Translation, linguistics and cognition

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11.1 Introduction

Linguistics is the academic discipline that investigates the nature and uses of spoken, written and signed language. It has a number of sub-disciplines, which cover the sounds of language (phonemics, phonetics and phonology), the structure of language (morphology and grammar), meaning (semantics), language in society (socio-linguistics), language in the individual (psycholinguistics) and language in text (text linguistics, discourse and conversational analysis, and genre analysis). In addition, historical linguistics deals with the history of languages, and comparative or contrastive linguistics identifies, describes and compares major types of languages. In this volume, a separate chapter discusses the relationships between translation, psycholinguistics and cognition, so I shall not discuss psycholinguistics here. Like many other disciplines, linguistics is the home to a number of different “schools”, each with a set of basic assumptions that will influence how each of the sub-disciplines mentioned is approached or whether it is approached at all. For example, approaches that are especially focused on cognition may pay relatively little attention to socio-linguistics. Similarly, not each sub-discipline will pay the same amount of attention to cognition.

11.2 Core topics

11.2.1 Cognition and universalism in linguistics

Issues of cognition are not central in historical linguistics, although practitioners readily acknowledge that it is likely that human cognition constrains the form of possible human languages (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 229, and see later); similarly, within typological linguistics, Tomlin (1986, p. 3) has suggested that “[t]ypological explanation, to the extent that it can be separated from areal, genetic, and historical influences, derives from universal principles of linguistic organization and processing”, which, in turn, “derive from fundamental cognitive constraints on the processing of linguistic information during discourse production and comprehension”.

The predominance among languages of the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) and Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) types may be explained with reference to three principles, of which two may be considered to have a cognitive issue at their root. These are the Theme First Principle,
which says that information that is central to moving the discourse forward (thematic) tends to 
be placed in initial position in simple main clauses; and the Animated First Principle, according 
to which noun phrases that denote the most animated discourse participants will be placed early 
in the discourse (the third principle is the Verb–Object Bonding principle, according to which 
the object of a transitive clause is more tightly bound to the verb than to the subject) (Tomlin, 
1986, p. 4). Arguably, these principles provide a functional account of the consequences of the 
cognitive constraints on human language. These consequences are available to direct observa-
tion, whereas the constraints themselves are inferred from the consequences. Thus, one of the 
best-known observers of languages, Joseph Harold Greenberg (1915–2001), used observations 
of 30 languages as the basis for his list of 45 linguistic universals (Greenberg, 1963, on the basis 
of a paper delivered at a conference in 1961), which, in turn, he sought to account for in terms 
of “some general principles […] which seem to underlie a number of different universals and 
from which they may be deduced” (1963, p. 96). He writes, for example (1963, p. 76–77; italics 
original),

The vast majority of languages have several variant orders but a single dominant one. 
Logically, there are six possible orders: SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV, and OVS. Of these six, 
however, only three normally occur as dominant orders. The three which do not occur at 
all, or at least are excessively rare, are VOS, OSV, and OVS. These all have in common that 
the object precedes the subject. This gives us our first universal:

Universal 1. In declarative sentences with nominal subject and object, the dominant order 
is almost always one in which the subject precedes the object.

Greenberg thus focuses on how universals manifest in languages, and he allows for variation 
among languages with respect to the presence within them of one or other feature (as evidenced 
in the expression “almost always” in universal 1, quoted in the extract). A rather different, though, 
at least initially, equally observation-based account of the nature of human language was provided 
by Avram Noam Chomsky (b. 1928), whose observation of the complexity of human languages 
led him to conclude that unless something like universals resided in the human mind, it would 
simply not be possible for small children to learn any language. He writes (Chomsky, 1965 p. 27):

A theory of linguistic structure that aims for explanatory adequacy incorporates an account 
of linguistic universals, and it attributes tacit knowledge of these universals to the child. It 
proposes, then, that the child approaches the data with the presumption that they are drawn 
from a language of a certain antecedently well-defined type, his problem being to determine 
which of the (humanly) possible languages is that of the community in which he is placed. 
Language learning would be impossible unless this were the case. The important question 
is: What are the initial assumptions concerning the nature of languages that the child brings 
to language learning, and how detailed and specific is the innate schema (the general def-
inition of “grammar”) that gradually becomes more explicit and differentiated as the child 
learns the language?

In a sense, these two approaches to commonality between languages (Greenberg’s focus on the 
verbal data and Chomsky’s focus on the mind) reflect two broad approaches to linguistics in 
the West, which relate to two major modes of understanding human reason in general, namely, 
rationalism and empiricism; Chomsky even titles one of his early publications Cartesian Linguistics 
(1966) in acknowledgement of his debt to the French philosopher, René Descartes (1596–1650), 
from whose work, Discours de la méthode (1637, Part IV; English translation by Donald A. Cress,
1988), stems the famous saying (which Descartes gives in Latin, although the Discours is written in French), “cogito ergo sum”; “I think, therefore I am.”

Broadly speaking, rationalism ascribes considerable innateness of cognitive phenomena to people and may hence encourage universalist understandings of humanity, while empiricism considers socialization and cognitive development to be mainly a question of acquiring and learning from experience. Note, though, that, as Quine (1969, pp. 95–96) puts it, even a behaviourist (that is, someone who believes that everything is learned from experience—an empiricist, in other words) “is knowingly and cheerfully up to his neck in innate mechanisms”. However, the behaviourist’s mechanisms are understood as means for learning; they are not the nascent concepts imagined by rationalists, which merely require a triggering by experience to come into full bloom. Translation is likely to be of more interest to people looking at differences between languages than it is for linguists of the opposite persuasion; and, in any case, Chomsky (1965, pp. 30 and 202) believes that nothing follows about the possibility of translating between languages from the existence of universals. It is interesting to note in passing that Saussure (of whom more later), though he believes that “universal kinship between languages is not probable”, makes a somewhat similar point to Chomsky’s, namely, that even if there was a universal kinship between languages “it could not be proved because of the excessive number of changes that have intervened” (1959, p. 192). Nida (1964, pp. 60–69) has a flirtation with the use of early, Chomsky-style transformations in his chapter on Linguistic Meaning, but this does not by any means amount to a full-scale application of the theory to the study of translation.

11.2.2 Descriptivist linguistics, translation and cognition

As indicated earlier, movements in linguistics tend to reflect movements of thought more generally. Chomsky’s approach is basically rationalist, whereas that of Franz Boas (1858–1942), Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), the so-called descriptivists (Sampson, 1980: Ch. 3), is basically empiricist. Their urge to describe was influenced by a sense that the Amerindian languages would soon become lost as their speakers became increasingly integrated into the culture and societies of non-native Americans; and they used translation both as a discovery procedure and as a way of illustrating the differences between languages. For example, Sapir (1921, pp. 86–98) uses versions of the sentence “the farmer kills the duckling” in English, German, Yana, Chinese and Kwakiutl Indian to show that some or all of the 13 concepts that our sentence happens to embody may not only be expressed in different form but may also be differently grouped among themselves; that some among them may be dispensed with; and that other concepts, not considered worth expressing in English idiom, may be treated as absolutely indispensable to the intelligible rendering of the proposition (1921, pp. 94–95).

In German, for example, the definite reference cannot be expressed in isolation from gender, so that the first “the” is translated into the masculine definite article, der, because the German word for “farmer”, Bauer, is masculine; whereas the second “the” has to be translated as das, which is the neuter definite article, because Entelein, the German word for “duckling”, is neuter: Der Bauer tötet das Entelein. English does not have grammatical gender, so the concept is not expressed in the English sentence. Nor does English “the” indicate number; it would remain unchanged had there been several farmers killing several ducklings; in German, again, such pluralities would have been shown in the article, which would have been expressed with die, as well as in the verb. The early Translation Studies scholar John Cunnison (Ian) Catford (1917–2009) similarly advocates the use of translations provided by “a competent bilingual informant or translator” as a way of discovering “textual equivalents” between languages (1965, p. 27).
Sapir’s emphasis is on describing languages, and he stresses that what he calls “the mere content of language” (1921, p. 234) is “intimately related to culture. A society that has no knowledge of theosophy has no name for it.” However, Sapir also warns that “the linguistic student should never make the mistake of identifying a language with its dictionary” and emphasizes that “when it comes to linguistic form, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd”. These pronouncements testify to Sapir’s faith that all languages relate to the same human cognitive scheme, although he refers to it as “a sliding scale”; and even Whorf, well known for his “principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated” (1940, p. 214), speaks of a “higher mind” (1942, p. 257) possessed by every human, which “can function in every linguistic system” (1942, p. 258). Saussure (1959, p. 23), too, writes of the need for the linguist to “acquaint himself with the greatest possible number of languages in order to determine what is universal in them by observing and comparing them”.

In Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century, a third “school” of linguistics arose as the manifestation within linguistics of the general movement known as structuralism (although the oft-acclaimed “father” of this movement, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), was in fact a linguist). A further school, the Prague School, was functionalist in nature in the sense that its adherents “analysed a given language with a view to showing the respective functions played by the various structural components in the use of the entire language” (Sampson, 1980, p. 103). From this school stems the so-called functional sentence perspective adopted in contemporary functionalist linguistics, as represented prominently by, for example, Michael Halliday (see later). Contemporary rationalist, or, more accurately expressed, cognitive, approaches to linguistics include cognitive grammar, pioneered by Ronald Langacker (b. 1942) and Rene Dirven (1932–2016), and, most recently, the relevance-theoretic approach developed by Dan Sperber (b. 1942) and Deirdre Wilson (b. 1941), although the latter locate themselves within the philosophy of language in the Gricean tradition rather than within linguistics. In spite of that, relevance theory has enjoyed a more systematic application to translation than any of the schools of linguistics mentioned earlier, in the work of Ernst August Gutt (e.g. 1991, 2000a, 2000b, 2004, 2005). However, Translation Studies scholars have also adopted systemic-functional linguistics and Langacker’s cognitive approach.

### 11.2.3 Structuralist linguistics (Geneva School)

The first major publication in what has become known as the modern academic discipline of linguistics is the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s posthumously published *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*) (1916). This publication was based on notes taken by students who had attended a course which Saussure delivered at the university of Geneva between 1907 and 1911; the notes were collected and edited by Charles Bally (1865–1947) and Albert Sechehaye (1870–1946), fellow members of the so-called Geneva School of Linguistics. Saussure’s course and the subsequent publication were remarkable in that they heralded a turn in European linguistics away from the historical study of the development of languages over the course of time (diachronic linguistics) towards studying the composition of individual languages at a moment in time (synchronic linguistics) (see Sanders, 2006, pp. 770). The history of publication of the *Cours* raises issues concerning the degree to which the understanding of linguistics that it presents accurately reflects Saussure’s views (see Cobley, 2006, p. 757 and Sanders, 2006, p. 769); the fact remains, however, that generations of linguistics students have been presented with the views published in the *Cours/Course*,¹ and this has profoundly affected the development of structural linguistics. The name “structural linguistics” reflects Saussure’s alleged view
of language “as a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others” (1959, p. 114). Such a view could be considered problematic in the context of translation, given that different languages tend to reflect different classifications and groupings of realia and the relationships between them. However, given that translators deal in clauses and states of affairs rather than in words and things, the systems-feature of languages rarely causes insurmountable difficulties for them. As Jakobson explains (1959/1987, p. 431),

All cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language. Whenever there is a deficiency, terminology can be qualified and amplified by loanwords or loan translations, by neologisms or semantic shifts, and, finally, by circumlocutions. […] No lack of grammatical devices in the language translated into makes impossible a literal translation of the entire conceptual information contained in the original.

Saussure’s Cours/Course presents language as

a social product […] a storehouse filled by members of a given community through their active use of speaking, a grammatical system that has a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals. For language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity. 1959, pp. 13–14

So, each speaker holds a proportion of language in their brain, and the Cours/Course stresses that rather than simply linking a thing and a sound, the linguistic sign links “a concept and a sound-image” (1959, pp. 66). Of the three Saussurean terms that are all to an extent covered by the English word “language” (langage, langue and parole), “langue refers to both the underlying linguistic structure and to the speaker’s mental representation of it” (Sanders, 2006, p. 770; langage is the term for language as a human characteristic, and parole means language in use). Langue becomes “embedded in the brain of everyone who has learned a given language”; it is “a network of relationships” (Koerner, 2006, p. 756). Saussure is thus clear that the sound patterns that constitute utterances relate to a cognitive phenomenon (a mental representation) rather than a physical referent out there in the world; of the link between the latter and the mental representation, he has less to say; nor does he address translation.

### 11.2.4 Systemic functional linguistics, cognition and translation

According to Saussure (1959: 130), when speaking, interlocutors make choices from ranges of possible meanings, a view that has been inherited by systemic functional linguistics, a major contemporary school of linguistics which has enjoyed immense popularity among Translation Studies scholars, in particular in mainland and greater China (see e.g. Webster & Peng, 2017; Zhang, 2015). This approach to language was developed by the British linguist Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday, who took forward the work of John Rupert Firth (1890–1960), the first professor of general linguistics in Britain. Inspired by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), who saw meaning as totally dependent on context, Firth was especially focused on theorizing the relationship between language and its surroundings. These are of two kinds: The non-linguistic context of people, things and events, and the linguistic context within which each linguistic unit finds itself. He is known for stressing that “[y]ou shall know a word by the company it keeps” (Firth, 1957, p. 11), an aspect of the inspiration for the corpus work
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instigated at the University of Birmingham by John McHardy Sinclair (1942–2007). The relationship between language and its physical context has remained a particular focus of the work of Halliday. A major difference between this work and that of the Relevance Theorists (see later) is that in the work of the latter, context is considered from a more overtly cognitive point of view than it is in the Hallidayan approach, even though Halliday has achieved a considerable level of theorization of the mind–language–context relationship.

According to Halliday, language is realized through the activation of three functional components, or “metafunctions”, of speakers’ “meaning potential”, namely, the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual, which correspond to three abstractions from physical context: (i) the field (what is perceived by the interlocutors as taking place), (ii) the tenor (the interactants with their characteristics and the relationships between them) and (iii) the mode (the part that the language is playing). The field tends to influence choices among nouns and their numbers, verbs and their tenses, and adjectives and adverbs; the tenor tends to influence choices of pronouns, modes of address and mood; and the mode tends to influence style (ranging from formal to casual) and the choice between speech, writing and signing (Halliday, 1978). Speakers develop expectations about the kinds of language that will occur in certain contexts, and these “register expectations” are evidenced in the register (configuration of linguistic choices) of texts.

Whereas Halliday himself has said little about translation, his approach has, as mentioned earlier, been enthusiastically embraced by Translation Studies scholars (see, for example, the papers collected in the journal Target, 27(3), 2015). The first of these enthusiasts was Catford (1965), according to whom, famously (1965, p. 1),

Translation is an operation performed on languages: a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another. Clearly, then, any theory of translation must draw upon a theory of language—a general linguistic theory.

The general linguistic theory that Catford fastens onto is “essentially that developed […] by M. A. K. Halliday”, as expressed, at that time, in Halliday (1961); and his “starting-point is a consideration of how language is related to the human social situations in which it operates” (Catford, 1965, p. 1). Cognition does not figure with any prominence in Catford’s application of Hallidayan linguistics to the description and explanation of translation. However, as Gideon Toury (1942–2016) shows, it takes only a minor modification of Catford’s definition of translation equivalence to illustrate the cognitive aspect of that phenomenon. Where Catford (1965, p. 50) has “translation equivalence occurs when an SL and a TL text or item are relatable to (at least some of) the same features of substance” (italics in the original), Toury (1980, p. 37) has “Translation equivalence occurs when a SL and a TL text (or item) are relatable to (at least some of) the same relevant features.” The notion of relevance, which Toury adds to Catford’s definition, brings cognition into play, because “it is to be regarded as an abbreviation for ‘relevant for something’ or ‘relevant from a certain point of view,’ or the like” (Toury, 1980, p. 38); and even though Toury here writes of this point of view as being that of either the source text or the target text, it is clear that this is metaphorical for, or an abbreviation of, a description of all the people involved in the production of a translation. Furthermore, as Toury (1999, p. 18) also reminds us, we must distinguish between translation as a textual, socially embedded phenomenon and translation as a mental act, which “is indeed cognitive”. Nevertheless, cognition is not a central notion in the tradition of descriptive Translation Studies pioneered by Toury, and I will now turn to a school of linguistics that places cognition at its centre, and which has captured the imagination of a number of Translation Studies scholars.
11.2.5 Cognitive linguistics and translation

In 2012, the Gutenberg Research Award was awarded to Leonard Talmy in recognition of his pioneering work in cognitive linguistics. Other prominent proponents include George Lakoff (b. 1941), Ronald Langacker (b. 1942) and Charles Fillmore (1929–2014). According to Talmy (2006, p. 543) “cognitive linguistics is concerned with the patterns in which and processes by which conceptual content is organized in language”, particular attention being paid to “space and time, scenes and events, entities and processes, motion and location, and force and causation”. Cognitive linguistics attributes ideational and affective categories to cognitive agents, “such as attention and perspective, volition and intention, and expectation and affect”, and many of its proponents are especially interested in metaphor (see in particular Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). A distinction is drawn between conceptual content and conceptual structure, with the former being represented by open-class forms such as nouns and verbs and the latter by closed-class forms like number and inflections. deixis is another category of particular interest in cognitive linguistics, because this system positions speakers with reference to aspects of the speech situation. For example, in English, the contrast between “here” and “there” relates to where the speaker is relative to the topic of speech, and tenses and temporal adverbs position the topic in time relative to the speaker’s now. Languages differ with respect to such features, and it is not unlikely that this influences cognition. Catford (1965: 37) gives a particularly interesting example, because it occurs within what is broadly one language, in its different varieties. In standard English, he points out, “this” indicates singularity and closeness, and “these” indicates plurality and closeness. “That” indicates singularity and distance, and “those” indicates plurality and distance. In contrast, North East Scots has three terms in its place-deictic system, “this”, “that” and “yon”, but makes no distinction according to number. Catford uses this example to show that when translating between the two languages, with respect to these sets of terms, “we cannot ‘transfer meaning’. There is no way in which, for example, Scots that can be said to ‘mean the same’ as English that or this or these or those.” Catford does not go on to discuss what this may mean for the ways in which the two speaker groups conceptualize place and space, because his focus is on the relationship between language and physical context rather than on the relationship between language and cognition. A cognitive linguist would likely use the example to argue that speakers of North East Scots express their conception of spatial divisions by means of this triad of terms, just as speakers of English do with their dyad, but would add that the conceptions of space and its divisions by the two speaker groups must therefore also differ. Thus, Slobin (1996, p. 195) draws on Talmy’s distinction (1985, 1991) between satellite-framed and verb-framed languages to argue that speaker groups are predisposed by their language typologies to view events in particular ways. In verb-framed languages, the verb carries the core information or “schema” of an utterance; in satellite-framed languages, this is carried by the satellite. He illustrates this with the example of a bottle floating out of a cave. In English, this event might be described by saying “The bottle floated out”, with the satellite, “out”, conveying the motion involved. In Spanish, the natural expression would be *La botella salió flotando*, that is, “the bottle exited floating”, with the verb, *salió*, carrying the directional information (Slobin, 1996, p. 196).

Slobin uses translation into Spanish of 80 motion events taken from four English novels, and of 60 motion events from three Spanish novels into English, in order to explore what he refers to as the “rhetorical slants” or “rhetorical sets” of the two languages (1996, pp. 209–210, 217). He shows that “English loses more in translation than does Spanish”, because the English translators are able to follow the original, whereas the Spanish translators tend to reduce the depiction of the motion (the “path”) (1996, p. 210). He concludes that (1996, p. 218)
typologies of grammar have consequences for “typologies of rhetoric.” The effects of such
typologies on usage may be strong enough to influence speakers’ narrative attention to par-
ticular conceptual domains.

Within Translation Studies, cognitive linguistics has been applied to explain the kinds of regu-
larities identified by Blum-Kulka (1986) and Blum-Kulka and Levinston (1983). Blum-Kulka
and Levinston (1983, p. 119) find lexical simplification operating in diverse linguistic activ-
ities, including the speech of second-language learners, children, adults speaking to children,
simplified reading texts, pidgins and translation. This ubiquity suggests to them that lexical
simplification “operates according to universal principles [which] […] derive from certain
aspect of semantic competence” (1983, pp. 118–119; italics in the original), including awareness of
semantic relations like hyponomy, antonymy and converseness and of the possibility of para-
phrase. However, Blum-Kulka (1986, p. 18) attributes “shifts in levels of explicitness; i.e. the
general level of the target text’s explicitness is higher or lower than that of the source text” to
the translation process itself: such shifts are, she contends (1986, p. 19), “inherent in the process
of translation” and possibly in any process of language mediation (1986, p. 21). This notion
has sparked a long debate about the existence and nature of so-called translation universals,
which can be tracked in Mauranen and Kujamäki (2004). Halverson (2003) explains the
existence of these phenomena “with reference to general characteristics of human cognition”
(2003, pp. 197–198—see also Chapter 1, Section 3, this volume), building on “the theory of
cognitive grammar, primarily as elaborated by Langacker (1987)” . She lists Langacker’s fun-
damental assumptions as follows: (i) “language is symbolic in nature” (Langacker, 1987, p. 11;
Halverson, 2003, p. 198); (ii) “language is an integral part of human cognition. An account
of linguistic structure should therefore articulate with what is known about cognitive pro-
cessing in general” (Langacker, 1987, p. 12; Halverson, 2003, p. 199); (iii) cognitive grammar
is a “usage-based approach to language” (Langacker, 1987, pp. 45–47, 494; Halverson, 2003,
p. 199), so it considers language to occur during events, and events are of various types. In
this respect, cognitive grammar resembles Halliday’s systemic functional account, in which,
as mentioned earlier, speakers are considered to be aware of various registers, i.e. of the kinds
of language that are appropriate to kinds of events. In Langacker’s account, event types that
are especially deeply entrenched in a speaker’s cognition are called routines (1987, p. 100;
Halverson, 2003, p. 199), and cognitive grammar shares with connectivist psycholinguistic theo-
ries the notion that repeated activation of such routines strengthens their entrenchment.

Although “cognitive salience […] will not be an absolute predictor of translation choices”
(Halverson, 2003, p. 233), “translated language at an aggregate level will show an overall
over- or under-representation of specific structures” compared with text that has not been
translated, because of the influence of the language being translated from and previous asso-
ciations made in previous translation activities (Halverson, 2003, p. 233). Halverson (2003,
passim) theorizes this effect in terms of her notion of gravitational pull, a metaphor borrowed
from space science, in which it refers to the attraction between planets. Halverson (2014), not
unreasonably, argues that a cognitive approach to translation will help to place the translator
centrally in the discipline, a goal shared by many 21st-century orientations in Translation
Studies (see e.g. Berneking, 2017).

The final cognitive approach to language and translation to be discussed in this chapter is
one that returns to the notion of relevance that we saw Trouy (1980, p. 37) introduce in the pre-
vious section, although in the approach to be discussed next, that of relevance theory (Sperber
& Wilson, 1986a), the notion of relevance is exposed to detailed scrutiny and defined from a
decidedly cognitive perspective.
11.2.6 Relevance theory, cognition and translation

Relevance theory is an inferential approach to communication developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson on the basis of the work of Grice (1957, 1968, 1975, 1978). Sperber and Wilson (1990, p. 40) explain that “[i]nferential communication involves the formation and evaluation of hypotheses about the communicator’s intentions” and that (ibid., p. 41) human cognition predisposes humans to pay particular attention to what is most relevant to them. Information is relevant to a person if it interacts with information, also called “assumptions”, that the person already possesses in such a way that the existing information is strengthened by the new information, or in such a way that an existing assumption is contradicted and eliminated. Strengthening, adding to and eliminating existing assumptions are called “contextual effects” (“cognitive effects” in the second edition of 1995) of new information, and “new information is relevant in any context in which it has contextual effects, and the greater its contextual effects, the more relevant it will be” (ibid., p. 43). However, the effort a hearer has to make in order to process new information also has to be taken into consideration, so relevance is defined as follows (ibid., p. 44):

(a) Other things being equal, the greater the contextual effects, the greater the relevance.
(b) Other things being equal, the smaller the processing effort, the greater the relevance.

If an act of inferential communication achieves a range of contextual effects without putting the hearer to unjustifiable processing effort, then it is optimally relevant, and “every act of inferential communication creates an assumption of optimal relevance” (ibid., p. 45). That is, a hearer can assume that what a speaker says to them is going to be relevant enough for them to invest in an effort to process it; and the more effort is required, the more contextual effects will accrue to them. What is said need not be identical to the full interpretation it causes or is meant to cause a hearer to arrive at; often, what is said only interpretively resembles what the intended communication is. Wilson and Sperber (1988 p. 138) define interpretive resemblance as follows: “two propositional forms P and Q […] interpretively resemble one another in a context C to the extent that they share their analytic and contextual implications in the context C” (emphasis in original). Analytic implications follow from an utterance alone without the use of context; for example, “Nils is Tom’s brother” analytically implies “Nils is a male sibling of Tom.” In various contexts, however, the utterance of these words may have various contextual implications. For example, if Jonas asks Amy whether Tom will help Nils out of a difficulty, Amy may respond to Jonas, “Nils is Tom’s brother.” The implications of her utterance will depend on the interactants’ background assumptions about many things but probably prominently including, for example, family relationship. When two propositions share all their implications, one is a literal interpretation of the other.

The theory has been met with considerable scepticism in linguistics. For example, Levinson (1989, p. 456) contends that Sperber and Wilson (1986a) and the theory in general relies on improbable presuppositions about human cognition; it underplays the role of usage in pragmatic theory; it ignores many current developments in semantics, pragmatics and the study of inference; it is too ambitious and globally reductive; and anyway the theory is obscure and it is not clear how it could be made to have clear empirical application.

Within Translation Studies, too, there have been criticisms (see e.g. Malmkjær, 1992; Tirkkonen-Condit, 1992). However, some translation scholars have embraced the theory enthusiastically;
for example, Boase-Beier makes frequent references to Sperber and Wilson (1995, the second edition of 1986a) in her discussion of cognitive stylistics and translation (Boase-Beier, 2006, Ch. 4), and Gutt (1991, p. 188) goes so far as to claim that “the range of phenomena commonly considered as translation” can be accounted for by relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986a, 1986b, 1987; Wilson and Sperber, 1985; 1988).

According to Gutt (1991, pp. 101–102), the intended interpretation of a translation should resemble the original “in respects that make it adequately relevant to the audience—that is, that offer adequate contextual effects” and “it should be expressed in such a manner that it yields the intended interpretation without putting the audience to unnecessary processing effort”. The principle of relevance thus constrains a translation both in terms of what it should convey and in terms of how this should be expressed. Both constraints are context determined, since the principle of relevance is context dependent. And (1991, p. 102):

These conditions seem to provide exactly the guidance that translators and translation theorists have been looking for: they determine in what respects the translation should resemble the original—only in those respects that can be expected to make it adequately relevant to the receptor language audience. They determine also that the translation should be clear and natural in expression in the sense that it should not be unnecessarily difficult to understand.

It is the responsibility of the target audience for a translation to familiarize themselves with the context assumed by the original communicator, even if this may be difficult (1991, p. 166). The translator’s task is to form a communicative intention and then decide whether this communicative intention can in fact be communicated (1991, pp. 180–181):

Thus, the translator is confronted not only with the question of how he should communicate, but what he can reasonably expect to convey by means of his translation. The answer to this question will be determined by his view of the cognitive environment of the target audience, and it will affect some basic decisions. It will, for example, have a bearing on whether he should engage in interpretive use [translation] at all or whether descriptive use [non-translation] would be more appropriate.

If the translator judges that it is “relevant to the audience to recognize that the receptor language text is presented in virtue of its resemblance to an original in another language”, i.e. if the translator decides to translate, then he will have to consider further what degree of resemblance he could aim for, being aware that communicability requires that the receptor language text resemble the original “closely enough in relevant respects” (Wilson & Sperber, 1988, p. 137). To determine what is close enough resemblance in relevant respects, the translator needs to look at both the likely benefits, that is, the contextual effects, and also at the processing effort involved for the audience. Thus, he will have to choose between indirect and direct translation, and also decide whether resemblance in linguistic properties should be included.

The jury is still out on relevance theory, and it has proved difficult to establish a method by which it might be tested. A potential strength of the theory is that it does not require separate accounts of processing for literal and figurative language; but there are other theories that share the same advantage (e.g. Davidson, 1978). In terms of the focus of the present chapter, however, relevance theory presents an interesting attempt at providing a cognitive account of the relationship between language and context, something that has exercised linguists since at least the time of the descriptivist movement.
11.3 Concluding remarks

Early in this chapter, I mentioned the opposition between empiricism and rationalism and its relationship to descriptive and cognitive linguistic theories, respectively. It is clear, though, that there can be no language use without cognitive engagement, just as there cannot be cognitive activity of the type that comes anywhere near what we think of as thought that is not expressible in language. As the strict empiricist philosopher, John Locke (1632–1704), has it,

Words are the sensible Signs of his Ideas who uses them [...] The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereof those invisible ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might be known to others.

Locke 1690, Book Three, Chapter II, paragraph 2; italics in the original

Perhaps the best way of viewing the various ways of approaching the question of the relationship between the linguistic approaches reviewed in this chapter is to see them as different concentrations on a phenomenon through which we do indeed achieve “the comfort and advantage of society”—language, which enables us to share much of what we have in mind.

Notes

1 All references in this article are to the Fontana/Collins edition initially published in 1959 and translated by Wade Baskin.

Further reading

A comprehensive introduction to the Translation Process Research Database (TPR-DB), which features more than 500 hours of annotated recorded translation process data, and to some of the studies that have explored it.

A survey of cognitive linguistics that provides in-depth explanations of its key concepts and major research foci, and of the theoretical approaches adopted.

A selection of articles focusing on the cognitive and mental processes involved in translating and interpreting and encouraging research at the interface between sociological and cognitive approaches to the translating/interpreting act.

References

Translation, linguistics and cognition


