Cognitive pragmatics and translation studies

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Introduction

The goal of translation and interpreting is communication, and the work of professionals in this field is underpinned by cognitive and linguistic abilities. Hence, an appropriate theoretical framework for capturing translation and interpreting – as well as guiding skills acquisition and assessing the results – must relate these activities to the mental processes a speaker/author or hearer/reader engages in during a communicative act.

This kind of framework has emerged from linguistics and psychology only in the last thirty years as a culmination of a long process, “from Saussure’s distinction between langue and parole, through the study of ‘speech acts’ (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) to Grice’s (1975, 1989) Conversational Maxims and its revision in a new, cognitive pragmatics” (Setton & Dawrant, 2016: 473, original emphasis). At its heart lies the notion of linguistic indeterminacy, i.e., the fact that language is not a logical product, but originates from the conventional practice of individuals, which depends on the particular context of the terms used by them. And if pragmatics is the study of meaning-in-context (Kasher, 1977; Levinson, 1983), then cognitive pragmatics can be broadly defined as encompassing the study of the cognitive principles and processes involved in the construal of meaning-in-context. In particular, scholars in this field focus on both the inferential chains necessary to understand a communicator’s intention, starting from their utterance and the different mental representations underlying the comprehension of various cognitive phenomena as cognitive processes.

Even though other cognitive pragmatic theories have been developed in the last three decades, Relevance Theory (henceforth RT; Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995) can be considered as the main theoretical framework in the area of cognitive pragmatics (Huang, 2007; Schmid, 2012) as well as the only cognitive-pragmatic approach within translation studies. Section 1 provides an overview of the cognitive approach to communication taken by RT and draws attention to two aspects of the theory, i.e., the distinction between explicit and implicit content (1.2) and the relationship between thoughts and utterances (1.3). The other two sections show how the application of RT has shed light on key issues in Translation (2) and Interpreting Studies (3).
1 Relevance Theory: a cognitive approach to pragmatics

Building on the work of Paul Grice (1961, 1989), Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995, 1987) proposed a relevance-theoretic model of human communication, which is opposed to the classical code model according to which information is encoded into a message, transmitted and decoded by another party, with another copy of the code. The diagram of Shannon and Weaver (1949; cited in Wilson, 1986: 32) shows how communication can be achieved by the use of a code (Figure 3.1).

The code model assumes that communication is a linear process in which a message starts at an information source and is then converted into a signal or a code. This signal then travels to the recipient, who uses their decoding mechanism to extract the information in the signal. The information is then processed and stored, and then he/she can encode their own signal to transmit (Searle, 1983: 68).

Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995, 1987) argue that utterance Interpretation is not achieved by identifying the semantically encoded meanings of sentences, but involves inferential computations performed over conceptual representations or propositions – that is, the propositional content of the utterance Interpreted taken together with contextual assumptions (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995). The fundamental tenets of RT are contained in a definition of relevance and two principles, one about cognition and the other about communication, to which I will now turn.

1.1 How relevance guides inferential comprehension

The relevance-theoretic inferential account of communication is based on a central assumption about cognitive processes: human cognition is relevance oriented (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995, 1987). This assumption is to be found in what Sperber and Wilson call the Cognitive Principle of Relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995: 260):

*Cognitive Principle of Relevance*: Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance.

What, then, is relevance? It is defined as “a property of inputs to cognitive processes and analysed in terms of the notions of cognitive effect and processing effort” (Wilson, 2000: 423). Relevance is thus an improvement of an individual’s overall representation of the world and is seen as a matter of degree, i.e., the degree of relevance of an input to an individual is a trade-off or balance between cognitive effects (reward) and processing effort (cost). This is made clear by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 252) in the following passage:

Relevance of an input to an individual

![Figure 3.1 Code model of communication](image-url)
a. Other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of the input to the individual at that time.

b. Other things being equal, the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual at that time.

The more cognitive effects the hearer is able to derive, the more relevant the information. In other words, information is relevant for the hearer to the extent that it yields cognitive effects at low processing effort by interacting with and modifying their existing assumptions about the world. Thus, as the cognitive principle of relevance suggests, in processing information people try to maximise cognitive effects; in other words, human attention and processing resources are designed to look for as many cognitive effects as possible for as little effort as possible. This, in turn, has an immediate consequence for the theory of communication. For Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 158ff.), communication means ostensive communication, where this is defined as involving both first-order informative intentions and higher-order communicative intentions; the attribution of the latter is yielded by “ostensive behaviour” or ostention. Ostensive-inferential communication is often “triggered” by an ostensive stimulus, which is used to give rise to the expectation of optimal relevance. In other words, such stimulus is “the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995: 158).

According to RT, the very act of requesting the hearer’s attention encourages her to believe that the information given will be relevant enough to be worth processing. Hence, every act of communication creates an expectation that a hearer is entitled to have – namely, that the utterance is the most relevant one within the parameters of the speaker’s abilities and preferences. This generalisation about human communicative behaviour is expressed in the second principle of relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995: 260):

**Communicative Principle of Relevance:** Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

In other words, the speaker communicates that his utterance is the most relevant one compatible with his abilities and preferences and is at least relevant enough to be worth the hearer’s processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995: 270ff.). Again, it is in their interest to do so, as the less processing effort and the greater the effect, the more relevant the utterance and the more likely it is that the addressee will understand it successfully (Wilson & Sperber, 2000, 2004). The Communicative Principle of Relevance leads to the following comprehension process which, according to RT, hearers spontaneously follow in utterance Interpretation (Wilson, 2000: 423):

Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure:

Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects.

(a) Consider interpretations in order of accessibility.
(b) Stop when your expectation of relevance is satisfied.

The speaker aiming at optimal relevance will try to formulate his utterance in such a way as to minimise processing effort for the hearer, so that the first acceptable Interpretation derived by the hearer is the one he intended to convey.

In this section, I have presented the two fundamental principles within RT: the cognitive and communicative principles. In particular, communicative principles apply at the level of both explicit and implicit communication, and are explored in more detail below.
1.2 The distinction between explicit and implicit content

According to Grice’s (1957, 1969, 1989) theory of communication, a distinction is made between natural meaning (in the world) and non-natural (or linguistic) overall meaning of an utterance. The meaning *non-[natural]* or *speaker-meaning* is claimed to be a matter of expressing and recognising intention (similar to RT; cf. Levinson, 2000) and is divided into *what is said* and *what is implicated*, as represented in Figure 3.2.

Both Grice and Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) agree that we should distinguish between meaning which is explicitly communicated (*what is said*) and meaning which is part of the implicit content of the utterance (*what is implicated*). Grice argues that the role of the maxims he developed, and that of pragmatic inference is restricted to what is implicated and plays no role in the recovery of what is said. By contrast, Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) and Carston (2002, 2004) argue that the explicit side of communication is far more inferential than Grice envisaged. According to RT, both the explicit side of communication and the implicit side involve making inferences from contextual assumptions on the basis of general pragmatic principles.

Thus, Sperber and Wilson develop the notion of *explicature*, which is defined in terms of an inferential development of linguistically given and incomplete logical forms into propositional forms. In other words, explicatures serve to “flesh out” the incomplete conceptual representations encoded by the utterances and thus yield fully propositional content. Unlike explicit content, the *implicit content* or *implicature* within RT is seen as an assumption that can only be derived pragmatically, i.e., via pragmatic inferences. Thus, the difference between explicatures and implicatures consists in the fact that the recovery of the former involves both decoding and inference, whereas the latter involves only inference.

*Figure 3.2 Gricean theory of communication*
In order to satisfy the expectation of relevance raised by an utterance, the hearer must, on the one hand, develop its encoded linguistic meaning into an appropriately explicit propositional content (explicature) and, on the other, use contextual assumptions made accessible by the conceptual content of this explicature in the derivation of cognitive effects. These two operations do not take place serially, but are, as Carston (2002) puts it, mutual adjustment processes, with hypotheses about context, explicit content and cognitive effects being made, adjusted and confirmed in parallel, on-line.

It must also be noted that the distinction between semantics and pragmatics in RT is based on a distinction between decoding and inference, seen as two separate processes in utterance comprehension. When an utterance is produced, a hearer recovers a semantic representation of that utterance, based on information delivered by the grammar, which is seen as an autonomous linguistic system. The pragmatic inferential process, instead, integrates the semantic representation with contextual assumptions in order to reach an intended interpretation of the utterance, and is guided by the Communicative Principle of Relevance. Further, as Carston (2002, 2004) argues, the semantic representation is not fully propositional, but is just a “template” for utterance Interpretation, which requires pragmatic inference in order to recover the proposition the speaker has intended. Therefore, RT argues that “semantics” is a relation between a linguistic form and the information it provides as input to the inference system, rather than a relation between a linguistic form and an entity in the world (Carston, 2002).

In this context, relevance theorists assume that there are ways in which a linguistic form may provide an input to the inference system, which yields utterance Interpretation. On the one hand, there are elements of speech that encode concepts, which in turn are constituents of propositional representations undergoing an inferential computation. On the other hand, there are expressions that “encode procedural constraints on the inferential phase of comprehension” (Wilson & Sperber, 1993: 12; emphasis added), i.e., they encode a procedure for performing an inference or for narrowing down the hearer’s search space by directly specifying an inferential route. If that is the case, an expression like so or but ensures that the intended Interpretation is recovered for a minimum cost in processing.  

1.3 The relationship between thoughts and utterances

The discussion so far raises the following question: is our utterance comprehension strategy to be seen as a specialised cognitive domain with its own (innately specific) principles? In other words, do we possess a “pragmatic” module in our minds?

It has been argued that Fodor’s (1983) and Chomsky’s (1986) modular view of the mind underlies the distinction between grammatically specified meaning and pragmatic meaning (cf. Blakemore, 2002: 154ff.). As stated in section 1.2, grammar has a role to play in communicative events, however this role is to deliver “semantic representations which fall short of the complete interpretation intended” (Blakemore, 2001: 101), rather than representations of thoughts communicated by the speaker. Therefore, the contextual assumptions needed to fully interpret the speaker’s communicative intentions and the computations used to derive this Interpretation sit outside of the realm of language module (or grammar). Further, according to the preeminent relevance-theoretic position (Sperber & Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Sperber, 2004), utterance comprehension involves a more modular capacity of “mind reading” – also known as theory of mind – which refers to the human ability to form a thought about another thought or, in other words, to inferentially attribute mental states or intentions to others on the basis of their behaviour. At the same time, Sperber and Wilson claim that utterance comprehension processes are subject to a distinct Interpretation
“submodule” of the theory of mind, which computes the information according to the communicative principle of relevance and contains the relevance-theoretic inferential comprehension heuristic. This submodule thus allows the hearer to infer the meaning of the uttered sentence on the basis of the evidence provided (Sperber & Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Consider, for instance, the following thoughts formed by someone in an office who sees their colleague placing their laptop in a drawer:

(1) The laptop is in the drawer.
(2) a. Andrea thinks that the laptop is in the drawer.
   b. Andrea thinks that the laptop is not in the drawer.
   c. Andrea thinks that Martine thinks the laptop is in the drawer.
   d. Andrea thinks that Martine thinks the laptop is not in the drawer.

Thoughts (2a) and (2b) can be seen as first-order representations of utterance (1), whereas sentences (2c) and (2d) are analysed as second-order representations. A metarepresentation is therefore a representation of a representation, i.e., a higher-order representation with a lower-order representation embedded within it.

According to Grice, a distinction needs to be drawn between two metarepresentational abilities: on one hand, the speaker’s, who metarepresents the thoughts he is willing to convey (i.e., communicated thoughts are representations and utterances are representations of those thoughts); on the other, the hearer’s, who is able to form representations of thoughts that the speaker intends to convey (i.e., Interpretations are representations of attributed thought). I shall now focus on the second ability, i.e., the hearer’s. Since a thought is a private representation and an utterance is a public representation that has a propositional form, an utterance can be said to be metarepresentational, i.e., it can be used to represent another representation which has a propositional form – or a thought. Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 230) thus assume that “every utterance is an interpretive expression of a thought of the speaker’s”.

The picture of communication which is emerging here is not one in which communicative success depends on the duplication of thoughts, but rather one in which communication results in what Sperber and Wilson describe as the enlargement of “mutual cognitive environments” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995: 193). In this context, an utterance is simply “public” evidence for a “private” thought, and the communicative process will be successful to the extent that the optimally relevant Interpretation of the utterance achieves the sort of “loose” coordination proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 199): “the type of coordination aimed at in most verbal exchanges is best compared to the co-ordination between people taking a stroll together rather than to that between people marching in step”. In particular, an utterance is an Interpretation of a thought to the extent that its propositional form resembles the speaker’s thought, or, in other words, to the extent that it shares logical and contextual implications with that thought. Furthermore, according to Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 233–4), two representations interpretively resemble each other if and only if they share logical and contextual implications; the more implications they share, the more they interpretively resemble each other.

As utterances have a range of properties, i.e., phonetic, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic, speakers can exploit resemblances in phonetic, linguistic or logical form to metarepresent another utterance. As an illustration of a speaker exploiting linguistic and semantic similarities, consider the different ways in which speaker C might answer B’s question by representing the director’s utterance in (3) (adapted from Blakemore, 2002: 180):
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(3) A (the director): We will have to let her go.
B: What did the director say?
C(a): We will have to let her go.
C(b): They’ll have to let her go.
C(c): She’s fired.

In example (3), the utterances produced by three hypothetical speakers (C) are to be seen as answers to speaker B’s question in a situation where the company director (A) had uttered the following words: “We will have to let her go”. What kind of resemblance do we have? Whereas speaker C(a)’s utterance has a similar linguistic and semantic structure to the director’s statement, C(b)’s utterance is characterised by a different semantic structure (since C(b) changes the pronoun), but common propositional form. Lastly, the sentence uttered by C(c) is relevant as an Interpretation of a propositional form or thought and the resemblance involves the sharing of logical and contextual implications.

On this account, utterances which are relevant as representations of attributed utterances or thoughts can only be said to be more or less faithful to the original. For instance, the speaker of C(c) creates expectations of faithfulness, whose degree will be determined by the extent to which the two propositional forms share logical and contextual implications.

But what does a thought represent, and how? In RT a distinction is drawn between descriptive uses and attributive (or interpretive) uses of language (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995: 231ff.). In general terms, a descriptive utterance is an Interpretation of a thought that is a description of an actual or desirable state of affairs; by contrast, interpretive utterances are Interpretations of a thought which is an Interpretation of another thought or utterance (e.g. a thought or utterance attributed to another person or to the speaker at another time). The latter might be explicitly communicated by use of parentheticals, such as I think, they claim, or it must be inferred in cases where overt linguistic indication is not given. Against this backdrop, a distinction is made between attributive uses of language indicated by the linguistic form and tacitly attributive uses. Consider the following examples (based on Wilson’s [2006: 1734] example on free indirect speech and thought):

(4) a. I thought I had cooked a nice lunch. b. But according to Andrea, it was very heavy.
(5) a. The Members of the House of Lords had come to a decision. b. The government’s plans to increase tuition fees will be approved.
(6) a. The students spoke up. b. If they didn’t act immediately, it might be too late.

Example (4) is a case of attributive interpretive use of language indicated by the linguistic form (“according to”). On the other hand, free indirect speech and thought, as in (5) and (6), are a well-known type of tacitly attributive use of language. An Interpretation of (5) is that the thought that the government’s plans will be approved (or an appropriate summary thereof) is being tacitly attributed to the members of the House of Lords. The same can be said of example (6): a plausible explanation is that the claim that if the students didn’t act immediately it might be too late is being tacitly attributed to the students. In both (5b) and (6b) the speaker “does not take responsibility for their truth, but is metarepresenting a thought or utterance with a similar content that she attributes to some identifiable person or group of people” (Wilson, 2006: 1734).
Utterances in example (3) C show attributive use of language. (3) C(a) and (b) are a case of attributive use indicated by the linguistic form, whereas (3) C(c) is a case of tacitly attributive use. Table 3.1 is a review of the two uses of languages according to RT.

However, the interpretive dimension of language use is not restricted to irony. This has served to shed light on a range of traditional linguistic topics such as metalinguistic negation (Carston, 1996, 2002), echo questions (Wilson, 2000; Noh, 2001), hearsay particles (Itani, 1998; Ifantidou-Trouki, 2001, 2005), and translation and interpreting (Gutt, 1991/2000, 2001; Setton, 1998, 1999, 2006; Mason, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Gallai, 2015, 2016;; Setton & Dawrant, 2016).

### 2 Translation as an “interpretive use” of language

Drawing on these presuppositions, Ernst-August Gutt proposed the first application of RT to translation studies, spear-headed by the publication of *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* in 1991 (followed by a second edition in 2000). In section 2.1, I discuss his notion of translation based on the relevance-theoretic model of human cognition, and its extended applications to translations, which include Alves (1995) and Alves and Gonçalves (2003). Section 2.2 explores a number of critiques put forward by translation studies scholars about the applicability of RT to translation studies.

#### 2.1 Gutt’s application of RT to translation studies

Working on the assumption that translation falls within the domain of communication, Gutt (1991/2000, 2001) argues that RT contains the key to providing a unified account of translation. Translators must be able to recover intended meaning instantly and render content in a way that allows them to convey what they consider to be relevant aspects of the original, but may not resemble the original closely. In other words, translations come with a (explicit or implicit) presumption that they *interpretively resemble* the original content.

In contrast with theorists before him, Gutt makes a distinction between “indirect” and “direct” translations. The former are designed to function on their own – e.g. a touristic leaflet – and may be modified in order to achieve maximal relevance for the users, whereas a “direct” translation seeks interpretive resemblance, i.e., the interpretation of a target text is as similar as possible to that of the source text. Thus, “direct translation” is defined as follows: A receptor language utterance is a direct translation of a source language utterance.
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if and only if it purports to interpretively resemble the original completely in the context envisaged for the original (Gutt, 2000: 177).

The more comparable the context of a direct translation is to the source text context, the closer the interpretation will be to that of the source text (Gutt, 1991/2000).

Gutt (1990; 1991/2000) argues that the notion of direct translation must be defined in terms of “shared communicative clues”, allowing for explicit treatment of many issues in translation, including poetic effects, that have often been claimed to be beyond the scope of objective analysis. Just like a communicator who gives his hearer “clues” that allow the inference to be made, a translator is required to provide “communicative clues” arising from a wide range of properties: “semantic representations, syntactic properties, phonetic properties, discourse connectives, formulaic expressions, stylistic properties of words, onomatopoeia and phonetic properties that give rise to poetic effects” (Gutt, 1990: 140).

Gutt draws on the distinction between “descriptive” and “interpretive” use of languages (cf. section 1.2) to define translation as a case of “interlingual interpretive use” (Gutt, 1991/2000: 136). Translators can achieve relevance by communicating to the audience what the original author wrote in the source text. In other words, the audience is not confronted with the original content, but with that produced by the translator, and states that “de facto translation is an act of communication between translator and target audience only” (1991/2000: 213, original emphasis). According to Gutt, the distinction between translation and non-translation is therefore a matter of a communicator’s intention, and hinges on “the way the target text is intended to achieve relevance” (Gutt, 1991/2000: 210, original emphasis).

Thus, translators are faced with a similar situation to “normal” communication and have several responsibilities; they are required to decide whether and how it is possible to communicate the informative intention, whether to translate descriptively or interpretively, and what degree of resemblance to the source text there should be. All these decisions are to be based on the translator’s evaluation of the cognitive environment of the target text receiver.11 To succeed, the translator and reader therefore need to share basic assumptions about the resemblance that is sought and the translator’s intentions must agree with the reader’s expectations (Gutt, 1991/2000: 192).12

This concept of translation as a case of interlingual speech or quotation is directly transposed to the realm of (simultaneous) interpreting (Gutt, 1991/2000: 213–215). Gutt claims that interpreting (as well as translation) can be accommodated in the relevance-theoretic view of communication as represented diagrammatically in Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 232). See Figure 3.3.

According to this interpretation, texts or utterances are interpretive representations of an author’s or a speaker’s thoughts, and hence involve one level of metarepresentation; by contrast, a text or utterance produced by a translator or interpreter is an Interpretation of the author’s or speaker’s thought, which in itself is an Interpretation of a thought attributed to someone who expressed it in a different language. In other words, such a text or utterance involves a further level of metarepresentation and is relevant as a thought about a thought. Gutt thus concludes that “the communicator whose utterance the target audience is actually dealing with is that of the translator” (1991/2000: 215, original emphasis).

Gutt’s (1991/2000) view of translation as attributed thought is shared by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) as well as a number of other translation studies scholars,13 some of whom also share Gutt’s claim that translation as communication can be explained using relevance-theoretic concepts alone and that “there is no need for developing a separate theory of translation, with concepts and a theoretical framework of its own” (Gutt, 1991/2000: 235).
Expanding the application of RT to translation, Gutt (2000) claims that translation studies would benefit from focusing more on the competence of human beings to communicate with each other. Thus, it may contribute to understanding the mental faculties that enable us to translate in the sense of expressing in a target language what has been expressed in another.

Additionally, Gutt (2004) develops discussions about translation competence to investigate translations as a higher order act of communication. He postulates that the primary concern of translators is not the representation of states of affairs, but the metarepresentation of bodies of thought. Accordingly, the translator must focus on the cognitive environment of the parties concerned — not just on external contextual factors. In principle, each of the three parties involved in translation (i.e., the communicator, the translator, and the audience) can have a different cognitive environment. However, Gutt points out that “as soon as one recognises the need to deal with different cognitive environments, it becomes clear that metarepresentational skills must be a core component of translation competence” (Gutt, 2004: 13; emphasis added).

Lastly, Gutt (2005) reiterates that competence-oriented research into translation and higher order acts of communication can be applied to a situation where communicator and the audience do not share a mutual cognitive environment. In such cases — known as “secondary communication” — Gutt suggests that additional sophistication at cognitive level is needed for communication to ensue, i.e., the capacity of human beings to metarepresent what has been communicated to them. Gutt (2005) thus claims that this capacity to metarepresent is a cognitive prerequisite for the ability to translate.
Following this theoretical trend, Alves (1995) developed a cognitive model of the translation process. Alves maintains that translators search for optimal interpretive resemblance between propositional forms – each one in the respective working language. His model was driven by empirical data obtained from think-aloud protocols of Portuguese and Brazilian translators and tested for the language pair German-Portuguese. Later on, its validity was corroborated through tests involving other language pairs. Further, Alves and Gonçalves (2003) applied the distinction between conceptual and procedural elements (see section 1.3) in a later project involving four non-professional translators (English into Portuguese). They conclude that “it becomes difficult to arrive at any instance of interpretive resemblance if procedurally and conceptually encoded information is not handled adequately by translators” (Alves & Gonçalves, 2003: 21). This shows the relevance of the decoding/encoding stage in the translation process and the primacy of inferential enrichments for a successful translation. Lastly, Alves and Gonçalves (2007) developed Gonçalves’ (2003) cognitive model of translation competence, which emphasises the central role played by metarepresentation and metacognition in the development of that competence. This model embeds them in a more comprehensive cognitive theory, which highlights that translating requires highly metacognitive, complex processing.

2.2 Criticisms

Pym (2010) underlines that the RT approach to translation represents a welcome shift of focus, allowing the concept of “interpretive resemblance” to be seen as an operative concept within the sub-paradigm of directional equivalence, since it heavily depends on directionality. However, reservations about the role of RT in translation have been expressed by a number of translation studies scholars.

The sternest opposition comes from scholars who embrace the functional equivalence approach. They perceive Gutt’s theory as “an elaborate, theoretically-based effort to justify” a return to formal equivalence (Wendland, 1997: 86). Pym (2010: 35) even refers to Gutt as a “theorist of equivalence”. This perception, however, seems to betray two broad misunderstandings of Gutt’s theory. First, the impression that Gutt’s primary objective is to promote formal equivalence is based on a misunderstanding of his stated aim, i.e., to provide a unified account of how the phenomenon of translation works. By viewing translation as “secondary communication”, the author seeks to lay down conditions for effective communication in translation. RT undermines functional equivalence because it exposes as false the assumption that maximum interpretive resemblance can be achieved while presupposing the target language context. However, RT also undermines formal equivalence because the principle of relevance emphasises the importance of minimising processing effort.

Second, Gutt’s critics seem to equate direct translation with formal equivalence. They may come to this conclusion because Gutt talks about retaining the linguistic properties (through communicative clues) and presupposing the original context. However, a closer look reveals that the two concepts differ considerably. The defining quality of a “direct translation” is that “it purports to interpretively resemble the original completely”. That is, it strives for complete interpretive resemblance.

Another common criticism of Gutt’s work is that it lacks practical applications. Wendland (1997) points to its many flaws as applied to the practice of Bible translation. The author’s criticism starts with the very principle of relevance, which he considers impractical, because it “presupposes an idealized communicative situation” (Wendland, 1996: 94). Malmkjær (1992: 306) adds to this criticism, stating that “if they [translators] want direct help with their everyday concerns, they should not expect to find it here”. She further questions how
and by whom the “rankings” of relevance are established in particular translation contexts. Tirkkonen-Condit (1992) contests its applicability as too vague. Almazán Garcia (2001) considers Gutt’s proposal as insightful, yet still incipient. Şerban (2012: 219) questions the status of textual evidence in pragmatics-oriented translation research, and whether it is possible to attribute intentions or motivation based on textual analyses.

Gutt attempts to respond to some of these criticisms in his lengthy Postscript attached to the 2000 edition of his 1991 book (Gutt, 2000: 202–238). Here he attributes this evaluation to the tendency of these translators to think in terms of “an ‘input-output’ account of translation” (Gutt, 2000: 204–205). He explains the approach as follows:

Its most central axiom appears to be that translation is best studied by systematic comparisons of the observable input and output of the translation process: “input” being the original text, “output” being the translated or target text.

(Gutt, 2000: 204)

Other approaches present translators with a body of descriptive comparisons based on which they offer guidelines on how to handle translation-related issues and make translational choices. Since Gutt offers no such generalisations, they seem to assume that his contribution is purely philosophical.

Again, by showing that the phenomenon of translation can be adequately accounted for as a form of “secondary communication”, one can argue that Gutt has made a significant contribution to the quest for a unified account of translation. He has shown that RT can “empower” translators to predict the conditions for effective communication in translation. The descriptive-classificatory hierarchies that functional equivalence employs are valuable, but in themselves they do not seem sufficient to empower translators to make the most appropriate translation choices.

Regardless of any criticism, RT continues to be used as a tool in translation theory as it seems to capture the complexity of translation processes and help translators understand the laws of effective communication. Indeed, as Kliffer and Stroińska (2004: 171) state, “it may well prove to be the most reliable tool for handling the interpretive richness evinced by real-life data”.

3 RT and interpreting studies

Unlike translation studies, RT research in interpreting studies is mainly characterised by an interdisciplinary perspective, which still remains a significant feature of this field, and is reflected in many of the key academic studies which will be discussed in the next section.

In terms of methodology, interpreting studies scholars drawing on RT tend to adopt a descriptive, qualitative method of inquiry. In particular, authors such as Setton or Gallai demonstrate the usefulness of an interdisciplinary theoretical framework (and its underlying assumptions) in guiding the description and explanation of interpreted discourse both at the interactional and “internal” level of cognitive processing in relation to specific empirical data.

3.1 RT for interpreters

Similarities have been drawn between the relevance-theoretic notion of context put forward by Gutt and other approaches, namely cognitive processing (CP) models such as Gile’s (1985, 1991, 1997/2002) Effort Model for simultaneous and consecutive interpreting. This focuses
on the cumulative effect of three competing and demanding efforts, requiring sufficient processing capacity on the part of the interpreter in order for her to meet the varying requirements of a given task. A comparison can also be made between the relevance-theoretic notion of inference and the comprehension part put forward by the théorie du sens or Interpretive Theory of Translation (or ITT; cf. Lederer, 2010: 178), championed in Paris from the 1960s by its leading researchers, Danica Seleskovitch and Marianne Lederer, and mainly applied to the analysis of simultaneous and consecutive interpreting.17

However, it was not until Setton (1998, 1999, 2006; Setton & Dawrant, 2016) and Vianna (2005) that studies of simultaneous interpreting – using Sperber and Wilson’s application of the Communicative Principle of Relevance to translation and Gutt’s view of interpreting as attributed thought – stressed the fundamental underdeterminacy of linguistic encoding. In particular, Setton’s study of Chinese–English and German–English interpreting brings together the ITT and CP paradigms as it “offers a more sophisticated account of “sense” in the light of state-of-the-art research in cognitive science” (Pöchhacker, 2004: 76) and explicitly builds context processing and relevance into the analysis of linguistic input.

Setton’s main aim is to reconstruct specific processing stages and mental structures. To this effect, he devised a detailed model of such complex psycholinguistic processing operations, addressing aspects of comprehension, memory and production involved in this mode of interpreting. Described as “a hybrid of best available theories” (Setton, 1999: 63), this model considers “context” – i.e., all accessible knowledge – to pay a pivotal role at all stages of cognitive processing. The (task-oriented) “mental model” (Setton, 1999: 65) in adaptive memory is assumed to be sourced by both situational and world knowledge, focusing on cognitive-pragmatic processing of linguistic and contextual cues “used by a speaker [. . .] to direct Addressees to relevance as realising and developing the act of ostension in the discourse itself” (Setton, 1999: 8). This notion of “pragmatic clues to inference” (Setton, 1999: 204) draws on the distinction made in RT between conceptual information, which enters into inferential computations, and procedural information about the inferences that are performed.

The principle of relevance seems to apply particularly well to the real-time performance of simultaneous interpreters. Setton states that communication is successful when speakers’ utterances are “optimally relevant”, i.e., when they give listeners access to maximum cognitive effects for minimum effort. On this basis, Setton and Dawrant (2016: 482) argue that “quality in interpreting can be defined as fidelity plus relevance”. In this context, relevance will depend on the speaker’s expressive ability, the listener’s comprehension, their accessible contexts (through knowledge, preparation, and presence), and their motivation to communicate. Thus, the interpreter’s goal is to:

make accessible to the interpreter’s audience the cognitive effects intended by the speaker as she understands them, at reasonable processing cost and risk, using whatever communicative devices available in the output language are appropriate and effective to do so in her projection of the listener’s available contexts.

(Setton & Dawrant, 2016: 485)

Aside from conference settings, there are other institutional contexts in which interpreting takes place, i.e., legal proceedings, healthcare contexts, work meetings or media talk. This is interpreter-mediated communication in spontaneous face-to-face interaction is also known as community or dialogue interpreting (Mason, 1999; Merlini, 2015).

In his discussion of dialogue interpreting, Mason (2004, 2006a, 2006b) suggests that “a way forward in analyzing the pragmatics of dialogue interpreting might lie in using the
evidence of actual responses [. . .] to trace the communication of meanings beyond what is said” (Mason, 2006: 366, original emphasis). Further, he agrees with Gutt (1991/2000) that the concept of “interpretive resemblance” can be used to describe dialogue interpreting and regards the principle of relevance as “applicable to the interpreted encounter as much as it is to any communicative event” (Mason, 2004: 365). In particular, the Cognitive Principle of Relevance can adequately account for interpreted events as interpreters “are constantly conscious of the need to be brief (efficient) and to-the-point (effective) because of the perception that their interventions hold up or lengthen the communication process” (Mason, 2006b: 109). Mason argues that the pragmatic shifts involved in the interpreters’ renditions may be analysed as translational adjustments made in order to improve relevance. In other words, the interpreter is required to adjust their output in order to preserve the balance between contextual effects and processing effort.

Setton’s and Mason’s contributions have inspired a relatively small number of authors to explore dialogue interpreting in pragmatic terms (e.g. Sykes, 2005; Vianna, 2005; Albl-Mikasa, 2008; Gumul, 2008; Gallai, 2015, 2016, 2017; Al-Kharabsheh, 2017; Livnat, 2017; Stroińska & Drzazga, 2017). In particular, Stroińska and Drzazga’s (2017) study of interpreter-mediated court cases analyses how an interpreter can best decide what can be missed out or included in rendition that is optimally representative of the original. The authors argue that RT offers insights into two aspects of messages that need to be understood in communication – i.e., explicatures and implicatures (see section 1.2). As illustrated by Stroińska and Drzazga, while implicatures may seem more problematic to resolve in real-life situations, explicatures are considered to pose significant difficulty in interpretation.

In contrast with an approach to translation and interpreting as interlingual interpretive use, Gallai’s (2015, 2016, 2017) interdisciplinary study of procedural elements in police interpreting draws a comparison between free indirect style or thought (FIT) representations in fiction as analysed by Blakemore (2009, 2010, 2011) and interpreter-mediated utterances in order to reassess the way in which attributed thoughts are represented in face-to-face interpreting. In general terms, Gallai argues that interpreters’ renditions contribute to the illusion that the hearer has direct access to the speaker’s thoughts. As with fiction, where “the effect of free indirect style is a seemingly unmediated view not only of a character’s thoughts but also of his thought processes” (Blakemore, 2010: 138), the effect of interpreted speech may be regarded as a metarepresentation of the speaker’s thoughts which is perceived to be unmediated by the thoughts of the interpreter who is responsible for producing the utterance. Thus, interpreting is no longer seen as an example of tacitly attributive use of language in the sense described by Gutt (1991/2000) and the interpreter cannot be treated as communicating her thoughts about the thoughts of the original speaker. Gallai thus argues that procedural elements have an important role to play in creating an illusion of being able to gain entry to the speaker’s mind, or rather of “being able to witness him/her as s/he is actually having the thoughts in much the same way as we are able to witness a speaker as he constructs utterances as public representations of his own thoughts” (Blakemore, 2010: 4). In other words, there generally appears to be no communicator speaking in the interpreter’s utterances, hence the sense of mutuality that is communicated is a relationship between speaker and audience. The more responsibility for the Interpretation process the interpreter gives to the audience, the greater the sense of intimacy between speaker and audience is communicated by the interpreter’s utterance, and in turn the greater the impression that the audience is directly participating in the speaker’s mental processes. This plays into the interpreters’ hands given that they generally strive to “minimise” their presence in order to allow the hearer to hear another voice, i.e., that of the original speaker.
3.2 Criticisms

As useful as it has proven to be in enhancing our understanding of the complexities of the interpreter’s task, RT has been criticised by some interpreting studies scholars for its “reliance on an ideal speaker and hearer in an imagined context, devoid of cultural and social difference” (Mason, 2015: 237). According to Mason (2006b: 114) in the absence of access to the interpreter’s thought processes the researcher can show evidence of ostensive behaviour through transcripts of interpreter-mediated interaction, yet they “can only suggest possible inferences, except where succeeding turns at talk provide evidence of actual take-up of particular meanings by participants”.20

Furthermore, as Pöchhacker (2004: 106) states, “no single model, however complex and elaborate, could hope to be validated as an account for the phenomenon as a whole”. The relevance-theoretical emphasis on context as mental representation has been criticised for downplaying features of context as a form of social interaction, a “socially constituted, interactively sustained [. . .] phenomenon” (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992: 6), i.e., the power relations involved.

Mey (1993) argued that in abstracting away from the social factors that govern communication, RT has portrayed human beings as mindless automatons, instead of “social” beings who interact in “pre-existing [socially determined] conditions” (Mey, 1993: 82). However, as Blakemore (2002) observes, a theory that abstracts away from the socially determined conditions that affect interaction does not necessarily assume that people do not operate in socially determined conditions or that human assumptions or beliefs cannot be culturally or socially determined. The question raised by RT is whether it is possible to generate a personal-level explanation of communicative behaviour of people in socially determined conditions without first having a sub-personal explanation of the cognitive systems that enable people to behave in such conditions.21

The RT account of communicative context and “discourse” is different from, yet arguably complementary to other theoretical frameworks. Indeed, the studies of both conference and dialogue interpreting discussed above have adopted other theories – notably, Goffman’s interactional sociolinguistics as mediated by Wadensjö (1992, 1998). In these studies, communication is also viewed as a social phenomenon and each participant in a triadic, interpreter-mediated encounter affects each other participants’ behaviour (Mason, 2015: 239).22 Thus, one can argue that while it is true that “the social character and context of communication are [. . .] essential to the wider picture” (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 279), it is also true that “in communicating in a social context people are enabled by various sub-personal systems – grammatical competence, an inferencing system, the visual system” (Blakemore, 2002: 8). In other words, communication in socially determined conditions as described by Goffman can be said to be enabled by a sub-personal inferencing system as described by RT.

Concluding remarks

Over the last 20 years, the field of translation studies has witnessed a steady departure from theoretical studies in favour of implementing various types of empirical research in order to gain further insight into the translation process. Scholars have been increasingly interested not only in the product of translation and interpreting, but also in the cognitive aspects of this process. In particular, cognitive pragmatics offers an additional dimension to the analysis of interlingual communication. Relevance theory has been used by translation and interpreting scholars (e.g. Gutt, 1991/2000; Alves, 1995; Setton, 1998, 1999; Alves & Gonçalves, 2003; Mason, 2004,
2006a, 2006b; Gallai, 2016) as one of the frameworks in their empirical investigations. Its flexibility seems to allow investigators to apply and adapt it to fit their research methodology. In particular, the cognitive-pragmatic approach of RT has been used by a number of translation studies in order to provide a detailed breakdown of mental procedures followed by translators and interpreters.

This chapter illustrates the explanatory potential of RT in providing a cognitively based, cause-effect account of translation and interpreting and “getting closer” to primary participants’ intentions. Within an RT framework, a translator’s or interpreter’s aim should be to produce a *faithful interpretation* of the original, where faithfulness is defined in terms of resemblance in content. The result of the interpreter’s work should be a text or an utterance which “can be processed by the L2 audience with minimal effort and which can be seen as having optimal relevance” (Stroińska & Drzazga, 2017: 105).

Thus defined, it must be noted that this notion significantly differs from the legal requirement for a “faithful” rendering of the original enshrined in most translators’ and interpreters’ Codes of Practice. However, Blakemore and Gallai (2014) and Gallai (2016) raise the question of how individuals accommodate the use of procedural elements in an attributive account of interpreting which turns on resemblances in content, dubbing the RT definition of “faithfulness” in terms of “resemblance in content” as too weak in this setting.

Much has been explored, yet there is still a lot of work to do to identify the cognitive components that contribute to the realisation of a complete pragmatic competence in translation and interpreting. It is hoped that the methodology employed by these authors (see sections 2.1 and 3.1) can be replicated in future research in order to both address its limitations, and confirm or disconfirm its findings. Further, it is highly desirable that research in this field continues to work towards a “healthy” balance between description and explanation by exploring the nature of what is processed and the way mental models are negotiated in real data sets. In particular, the integration of cognitive-pragmatics and social and intercultural studies still awaits large-scale investigation. Lastly, an in-depth knowledge of cross-linguistic pragmatics may be useful in terms of interpreter and translator training and certification.

**Notes**

1. I refer to the speaker (or author) as “he” and the hearer (or reader) as “she”. I shall also distinguish:
   (a) interpreting or to interpret (lower case), which indicates the activity of an interpreter; and
   (b) Interpretation or to Interpret (upper case), which denotes the metarepresentation of speaker’s thoughts recovered by a hearer.

2. As Schmid (2012: 4) points out, this may appear to be a Janus-faced combination. On the one hand, the term cognitive pragmatics is not well established in the linguistics community. On the other, the concept of cognitive pragmatics comes close to being a tautology since fundamental work in the field has always considered cognitive aspects as essential to the analysis of linguistic behaviour (i.e., see House’s [2013] plea for a new linguistic-cognitive orientation in translation studies).

3. These include a far-reaching theory of the cognitive processes underlying human communication known as the Cognitive Pragmatics theory (Airenti et al., 1993a, 1993b; Bara, 2007) and the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora, 2003).

4. Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) identify three types of cognitive effect: (a) generating a conclusion drawn from old or new information together, but not from such information taken separately, which is known as contextual implication; (b) strengthening an existing assumption; and (c) contradicting or eliminating an existing assumption.
5 This does not imply that every act of overt communication is in fact optimally relevant (Sperber, 1994; Wilson, 2000). For instance, speakers can be mistaken about the relevance of the information they communicate or about the hearer’s contextual or processing resources.

6 In particular, Blakemore (1987, 2002) claims that these linguistic expressions encode information about the inferential phase of Interpretation. I discuss how these elements are analysed in translation and interpreting in sections 2 and 3.

7 As Wilson stated in an unpublished lecture in 1995, “there is no more reason to expect discourse to have the same structure as language than there is to expect it to have the same structure as vision” (as cited in Blakemore, 2001: 101).

8 “Mind-reading” is perceived as a misleading term as it is taken to suggest the decoding of thoughts. Few post-Gricean pragmatists would deny the central role of “mind-reading” or theory of mind (ToM) in utterance interpretation. However, what is altogether more contentious is the exact nature of ToM in the complex cognitive processes whereby speakers produce, and hearers interpret utterances. For further insights, see Leslie (2001).

9 In particular, the notion of dissociative echoic use plays a key role in the relevance-theoretic analysis of verbal irony (cf. Wilson, 2006). This view differs from Grice’s account of metaphorical or ironic utterances, which he sees as examples of the way in which a speaker may deliberately violate the quality maxim in other to communicate something other than what is said.

10 Gutt was critical of previous approaches to translation, in particular House’s (1977) functionalist approach, which argues that source texts (ST) and target texts (TT) should match one another in function. Central to House’s discussion is the concept of overt and covert translations. On the status of “covert translation”, in particular, see ch. 3 of Gutt (2000).

11 See section 2.2 for criticism of Gutt’s assumption that a shared cognitive environment exists for texts that are intended for a wide audience (in contrast to a specific client).

12 As an instance of failed communication, Gutt (1991/2000: 193–4) gives the example of a translation of the New Testament into Gaurani. In this instance, the initial, idiomatic translation had to be rewritten because the Gaurani expectation was for a target text that more closely corresponded to the form of the high-prestige Portuguese.


14 An awkward target language idiom that results from attempting formal correspondence increases processing effort; thus, the translation would not be very effective in relation to its intended audience.

15 See definition of “direct translation” in section 2.1.

16 Since RT excludes the possibility of complete interpretive resemblance across contextual gaps, this attempt at achieving complete resemblance constrains direct translation in presuming the original context. Thus, the presumption of the original context can be said to be “more a consequence of the main part of the definition than a central part of that definition” (Smith, 2002: 113).

17 They rejected the notion of equivalence at word or sentence level. Their insistence on intended meaning, via deverbalisation and reformulation in the target language, points towards pragmatics. However, they seem to assume that “sense” can be grasped and re-expressed as intended, suggesting that speech is fully determinate. See Lederer (1994/2003); Seleskovitch (1962, 1976); Seleskovitch and Lederer (1984).

18 In the classic period, linguistic phenomena were analysed on the premise that a distinction could be made between what is said, the output of the realm of semantics, and what is conveyed or accomplished in particular linguistic and social context in or by saying something, the realm of pragmatics. This premise is increasingly undermined by developments in pragmatics, i.e., the one inaugurated by the work of J. L. Austin and H. P. Grice.

19 See also Blakemore and Gallai (2014).

20 See Mason (2015: 238) for two examples from Setton (1999: 259) and Gutt (1991/2000: 123) which serve to illustrate this point. See also Şerban in 2.2.
21 From the viewpoint of the “sub-personal cognitive processes which are involved in the human
ability to entertain representations of other people’s thoughts and desires and ideas on the basis of
public stimuli such as utterances” (Blakemore, 2002: 60).

22 As Simon (2000: 25) states in a passage on his theory of bounded rationality, “rational behavior
in the real world is as much determined by the ‘inner environment’ of people’s minds, both their
memory contents and their processes, as by the ‘outer environment’ of the world on which they act,
and which acts on them”.

Recommended reading


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