

The Unit of Translation

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Abstract:

This paper tackles the topic of the Unit of Translation (UT) with the aim of making a number of suggestions that might bring up new insights into this thorny issue. UT has been differently tackled by scholars and related to general text types, or functions. In this paper, UT is related to the micro text levels and a number of text-functions. It concludes that the UT issue cannot be tackled in terms of wide generalizations of macro text types and that many practical factors interfere in the choice of UT such as text length, text complexity, time pressure, translator's experience, and degree of conformity between SL & TL languages and cultures.

Key Words: translation, unit of translation, text type, text function, translating strategy

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1. Introduction:

The notion of Translation Unit (TU) has been a controversial issue. No consensus has been found among scholars as to what specifically constitutes a TU. Scholars have related this notion to text type, or language functions; but unfortunately, they are not consistent in the classification of functions with regard to their number, names, and implications. What Reiss and Buhler (1984) call 'informative function' is called 'ideational function' by Halliday (1976); but 'referential function' by Holmes (2008). What Reiss (1984) calls 'Social function' is called 'interpersonal function' by Halliday (1976) 'affective function' by Holmes (2008) and 'phatic function' by Malinowski (1923). The term 'expressive function' for Reiss (1984) refers to the artistic language function, but the expression of feelings for Jacobson is the 'emotive function', whereas the artistic language function for Jacobson is the 'poetic function'.

Texts are classified into a variety of types in relation to different parameters. According to medium, texts are spoken and written; and according to genre, texts are classified into scientific, journalistic, literary, legal, poetic, narrative, dramatic, etc. According to function, texts can be classified into factual (informative-instructional-descriptive), narrative, argumentative (persuasive), and expository. Because speakers use various linguistic techniques and styles to express themselves in accordance with their communicative needs in various situations, a text is not generally a pure type, but is a hybrid of more than one type or segment, with the aim of fulfilling certain micro functions within the overall text act or macro function. A novel which is usually characterized as narration may include conversation, argumentation, description, etc. Advertisements may be persuasive and directive simultaneously. On the other hand, texts that belong to different genres may share certain textual and stylistic features as is the case with magazine and newspaper articles that contain various text types and styles (news stories, literature, arts, industry, business, advertisements, etc). In the age of modern technology, a text may include a variety of genres (letters, numbers, graphs, images, etc) that merge and mix to fulfill a certain function. Relating UT to a text type in terms of the general genre category only does not seem to be practically an adequate measure for handling the UT.

The notion of function too has been differently tackled by different scholars. Searle (1976) suggests five types of functions or speech acts: representatives (assertive), directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Reiss (1976) suggests three types of function: informative (which includes information, arguments, feelings, judgments, intentions, and compliments); expressive (artistic or creative use of language); and operative (text as stimuli to behavioural responses, action or reaction on the part of the receiver). Halliday (1976) suggests three function types: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Holmes (2008) mentions 8 functions: referential, affective, directive (orders or requests.), expressive (of mood or feelings), poetic (artistic language function), meta-linguistic (using language to describe language), commissive (vows, bets, promises, threats) and heuristic (suggested by Halliday in relation to children's learning).

1.1. Hypothesis:

A text's function may be handled in terms of a macro text act and a number of different micro functions that serve or fulfill the main purpose of the text act as an overall general function. An advertisement text may have multiple micro functions: poetic (achieving foregrounding through

certain artistic literary features), informative (providing information about a commodity or service), interpersonal (establishing some form of social relation with the addressee (potential customer), all of which serve the main (directive/persuasive) text act or function that stimulates the addressees.

1.2. Methodology:

This paper attempts at relating the 'UT' to the criteria of both text type and text function, in order to attend to the different relevant factors that may influence a translator's decision as to the focus point of the UT (which becomes the starting point of his translating process), in relation to text types and text-functions that are not only inter-related but also inseparable.

1.3. Literature Review:

For Catford (1965), the unit of translation extends from morpheme to clause. Newmark (1988) says that the UT in most translations is at the level of lower units, and in some cases at the level of higher units. For Snell-Hornby (1988/1995) the UT is "a cohesive segment lying between the level of the word and the sentence." According to Koller and Baker, ST may be translated into larger TL units for explicitness when SL and TL are not closely related, but for Barkhudarov, a UT is "the smallest unit of SL which has an equivalent in TL" (cited in Shuttleworth and Cowie, 1997, pp. 192-193). Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/1995:21) suggest a formal-cognitive approach combining a 'lexicological unit', and a 'unit of thought', and define UT as "the smallest segment of the utterance whose signs are linked in such a way that they should not be translated literally" (Hatim & Munday, 2004, p.138). Matthiesen (2001) considers the clause to be the proper UT. Hatim and Mason (1990) consider 'word' to be the UT in literal translation, and that free translation involves longer stretches of language. Guo (2002) suggests 'paragraph' as the best UT for Chinese-English translation; but Huang and Wu (2009) consider the 'sentence' to be the proper UT in accordance with their quantitative study.

2. Factors that Affect the UT:

Text producers produce texts, as they make their linguistic paradigm choices from various linguistic levels (phonology, morphology, lexi, syntax), and syntagms to create texture (thematic, information, stylistic and outlay), according to the goals they want to achieve within the relevant socio-cultural contexts. Translators act as decoders of SL linguistic, textual and cultural systems in terms of content processed chunks (UT) and re-coders of the TL texts. UT thus refers to the translator's starting point of handling the amount of content to be processed in order to produce the TT.

A translator thus ought to pay careful attention to the micro functions of a text, without losing sight of the macro function or text act while translating. This may be compared to a driver who ought to concentrate not only on the few meters ahead of him to avoid small pitfalls, but also to keep sight of the farther part of the road ahead of him, so that in his endeavour to avoid small pitfalls would not fall into much larger ones.

UT may be influenced by a number of factors such as: text type and function, structure length or complexity, translator's competence, time pressure, and the degree of linguistic and cultural divergence between SL and TL.

2.1. Text type and Function:

2.1.1. Information-oriented (referential) texts:

(1). London is the capital of England.

Texts that convey information or instructions and rules about a certain life experience or domain (as in scientific, technical, legal, economics, etc.) where the dominant text function is referential (i.e. informative), the UT focus in such texts is usually on the thematic structure (i.e. theme-rheme) and information structure (given-new) that should carefully be attended to. In this example, the ‘theme’ and ‘given’ information ‘London’ constitutes a UT at the word level, and the rheme constitutes a second UT at the group level:

UT 1 (theme-given information)	UT 2 (rheme-new information)
London	is the capital of England

(2). The capital of England is London.

In example 2, theme/given information (The capital of England) is the first UT at the group level, whereas the rheme part is the second UT at the word level:

UT 1 (theme-given information)	UT 2 (rheme-new information)
The capital of England	is London

(3). Answering that question was easier than saying ‘London is the capital of England’.

In example (1), ‘the capital of England is London’ is information-based. In example 3, the same text and words are not information-based, but focus is on its being an example of easiness. When the information unit is used with a secondary function of serving some other dominant function in a text, the UT would be at levels higher than the ‘word’, such as the clause level.

(4). Gold is more expensive than silver, and it is also more desirable.

In texts with specialized terms or jargon, the UT begins at the word level and moves up to the group, the clause, and the sentence levels. The rheme part can be handled as one UT, or can be divided into two UTs depending on the translator’s skill and experience:

(5). Hypermetropia and astigmatism are the defects most likely to cause headaches.

UT 1 (theme)	UT 2 (rheme)	
<u>Hypermetropia and astigmatism</u>	are the defects	most likely to cause headaches.
	are the defects most likely to cause headaches.	

In the following example, the legal text needs careful handling with regard to content, and may be processed as 8 UT at the group-clause level with attention to certain legal technical words:

(6). “If any state party to this **Convention** / considers there has been an abuse of privilege or **immunity** / conferred by this Convention, / consultations shall be held / between the State and the specialized **agency** concerned / to determine whether any such abuse has occurred, / and if so, / to attempt to ensure that no repetition occurs.”

(Section 24, Article 7, Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the Specialized Agencies, UN)

In coordinated clauses, each clause can be analyzed independently:

UT 1 (theme)	UT 2 (rheme)		UT 3 (theme)	UT 4 (rheme)
Gold	is more expensive than silver	and	ellipted subject [it]	is also more flexible

2.1.2. Translating texts that are partly information-oriented:

Some texts are charged with a mixture of information-oriented function (referential), and other functions:

(7). Quran Ch.44:35

‘Allahu nurul samawati wal-ard mathalu noorihi kamishkaatin feeha misbaah al-misbaahu fi zujaja al-zujaja kaannaha kawkabun durriyun..’

“Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star” (Pickthall, p.343).

(8). Quran Ch.81:6

‘*wa itha al-biharu sujjirat*’.

In translating a religious text, the UT is usually at the clause level unless the verse contains an ambiguous or semantically indeterminate lexical item that requires the UT to start from the word level and sing to higher levels, (as in example 8 above in which the word *sujjirat* has more than one possible meaning or interpretation: ‘boil’, ‘rise’, ‘burnt’, ‘flooded’). In such cases, translators may have to seek help from the macro text by looking for parallel intra-textual stylistic variants which sometimes give helpful clues (Ilyas, 2013, p.89).

2.1.3. Translating texts that are not information-oriented:

When translating texts that are not information-based, but have other functions (such as full idioms, proverbs, social formula, poetry, advertisements, etc) the UT is usually at the higher levels of clause or text.

2.1.3.1. Full Idioms and Proverbs:

In the case of rendering full idioms, and proverbs, the UT is at the group-clause level since the meanings of full idioms do not result from the addition of the meaning of its constituents, but have their own special meanings:

(9). once in a blue moon (Group Level)

(10). to let the cat out of the bag (Clause Level)

(11). Not all that glitters is gold.

In the case of partial idioms, the UT of the non-idiomatic part is usually at the word level:

(12). needle’s eye

2.1.3.2. Social Formula (with interpersonal function):

The UT in social formula is at the clause-sentence level:

(13). How do you do?

2.1.3.3. Poetic Texts:

Poetic Texts constitute replacing SL semiotic codes (of rhyme, rhythm, stress, intonation, etc.) by counterpart TL semiotic codes in accordance with the TL socio-cultural norms of writing within a particular genre, the UT for a poetic text begins at the phonological level when sounds are artistically manipulated (through parallelism or deviation), and moves upward on the rank scale (group, clause, sentence) and macro text. Each line in example 14 can be a UT:

(14). Shall I compare thee to a summer's day
Thou art more lovely and more temperate

A source of structural ambiguity or complexity is ellipsis (as in the following stanza from Hopkins) which would move the UT down to the word or group level.

(15). I cast for comfort I can no more find
By groping round my comfortless than blind
Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find
Thirst's all –in-all in a world of wet.

The missing or ellipped words make this stanza structurally and semantically complex and ambiguous. Specifying the ellipped words will help in disambiguating the stanza, which means focus here should be on the word level.

I cast [around] for comfort [that] I can no more find
By groping round my comfortless [situation] than blind
Eyes [can find day] in their dark[ness] can day or thirst can find
Thirst's all –in-all [satisfaction] in a world of wet.

Deviant expressions and structures as is the case with the poetry of e e cummings who uses two concrete qualifiers 'thicker' and 'thinner' for the abstract meaning of the word 'love', besides using the ungrammatical double comparative form 'more thicker' and 'more thinner' have a special semiotic and symbolic meaning that love does not follow rules. If the TT is produced in correct grammar, this will distort the stylistic and semiotic function of the ST deviant forms. Such cases make the UT swing to the lower levels of morpheme and word in order to reproduce equivalent deviant forms in the TL.

(16). love is more thicker than forget
More thinner than recall

This should be rendered into some ungrammatical TT form too, something like:

الحب أكثر أسمك من ينسى
أكثر أرفع من يتذكر

2.1.3.4. Advertisement:

Advertisement involves semiotic and cultural features mainly, because what is important in an advertisement is not its information content but the achievement of the desired impact on the receivers (skopos), by using semiotic and artistic TL devices. Micro components

are not important except for contributing to the achievement of maximum effect on the receivers. The UT in advertisement texts is therefore at higher levels (clause-sentence level), with much freedom to diverge from the original textual features and devices to conform to TL cultural norms. ST items and semantic chunks are not necessarily rendered into parallel TL ones, and may be expanded or contracted as long as the main function (marketing) is achieved. In example 14, the six-line English advertisement may become two lines in another language, but non-verbal semiotic features (whether pictures, font type, colour, bold print, etc. should also be attended to and reproduced unless they are discarded for cultural reasons:

- (17). When the heat is on,
And the pace is slow,
There's a cool fresh world
Where you can go
Clear, crisp, and light
It tastes of Sprite.

حين يسود الحر والخطى ثقال
رشفة سبرايت ... الحل في الحال

2.2. Text Length and Structural Complexity:

2.2.1. Text Length:

The length and complexity of structures also affect a translator's choices of UTs. A long structure would usually be divided into smaller units or chunks. When the information-oriented text is a long one, the UT is usually on the levels of group and clause, with special attention to scientific or technical jargon. Sentence (6) may be handled as

- (18). In such studies of pattern and process, attempts are made to unravel the interrelationships and roles of various species in particular communities, while function at the ecosystem level involves studying such processes as the flow of energy and the cycling of nutrients.

2.2.2. Structural Complexity:

An ambiguous would move the UT down to the word or group level. In the following example, a translator will have to think about the first two words whether to be interpreted as a nominal group in which 'aunts' is considered the subject of the clause or as an object of the verb with an ellipted subject:

- (19). Visiting aunts can be a nuisance.

2.3. Time Pressure and Translator's experience:

Modern society is obsessed with speed, and doing things within short notice which causes overload and haste in performing translation tasks. If translators intend to do their task hastily, they would generally select small UTs or chunks (generally at the word-group level, with little focus on the macro level, leading to errors sometimes.

2.4. Degree of conformity between SL & TL Languages and Cultures:

The size of the text unit and semantic chunk selected for translation processing is affected by the degree of convergence/divergence between the SL and the TL. Translating a text between two languages that have a high degree of linguistic and cultural convergence will reduce the number but increase the size of semantic chunks to be processed; but translating the same text between two languages that have a high degree of linguistic and cultural divergence will reduce the number of semantic chunks but increase the size to be processed.

3. Findings and Conclusion:

1. Since a text may contain a variety of types, there is no pure text type; and relating the notion of UT to the macro text or genre typology and function does not seem to be quite useful. UT would better be related to the micro text components.
2. In texts with basic referential function that are information-based (scientific, technological, legal and business), the UT begins at the lexical level due to the importance of specialized jargon, and swings to higher levels (example 5). The UT in poetry is generally at higher levels (the clause-stanza level), but in certain poetic texts where ellipsis (as in example 15) and deviation are used (as in example 16), the UT moves down to the word level and in some cases to the morpheme level.
3. In literary artistic texts, advertisements, idioms and proverbs, social formula, etc., the UT is usually at the larger levels (group-clause); but in partial idioms it is at both the word and group levels (examples 9, 11, 13, and 17). A SL text may be replaced by a non-corresponding TL text as long as the rendering achieves the main text act or function.
4. Some texts contain both referential and artistic components, (religious and political texts are a case in point), the UT is at the word level for the former, and at the group-clause levels for the latter ones (examples 7 and 8).
5. A UT tends to be relatively larger in size and smaller in number when the SL and the TL are linguistically and culturally similar. A UT tends to be relatively larger in size and smaller in number also when translators are more experienced.
6. Other factors that may affect the variability of UT are: text length, text complexity, time pressure, translator's experience, and degree of conformity between SL & TL languages and cultures.

About the Author:

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