

Vinay & Darbelnet's Translation Techniques: A Critical Approach to their Classification Model of Translation Strategies

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Abstract: The specific study starts with a general overview of V&D's approach and a brief analysis of the two general translation strategies, direct and oblique translation, introduced in their classification model. An in-depth study of the seven techniques suggested by them follows, which is accompanied by a short criticism of their taxonomy. Representative examples are provided of how their theory is closely related to the practice and the evaluation process of translation. The final part of the study outlines some general conclusions drawn by the particular research and summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of V&D's approach.

Keywords: translation techniques, classification model, translation evaluation, translation theory, translation practice

Introduction

Vinay & Darbelnet's classification model has had a wide impact on the theory and practice of translation and continues to exert influence up to the present. In their "Stylistique Comparée du Français et de l'Anglais" (1958) they analyzed texts in both English and French stressing the differences between the two languages and identifying different translation strategies and procedures. They have also suggested a number of steps for the translator to follow in moving from the source text to the target text. Their translation model is based on the segmentation of both texts into units, numbering the same translation units and comparing them to examine which translation procedure has been adopted.

V&D'S translation techniques

The two general translation strategies identified by V&D are direct and oblique translation, a division which corresponds to the distinction between literal and free translation. According to Vinay and Darbelnet's methodology, in some translation tasks it may be possible to transpose the source language message element by element into the target language and translate literally (literal translation). In most cases, more complex methods have to be used because of structural and metalinguistic differences among languages and taking into account the fact that certain stylistic effects cannot be transposed into the target language without upsetting its syntactic order (free translation).

On the basis of an extensive discussion of examples from the two language pairs English - French and German-French, the two theoreticians came to the conclusion that all translation procedures, at least in these two language pairs, can be subsumed under seven main categories, of which the first three fall into direct translation and the other four fall into oblique translation.

The first one is *borrowing*, which means transferring the SL (source language) word directly to the TL (target language) without formal or semantic modification is the simplest of all translation procedures. Borrowings are used to fill a semantic gap in the TL and to add local colour. For instance, in order to introduce the flavour of the SL culture into the TL, foreign words may be used such as the Russian "roubles", "perestroika", or Mexican Spanish food names such as "tortillas", "tequila" and so on. Some of these borrowings are so widely used that they eventually become part of the TL lexicon and they are no longer considered to be borrowings.

The second of the procedures is *calque* which is defined by V&D (1958: 85) as "a special kind of borrowing where the SL expression or structure is transferred in a literal translation". V&D point out that some calques after a certain period of time have become an integral part of the TL, turning them into "faux amis". For instance, the French calques "les quatre Grands" or "thérapie occupationnelle" for the English "the four great powers" and "occupational therapy" respectively.

As far as *literal translation* is concerned, this is the replacement of SL syntactic structures normally on the clause/sentence scale, by TL syntactic structures which are isomorphic and synonymous in terms of content. The phrase "where are you" is translated literally "où êtes-vous?". According to V&D, literal translation is most common when translating between two languages of the same family and even more so, of the same culture. Literal translations between English and French are justified by a certain convergence of structure and thought which exists among the European languages. It is worth mentioning that in their theory there is not a conceptual distinction between literal and word-for-word translation.

V&D contend that if *literal translation* distorts the meaning of the ST, then translators must turn to their methods of oblique translation which are *transposition*, *modulation*, *equivalence* and *adaptation*. *Transposition* is the replacement of one grammatical unit by another without any change in the meaning of an SL element by structures which have the same meaning but belong to different word classes. The phrase “il rend délicat l’identification” is translated as “it makes it difficult to identify” where the noun “identification” has been transposed.

They also distinguish two types of transposition in the translation procedure: *obligatory* and *optional* transposition. *Obligatory* transposition is used when the SL structure is such that it does not allow the translator any other choice but use the transposed expression. On the contrary, *optional* transposition is stylistically motivated since the base and the transposed expression do not have the same value and allow a different nuance of style to be retained. This kind of transposition appears to go beyond linguistic differences and can be regarded as a general option available for stylistic consideration. Thus, a complex sentence can normally be converted to a co-ordinate sentence or to two simple sentences.

Modulation is a variation of the form of the message which results from the change in the point of view. It indicates a change in the angle from which something is seen. This kind of translation strategy is used when, although the translated text is grammatically correct, it is considered unacceptable in the TL. V&D distinguish between *obligatory* and *optional* modulation. A typical example of obligatory modulation is the phrase “the time when” which must be translated as “le moment où” which in back-translation is “the moment when”, and not literally as “the moment where”. The type of modulation which involves turning a negative SL expression into a positive TL expression is considered optional modulation, as in the phrase “it is not easy” that can be translated as “il est difficile”. Sometimes an optional modulation corresponds so perfectly to the situation indicated by the SL text that it may become obligatory.

Equivalence is the replacement of an SL situation by a communicatively comparable TL situation. Most equivalences are fixed and they are used in translating idioms, proverbs, nominal or adjectival phrases etc. In general, proverbs are typical examples of equivalences. Thus, “il pleut a seaux/des cordes” is rendered as “it is raining cats and dogs”.

The final translation procedure proposed by V&D is *adaptation* which is in fact a special kind of equivalence, a situational equivalence. It involves changing the cultural reference of a situation of the ST because of socio cultural differences between the SL and the TL communities. In such cases, translators create a new situation that can be considered as equivalent. For example, V&D suggest that the phrase “en un clin d’oeil” would be best translated into English as “before you could say Jack Robinson”.

An important aspect of V&D’s approach is the distinction between obligatory and optional translation procedures. Obligatory translation procedures are to be found on the syntactic or lexical level. They are motivated by structural, semantic or socio cultural differences between SL and TL and belong to the category of non-literal translation procedures. Obligatory changes in syntax, which V&D mention under the heading “servitude” occur when the translator, in his effort to render a ST, is forced to find new ways of expressing it in the TL. In addition, obligatory lexical restructuring is necessary when a certain concept of the SL text is absent from the TL text. In contrast to the obligatory translation procedures, optional shifts are due to the translator’s style and preferences. In such cases, the translator’s choices may depend on various factors such as the type of text to be translated, the target readership and his stylistic preferences. However, in many cases the difference between optional and obligatory translation techniques seems to be slightly subjective and difficult to decide which of the two fits best.

Critical approach of V&D approach

Their theory has been a considerable attempt to organize various events into a number of categories and subcategories of translation procedures, producing in this way techniques of translating which can be used in the target text. However, there has been much criticism of their classification model, as well. The inclusion of *borrowing* in the classification system might be considered unacceptable, since a direct *borrowing* cannot be called a translation procedure in the narrower sense of the word (Wills, 1982: 100). *Calque* and *literal translation*, likewise, could not be regarded as direct translation procedures, but as two special cases of translation.

Confusion of category boundaries also affects the four oblique translation procedures. Thus, the use of the term “equivalence” to designate the sixth translation procedure appears problematic since every translation process aims at equivalence which is to be attained by the selection of any translation procedures. According to Ladmiral (1978: 20), “le concept d’ équivalence a une validité extrême et générale et il tend à désigner toute opération de traduction”. Similarly, the term “adaptation” has a rather general meaning which could characterize every non-literal translation process. Ladmiral (1979: 20) states: “l’adaptation n’est déjà plus une traduction”.

Another disadvantage of their theory is that it does not focus on the text as a whole and major factors are not taken into consideration. Their theory should also be enriched by text - typology study and the usage of phrases and collocations for each text-type. Finally, their classification model should be supplemented by a detailed analysis of the purpose of the translation and the function of the text to be translated.

Conclusion

To conclude, V&D's approach has been the first systematic attempt to draw up a well-oriented set of propositions relating to transfer processes and to devise a classification of translation procedures in both literal and non-literal translation. They have managed to organize recorded translation events into a number of categories and subcategories of translation procedures, seeking in this way to derive a technique of translating which can be used in a target text. They have also made an attempt to describe the behaviour of the translator in terms of performance and allow him freedom to make certain decisions on the translation process which are stylistically motivated.

However, there are certain difficulties in distinguishing translation procedures since several of them can be used within the same sentence and some translations come under a whole complex of methods. Such difficulties could be solved by avoiding the strict, linear arrangement used in the taxonomy of *Stylistique Comparée*. In addition, according to some criticism, certain translation techniques of *Stylistique Comparée* are only special cases of translation. Claus (1971: 608), who examined this typology concludes that only *modulation*, *equivalence* and *adaptation* are true "procédés techniques de traduction" because they relate to semantics. On the whole, V&D approach has made a considerable contribution to the development of the language-pair-oriented descriptive and applied science of translation.

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