SAT in translation. Being able to convey to your audience what actually happens in the SL means as much if not more than simply translating the text from SL to TL. It is not enough for the words to be said, it is more important for them to be understood. This is one of the downfalls of SAT in translation, and why it might not be the best approach.

Conversation Analysis (CA)

Like with SAT, Conversation Analysis (CA) was developed in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. It was championed by a sociologist named Harvey Sacks and his collaborators Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. CA was based on a conception of interaction order by Erving Goffman and took inspiration from Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology. It is widely used today in the fields of anthropology, linguistics, psychology, sociology and speech-communication, and with varying degrees in translation and interpretation studies or interactional sociolinguistics.

There are four main departments of research within CA, which are: turn-taking, repair, action formation and ascription, and action sequencing. A conversation analyst will begin by setting up a problem with a preliminary hypothesis. This is done by using audio and video recordings, which the analyst will use to construct a detailed transcription from the recording, with the preference of leaving out no details. The analyst will then perform data-driven analysis with the purpose of finding recurring or repeating patterns of interaction. This has been well established of the method for using CA in the social sciences. Over the past 40 years however, CA has expanded considerably to include a wider variety of studies that has helped many in the field of sociolinguistics.

As with many social sciences, including linguistics, the transcription of data is all too common. More often than not, analysts are interested in what is being said when reading or listening to a piece of SL. Conversation analysts on the other hand, are notably different. They show equal consideration for how something is said. Convening on the intent and the details of how the SL is delivered, showing an emphasis on the interactional details. Let’s extrapolate on the four main departments of CA.

1. Turn-taking

Whose turn is it? Turn-taking is simply that. During every conversation, regardless of the SL, a conversation is made up of two or more persons taking turns expressing their utterances. The founding principle of this idea is that parties of a conversation are expected to express these utterances when it is their turn. Sometimes the utterance is a phrase, a sentence or a word, but could be a basic sound or a pause. One-on-one conversations are the most basic form of turn-taking, while multi-party conversations tend to add to the complexity. As we all know there are many different avenues that a conversation can take, and turns can be decided by a myriad of mitigating factors. With endless possibilities, turn-taking is developed and organized on a ‘ local’ level by all the participants of the conversation. Turn-taking is “ locally managed, party-administered, interactional controlled (Sacks, 1974).

2. Repair

The second main department of CA focuses on the systematically organized set of practices of ‘ repair’ that participants use to address troubles of speaking, hearing and understanding. Episodes of repair are composed of parts (Schegloff, 1997; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). A repair initiation marks a “ possible disjunction with the immediately preceding talk,” while a repair outcome results either in a “ solution or abandonment of the problem” (Schegloff, 2000, p. 207). That problem, the particular segment of talk to which the repair is addressed, is termed the “ trouble source” or “ repairable.” This is extremely important in the field of linguistics, specifically translation. This segment helps to repair breakdowns in communication, most notably when translating between SL and TL.

“ Recent research has been done to describe the linguistic practices and resources used in initiating repair from a cross-linguistic, comparative perspective. Fox, Hayashi, and Jasperson (1996) note differences between self-repair in English and Japanese and form a link between the different “ syntactic practices” of the two languages. Authors Makato Hayashi and Kaoru Hayano (2013) describe a particular format used in Japanese conversation, which they term “ proferring an insertable element” (PIE), in which the next speaker articulates a successive understanding of the prior utterance, but does so with an account that is understood to be *inserted into* rather than *appended onto* the preceding turn. In comparison; Dingemanse, Blythe, and Dirksmeyer (2014) describe various formats for others to initiate repair, suggesting that, “ different languages make available a wide but remarkably similar range of linguistic resources for this function,” noting that repair initiation formats are adapted to deal with different contingencies of trouble in interaction.” (Sidnell, 2018) Categorically, repair initiation formats will in general react to the issues of portraying the inconvenience experienced, overseeing duty regarding the inconvenience and showing their speaker's comprehension of the circulation of information. Thus a form such as " um?" indicates trouble but does not specify it, incorporates no position with respect to responsibility for the trouble, and guarantees no information of what has been said. Interestingly, a repair initiation format such as " are you talking about the one on Main St?" locates (e. g., the expression " a restaurant") and portrays (as an issue of reference or comprehension) the trouble. Although such a format again includes no explicit indication of which participant is responsible for the trouble, it nevertheless suggests that the one initiating repair takes responsibility for finding a solution. And, finally, by displaying an understanding (candidate) of what has been said, it thereby shows that its speaker is knowledgeable in this respect (and has heard what was said) (Sidnell, 2016).

3. Action Formation and Ascription

Often called Action in Interaction, this area of research concentrates on the matter of how saying something can count as doing something. Helping to describe the practices by which turns at talk are formed and situated in order to acknowledge some arrangement of actions. The majority of the work done in this area has served as a solution to the problems based in Speech Act Theory and has been spearheaded by John Searle. Different versions of the theory exist, however, they all have a similar premise, that all actions can be labeled or categorized. The theory further concludes that listeners are on the lookout for cues or clues that help them to identify what action is being spoken or what action is being implied. These clues are brought upon by linguistic devices which the listener already retains a base knowledge of. This is extremely noteworthy in the field of translating. This theory assumes that both parties of a conversation have a set index of actions with which to draw from. This may not be the case when the parties may be from different cultures or backgrounds. Several actions that may be described in one language may not have a literal translation to a new language. It is important for the translator to have a vast knowledge of not only the language but of the culture of the SL and the TL to further gain knowledge into certain actions that may be latent when translating.

4. Action Sequencing

The fourth and final area of research within CA is action sequencing which can be described as how actions are organized into sequences within a conversation. Often called ‘ sequence organization’, where we search to develop ‘ adjacency pairs’ built around the courses of action that are implemented through speech. For example, a sequence may consist of one speaker asking a question or requesting a certain action, and another speaker’s response. The organization of sequences involves “ the ways in which turns-at-talk are ordered and combined to make actions take place in conversation” (Schegloff, 2007). Research in action sequencing pertains to how the speakers make their turn coherently with prior turns by themselves and the other speaker. More in depth, this area centers on the precise actions performed during each speakers turn, and the grouping of those actions, as opposed to the moment when a turn may start or end.

The technological writings of CA scarcely ever discuss issues of translation however for anyone who needs to present a piece of translation to a group of people which is not acquainted with the language utilized by participants, translating such materials is a daunting task (Duranti 2013). These issues are emulated in the multiple ways in which a translation can be presented in actual CA publications. According to Paul Ten Have (2012), some of those include:

- Materials presented in translation into the language of a specialized publication.

- Materials presented in translation into the language of the publication in the body of the text, with the original transcript given in an appendix.

These two examples prove unacceptable as they only serve to give the reader a word-for-word translation of the source text (ST). Leaving out useful information and interaction that would have been present in the ST. Thus, negating the use of CA in these instances.

- Materials presented in translation into the language of the publication in the body of the text, with the original transcript given immediately below it, as a separate block of text, or the opposite, the original being first, followed by the translation (Ten Have, 2012).

- Materials presented in the SL, with a translation into the TL of the publication immediately below it, line by line.

- Materials presented in the SL, but with first a phrase-by-phrase ' annotation', and then a ' translation' into the TL of the publication immediately below it, line by line.

These three examples, in my opinion, are quite acceptable in their use of CA in translation. The analyst or translators focus should be on providing as much information to the reader while staying true to the intent and the interaction that was intended upon in the original text.

Ultimately, Conversation Analysis helps to simplify and fulfill the criteria of a competent translation. Nida’s critique that “ the relevant unit of meaning for the translator is not the word, but the message,” (Nida, 1959) helps to solidify CA as a powerful tool with which we can draw upon to formulate a solid and precise translation. Our aim with using CA in translation is to ensure that the words spoken or used in the TL do the same job as the SL, focusing on the criteria of equivalency that is both sequential and interactional. Translation is not a process where the outcome is always undoubtedly correct or incorrect, it remains an “ indirectly controlled guess” (Richards 1932). However, by using CA as a research mechanism with which to translate and form translations, we are able to not only focus on the what but also on the how.

CA is not without its criticisms as well, however, CA has proven a useful mechanism when used in translation studies. More studies and research have been done in support of using CA in translation than that of SAT. While both are useful tools, CA helps the analyst or translator develop a better sense of the intent behind the source language and the interaction between the parties involved in a particular conversation or instance. Being able to extrapolate the meaning behind the words is an ever important resource when trying to devise a precise and informative translation. Translation to TL needs to have a decisive and unambiguous correlation to the SL. This can more easily be achieved by using CA as an instrument when developing a translation.

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