Translation and Understanding: Mental Models as an Interface in the Process of Translation

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Linguistics at the University of Auckland

1992
ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses two characteristics of language which affect translation, using English and Japanese examples. However, the general points made in the thesis are not specific to these two languages.

One characteristic of language is that it encodes particular perceptions of experience by its users. Word meaning is defined in this thesis in terms of the typical experience the language user associates with a word. Concepts for which there are no single lexical items are encoded by putting together words which the speaker thinks best characterise the concept. This particular characterisation of a concept may become established in the language community. If the members of a language community form a habit of characterising a concept in a particular way, it may become difficult to perceive the concept in any other way. In translation, this may lead the translator to impose characterisations established in her own language on the other language.

However, such difficulties can be overcome because of the creative capacity of people everywhere to learn new ways to perceive the world. And language provides the mechanism to encode such novel perception. This is the other characteristic of language discussed in this thesis. We can use an existing word to encode a new kind of experience which we perceive as having some connection with the kind of experience associated with the word. Such novel application of a word can be understood because upon hearing the word, the typical experience associated with the word is evoked in the hearer's mind, and using her knowledge, the hearer constructs a mental model which she thinks best accounts for the combination of experiences evoked in her mind by the linguistic forms.

Defining word meaning and sentence meaning in terms of mental images allows us to understand the process of translation: Upon hearing/reading the source language text, the translator constructs a mental model based on the text. She then bases her translation on this mental model, which becomes a rich source of information. Because the translator is not moving directly from one language to the other, no direct correspondences between the linguistic forms of the two languages need to be sought. This also explains why it is relatively easy to translate between two languages whose users share similar experiences and therefore can build similar mental models, even if the languages are typologically very different from each other.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vi
List of Abbreviations viii

1. Introduction 1

2. The container view of language 12
   2.1 Introduction 12
   2.2 The assumptions of the container view and semantic theories based on this view 15
   2.3 Semantic theories and translation 20
       2.3.1 A behaviourist's view of translation 22
       2.3.2 A rationalist's view of translation 25
   2.4 An alternative to the behaviourist and the rationalist approach to meaning and translation 31

3. Arguments against the Determinacy Thesis 34
   3.1 Introduction 34
   3.2 Arguments against the DT 35
       3.2.1 Keenan's argument 35
       3.2.2 Grace's argument 37
       3.2.3 Givón's argument 41
       3.2.4 Summary of the criticisms of Katz's Determinacy Thesis 47
   3.3 The linguistic construction of reality 50
       3.3.1 The nature of linguistic signs 50
       3.3.2 The construction of reality-models 54
       3.3.3 The mapping and the reality-construction views of language 58
       3.3.4 The implications of the reality-construction view of language on the theory of translation 61

4. Conventional signs and translation 64
   4.1 Introduction 64
   4.2 Variation 65
       4.2.1 Variation in the perception of motivatedness 66
       4.2.2 Variation in conventional signs 70
   4.3 An expanded notion of motivatedness 71
       4.3.1 The formation of conceptual categories 72
   4.4 Two levels of unpredictability 79
   4.5 What is conventionalised in a language? 82
       4.5.1 Consequences of unpredictability (a) 82
           4.5.1.1 Category of experience encoded in conventional signs 83
           4.5.1.2 Productive and isolated metaphorical concepts 85
           4.5.1.3 Conventionalised functions 90
       4.5.2 Consequences of unpredictability (b) 94
           4.5.2.1 Formal characteristics of conventional signs 95
   4.6 Interference of the outsider's constructed realities 98
       4.6.1 Differences in categories of experience 98
4.7 Conclusion

5. Case studies
5.1 Introduction
5.2 Case study I: Category of experience associated with a word
   5.2.1 Frame Semantics
   5.2.2 Background of the study
   5.2.3 Survey-1: Example sentences using mabusu
   5.2.4 Survey-2: Rating sentences with mabusu
   5.2.5 Survey-3: Example sentences using sameru
   5.2.6 Survey-4: Rating sentences with sameru
   5.2.7 Comparing frames for translation
5.3 Case study II: The interpretation of novel metaphors
   5.3.1 Objective
   5.3.2 Method
   5.3.3 Results
   5.3.4 Discussion

6. Language and comprehension
6.1 The toolmakers paradigm
6.2 Understanding sentences
6.3 Understanding and recall of linguistic expressions
   6.3.1 Experiment 1: Association of instrument with verb
   6.3.2 Experiment 2: Inferred consequences
   6.3.3 Experiment 3: Inferences of spatial relations
   6.3.4 Experiment 4: Justifying the relation between two events
   6.3.5 Experiment 5: Semantic prerequisites for comprehension
   6.3.6 Experiment 6: Recall of linguistic form
6.4 Mental models and translation
   6.4.1 Mental models as an interface between the SL and the TL
   6.4.2 Defining translation
   6.4.3 Defining mental models
   6.4.4 The separability of mental models from linguistic forms
   6.4.5 Cognitive system vs. cognitive capacity
   6.4.6 Encoding a new perception
   6.4.7 Shared experience
   6.4.8 Literal translation vs. free translation
      6.4.8.1 A case study of mental models and translation
   6.4.9 The advantages of the hypothesis

7. Conclusion

Appendix 1: Mistranslations of conventional signs
Appendix 2: Questionnaire for Survey-1
Appendix 3: Questionnaire for Survey-2
Appendix 4: Questionnaire for Survey-3
Appendix 5: Questionnaire for Survey-4
Appendix 6: Questionnaire for Case Study II: Interpretation of unfamiliar metaphors 185
Appendix 7: Questionnaire for 'How to wash clothes in a washing machine' and subjects' translations 189
References 195
Acknowledgements

I would like firstly to thank my supervisor Ross Clark for the time he has spent with me in clarifying many of the ideas in this thesis. Special thanks to Frank Lichtenberk, whose valuable comments have given this thesis more depth. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank George Grace for being a constant source of inspiration for me over the years. Martin Tweedale, my former supervisor, who is now in Canada, helped me with earlier drafts of some of the chapters and gave me tremendous encouragement. Jan Crosthwaite was very kind in assisting me with the section on Quine. I would also like to thank all those who participated in the surveys for the thesis. I am grateful to Manying Ip and Kuan-Hoong Lun for explaining to me the meanings of the Chinese metaphors discussed in Chapter 5.

Wayne Lawrence was of great help in searching for articles and books from which I have quoted and in proof-reading. My thanks also to Judith Rabinovitch for proof-reading early drafts of some of the chapters. I am very grateful to Wayne Lawrence, Tomoko Tada, Chako Eastwick-Field, and other members of the Japanese Section of the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures who have taken on some of my work load in the past months to enable me to concentrate on the thesis. I also thank Richard Phillips, the Head of the Department of Asian Languages and Literature, for his support. Mari Imae typed the Japanese translations in Appendix 6.
I am also fortunate to have a very understanding daughter, Sonya, and I would like to let her know how much I appreciate her patience with me.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this thesis to my father, Kiyoaki Kikuchi.
<table>
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<th>Meaning</th>
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