Is register analysis an effective tool for translation quality assessment?

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Any source text is constructed within a complex and unique linguistic, textual, and cultural context. According to the theory of systemic-functional linguistics, context of situation determines the different meaning that a text can convey. Meaning is the crucial component that must be transferred from the source text (ST) to the target text (TT). However, since no identical situational context exists between ST and TT, different translation strategies should be made. This study critically examines the importance of the situational context in text and it explicates register analysis as a model of translation quality assessment. It also investigates how register analysis can be an efficient tool as an attempt to reconstruct the situational context of the source text.

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976: 23) 'a text is a passage of discourse which is coherent in these two regards: it is coherent with respect to the context of situation and therefore consistent in register; and it is coherent with respect to itself and therefore cohesive'. These two conditions work together to form texture, developing a text with a consistency of register and a text that is interdependent. Therefore, register analysis is an effective tool when examining texts in terms of logical connectivity; in other words deciding if a text is coherent or not. In translation, when meaning is transferred from the ST to the TT any modifications in register causes changes in the language used in order to achieve a coherent text, and consequently an adequate translation (Munday, 2009:39). However, register analysis as a tool to assess translation quality is a controversial subject as register theory has gone under different revisions.

Context of situation is also termed register and it is constituted by three concepts: field, tenor and mode. These concepts describe how the context of situation determines the kinds of

meaning that are expressed in the text (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 22). These three variables create the basic conditions to achieve communication, developing the register profile of a text (Munday, 2009: 41). The different registers found in texts are defined and identified by these three variables, which are expressed in any text through the three metafunctions of language: interpersonal, textual and ideational (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 26).

Field is generally expressed through the experiential/ideational metafunction, where language represents social experiences, activities and understanding of the world. It uses language to represent knowledge and belief, and is normally realised through the language features of clauses, nouns, verbs and adjectives. Different languages develop different fields of discourse in different ways (Hatim and Mason, 1990:48). Example: the English field of law, based on common law and the traditions of the English courts, is very different from the Spanish field based on Roman law and a different legal system (Lonsdale, 1996:54).

The second component of register is tenor that is expressed through the interpersonal metafunction which defines the process of social interaction, especially the relationship between reader and writer. Four interacting levels of tenor can be distinguished: formality, politeness, impersonality and accessibility. Formality can be marked syntactically. One technique in English is pre-modification, which must be recognised as a formal marker and therefore it must not be overused in less formal texts, as illustrated in the following article about the homeless in New York (Lonsdale, 1996:56).

Esto es el sonido de los mendigos de fin   *This is the end of the century beggars*

de siglo....   *sound...*

Duermen, como Walter, en frente de tiendas   *Like Walter, they sleep in front of 24*

abiertas las 24 horas.   *hour open shops.*

          (Spanish newspaper: El País,3 Spetember1991)

Politeness is a further level of the tenor variable. It reflects the social distance between the reader and the writer. Spanish has many ways of expressing politeness, but the most obvious is the address system: *'usted'* versus *'tú'.* English only has *'you'* and politeness has to be expressed by the use of titles and of lexical and syntactic markers. Impersonality refers to whether the reader or writer's presence is made explicit in the text or whether the first or second person is used. In Spanish, impersonality is highly used in formal writing. Finally, the fourth level distinguished in tenor is accessibility, in which the translator has to consider how the TT readers differ from the readers of the ST and whether elements that are implicit in the original have to be made explicit (Lonsdale, 1996:59). These variables: field, tenor and mode are interdependent: a given level of formality (tenor) influences and is influenced by a particular level of technicality (field) in an appropriate channel of communication (mode) (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 51).

Mode is expressed through the textual metafunction which gives a text its coherence. This textual metafunction plays a significant role in inspecting and promoting the textual coherence of a text. It is concerned with organising interpersonal and ideational messages. As Hatim and Mason (1990:49) explain 'mode is the manifestation of the nature of the language code being used', for example: the distinction between speech and writing. It is important to highlight that textualisation is seen as the specific task of mode, which is an area at the interface between text and context where functional variation of language use is

negotiated, such as informative versus persuasive. According to Munday (2009:41), mode must be seen as functioning together not only with the contextual variables: field and tenor but also with the different textural and structural mechanisms. Therefore, under this view the register analysis is an attempt to explicate how linguistic structures function to create a text that is internally cohesive and coheres with its context.

The content-structure of a text can be examined by illustrating the text's linguistic patterns, concentrating on its textual metafuction. According to Newmark (1987:295), cohesion is the most useful constituent of discourse analysis applicable to translation. Cohesion in a text is provided by a network of lexical, grammatical, and other relationships that provide links in the surface structure of the text. Different languages use cohesive devices (such as substitution, reference, conjunction, lexical and syntactic cohesion) differently. Therefore, translators must consider the adjustment of cohesive devices from the ST to the TT. These devices reflect rhetorical purpose and control interpretation of the text; as a result changes may affect both the content and the line of argument (Londsdale, 1996:215).

In the following translation from Spanish to English, textual cohesion is provided by the repeated use of the question form and the subjunctive mood in the ST. The inverted question mark at the front of a question in Spanish is a taquigraphical marker that does not exist in English. Furthermore, there is word play between '*Para qué*' (*why?*) and '*Para que*' (*so that*), and most of the sentences (which are organised as a list) begin with either one or the other. This same effect is not possible in English, however most of the question words in English begin with *W*. Therefore, a cohesive effect can be achieved by starting all the sentences with *W*. It can be argued that word order is more fixed and repetitive in English

than in Spanish, which contributes to achieve cohesion in text. In terms of tenses, the subjunctive mood in Spanish has no direct equivalent in modern English, therefore the conditional '*would*' is more appropriate in this text (Londsdale, 1996:217).

¿Y si hoy estalla la Guerra?
¿Para qué?
¿Para probar que el derecho de invasión es un privilegio de las grandes potencias?
¿Para que Israel pueda seguir haciendo a los palestinos lo que Hitler hizo a los judíos?
¿Para que quede claro que el petróleo no se toca?

(Spanish newspaper: El País, 17 January 1991)

Possible translation:

<u>What</u> if war broke out today?
<u>What</u> would it prove?
<u>Would</u> it prove that only the superpowers have invasion rights?
<u>Would</u> Israel be able to go on doing to the Palestinians what Hitler did to the Jews?
<u>Would</u> everyone understand that oil is out of bounds?

Different models of register analysis can be identified. House's model of translation quality assessment involves a systematic comparison of the textual profile of the ST and TT. The operation of House's model concentrates on a register analysis of both ST and TT according to their realisation through lexical, syntactic and textual means. She distinguishes three main textual aspects. Firstly, the theme-dynamics charts the various patterns of semantic relationships by which themes recur in texts such as repetition, anaphoric and cataphoric reference. The second aspect is clausal linkage that is described by a system of logical relations between clauses and sentences in a text, such as additive and adversative. And the third component is iconic linkage that occurs when two or more sentences in a text cohere because they are, at the surface level, isomorphic (House, 1997:45). She suggests the

comparison between texts by analysing the three domains of register: field, tenor and mode in terms of these lexical, syntactic, and textual mismatches.

House categorised translation into one of the two types: overt or covert translation. Covert translation describes a translation which is comparable to the ST in terms of the function it has in its discourse environment (focusing on language use), being equivalent to the ST at the genre and function level. On the contrary, overt translation has to be equivalent to the ST at register, genre and language/text level (Munday, 2009:179). This distinction is part of the process of evaluating the relative match between ST and TT, which consist of a list of covertly erroneous errors (dimensional mismatches) and overtly erroneous errors (non-dimensional mismatches). The latter comprising both mismatches of the denotative meanings of ST and TT elements and breaches of the target language system. Moreover, the qualitative judgment of a translation in House's model also consists of a statement of the relative match of the ideational and the interpersonal functional components of the textual function. Following Halliday's model of register analysis, House proposes that in order for TT to be equivalent to its ST, the TT should have a function (consisting of an ideational and an interpersonal functional component) which is equivalent to the ST's function. Furthermore, the TT should employ equivalent pragmatic means for achieving that function (House, 1977:Abstract). However, in the process of evaluating a translation the concepts of purpose and cultural context must be considered, as these concepts may affect how readers perceive the text and therefore the readers' interpretation.

In terms of the text's purpose, Reiss (Munday, 2001:73) identifies functional characteristics of text types and links to translation methods. Informative texts that should transmit the full

referential content of the ST, using plain prose, for example in a lecture or tourist brochure. Expressive texts which should transmit the aesthetic and artistic form of the ST, in which the translator must adopt the standpoint of the ST author, for example in a poem or play. And the operative texts should produce the desired response in the TT receiver, creating an equivalent effect among TT readers, for example in an electoral speech or advertisement. Therefore, it can be argued that form is almost as important as content, thus a translator must also be sensitive to the purpose of a text. As the skopos theory suggests a translation is determined by its purpose 'skopos' which establishes the translation methods and strategies which are employed in order to produce a functionally adequate result (Munday, 2001:79).

As illustrated above, register analysis is used as an attempt to achieve equivalence of meaning in text between the ST and TT, by obtaining equivalence of situational context. Context of situation and text must be acknowledged together when examining the meaning and function of a text. The crucial point is to explore correspondences between structure and real-time communicative function in a given context. It can be argued that the quality assessment of any translation involves a theory of equivalence. The concept of equivalence is a controversial issue in which scholars disagree on its validity. Nida (Munday, 2001:42) creates the concept of principle of equivalent effect, distinguishing between formal equivalence where the focus is on the message itself, in both form and content; and dynamic equivalence, where 'the message has to be tailored to the receptor's linguistic needs and cultural expectations'. However, Newmark rejects Nida's idea of full equivalence effect being achievable, he sees it as unrealistic. In other words, the requirement that a TT should replicate the effects of ST on its original audience can be considered possible in a contemporary ST, but for an old text it may not be feasible. This is due to the fact that it will

not be possible for a translator to know how the audience responded to that text when it was first produced (Munday, 2009:173). Therefore, there are complications in measuring this equivalence effect.

It is unrealistic to think that a text can have the same effect and elicit the same response in two different cultures and times, even in individual audiences because every reader's responses differ. The crucial point is that the whole text creates the unity of meaning that a translator must aim to transmit. It can be argued that the term equivalence, not in the sense of sameness but rather in the sense of similarities, will be a more realistic view concerning translation methodology, because it is inevitable that a translation will lack certain culturally relevant features that are present in the ST. Therefore, a good translation must produce a careful approximation to the properties that a ST manifests, aiming for the closest possible natural equivalent to the source-language meaning (Sándor et al, 1995:16).

A translation tries to transfer correspondence between situation and language, however the degree of register restriction may be an obstacle to this objective. There are registers which are restricted such as diplomatic protocol as opposed to unrestricted registers such as journalism. It can be argued that the concept of register is a reasonably adequate device for predicting language use in restricted domains. However it becomes less powerful in unrestricted areas in which the linguistic resources do not lead to any meaningful characterisation of a register (Hatim and Mason 1990: 54). In certain cases the intended meaning that a translator must transfer to the TT is subject to subtle variation. In other words, a translation may be faithful in rendering the denotative meaning but failing to transfer the conviction of the source text. According to Widdowson (Hatim and Mason,

1990: 57) equivalence is not just linguistic and semantic; it is also pragmatic. The register

analysis is sufficient when examining the following three dimensions of context:

communicative dimension, pragmatic dimension and semiotic dimension.

These three dimensions of context are crucial when achieving the closest possible natural

equivalent. Identifying the register of a text is an essential part of discourse processing. As

mentioned previously the three variables (field, tenor and mode) that constitute register, also

set up a communicative transaction as they provide the basic conditions for communication to

take place. However, the problem with register analysis on its own is that the insights which

it affords into the communicative dimension of context are not in themselves sufficient, the

pragmatic dimension and the semiotic dimension must also be considered (Hatim and Mason,

1990:37)

Pragmatics is the study of the relationships between language and its context of utterance.

Sentences have the ability to perform actions, and as consequence they have some

communicative purpose. The translator must be a competent processor of intentions in the

SL, and also he/she must be in a position to make judgements about the possible effect of the

translation on TL readers (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 60). Translators make linguistic choices

which are conditioned by the pragmatic action of a discourse, for example: when considering

speech acts, a translator must consider any substantial differences that can exist cross-

culturally in interpreting concepts like *'complimenting'* or *'apologising'* (Yule, 1996:88). In

English the use of the imperative to request something in a shop, instead of the use of modal

verbs *'would you give me'* is normally considered rude. However, in Spanish it is a natural

way of requesting something without being considered rude or arrogant *'give me'*. A further

example is the over use of *'thank you'* and *'please'* when translating from English to Spanish. This will provide amusement to the target audience as it is not part of the Spanish use of language. The pragmatic dimension of context constitutes the ways in which intentions are perceived in communication and consequently, it is crucial in the process of register analysis in translation studies.

The third dimension is the semiotic dimension. Semiotics is the science which studies signs in their natural habitat (society). Transfer of meanings from one cultural system to another involves a contextual dimension which manages our understanding of the way cultures work in terms of communicative and pragmatic features. These three dimensions: communicative, pragmatic and semiotic dimensions are interdependent (Hatim and Mason 1990: 58). Under this view, register analysis can account for the intricacies of any communicative process. A translation involves not just a transfer of information between two languages but also a transfer from one culture to another. This third dimension, the semiotic dimension, is linked with cultural context.

Culture is a complex collection of experiences which condition daily life; it includes history, social structure, religion, traditional customs and everyday usage. Meaning is negotiated between readers from their own contexts of culture. In translation, a new text will be read according to a different map or model of the world, through a series of different sets of perception filters. Cultural context involves the fact that there are words related to ways of thinking and behaving within a particular language community, and words which may be cultural such as *kuffiah* an Arabic head-dress, or universal such as *coffee or tea* denoting a specific material cultural object (Newmark, 1995:95). According to House (Munday,

2001:93) a cultural filter needs to be applied by the translator, modifying cultural elements in order to give the impression that the TT is original. This involves changes at different levels of language/text and register. Consequently, the translator should be able to model the various worlds.

The following are examples that contain a cultural element and therefore must be transferred neat. Concerning lexical meaning, translators can encounter false friends such as the Spanish adverb '*actualmente'* meaning '*presently'* in English not '*actually';* the Spanish '*decepción'* meaning '*disappointment'* in English not '*deception'*. Concerning collocations: same meaning but different order: Spanish '*blanco y negro'* (white and black) in English '*black and white'*; Spanish '*ir y venir'* (go and come) in English '*come and go'*. A source language (SL) word or phrase will not necessarily correspond exactly to a target language (TL) word or phrase. Therefore, the translator needs to accept the lack of a similar cultural convention in the TL. Moreover, he/she needs to consider how attached the intended meaning is to its specific social context and value systems. For example, when translating a Spanish text describing the Christmas season, knowledge of culture is absolutely vital to correctly translate certain events that are unique in the Spanish culture: '*los Reyes Magos'* (the three wise men), '*turrón'* (traditional Christmas candy) or '*las doce campanas'* (The 12 grapes of midnight –a tradition to eat twelve grapes, one on each chime of the clock before 12 on New year's eve). Agreeing with Newmark (1995:94) it is certainly correct when defining culture as 'the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression'.

Register constructs the situational context of a text, which is crucial as it determines the different meaning that a text can convey. This broad examination shows that register analysis can be considered as an effective model of translation quality assessment when taking into consideration the communicative, pragmatic and semiotic (cultural) dimensions, as well as the purpose (skopos) of the text. These concepts construct the different register variables that a translator must consider when applying linguistic adjustments in order to successfully construct the situational context in the target language, aiming to achieve the closest possible natural equivalent to the source language meaning. As a result, translation is a process of re-establishing situational context in the target language.

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