

Translation practice from a functional-linguistic perspective¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental aspects of the successful translator's task is a correct handling of the idiosyncratic features of both the source language and the target language. Through time, the process of translation has been considered to be some sort of craft, understood in terms of an activity which implies rendering a text from one language into another skillfully and in a traditional way. In this sense, the translator resembles a craftsman. In spite of this, it was considered that the translation of a text in one language into a text in a receptor language would seem, by very definition, to be a linguistic process. To seriously contemplate how relevant linguistics could be to the purpose of translating was totally out of the question, and it was probably through text linguistics that translators started at least taking an interest in linguists' observations about language and about texts from a scientific perspective.

The aim of this paper is to informally sketch the way in which functional linguistics, namely M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar (SFG), might be of help in translation practice. My starting point is that any translation must be based, overtly or covertly, on some type of functional approach to language, and the decisions reached by the translator at difficult points in the translation process spring from the view of language he adopted at the outset. I will review some of the basic assumptions of the Hallidayan model and I will pinpoint some clear links between the systemicist's view of language and the translator's linguistic problems by making references to the views and needs of the translator, embodied mainly in those of Peter Newmark (Newmark 1992) for the purpose of my task. I would like to emphasize that my ultimate aim is, then, to make an appeal to translators to get familiar with a functional approach to language study such as SFG because much benefit can be obtained from it for the world of translation. It is striking to me to observe that there are only three minor references to Halliday in the whole book by Newmark (1992). Generally speaking, there are very few references to SFG in translation treatises, and the same holds true for works which tackle translation issues in systemic spheres². In a way this paper aims to be a step towards bridging this gap.

The paper is structured in two parts. The first one will address general questions which have to do with how SFG views language, its approach to it, and its overall aim as a functional school of linguistics. A comparison will also be made with similar questions from the point of view of translation. The second part examines some aspects of the design of Halliday's grammar which the translator can take decided advantage of.

¹ Some ideas contained in this article were presented at the *I Congreso Internacional de Estudios de Traducción*, held at the Universidade da Coruña in May 1997.

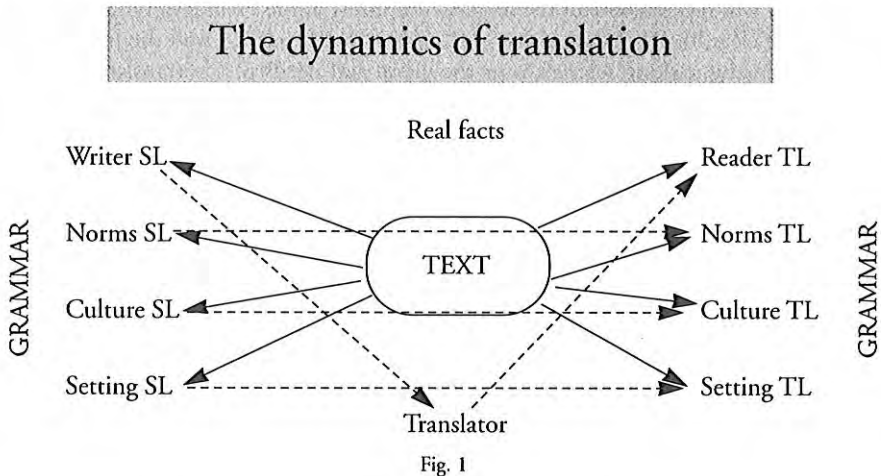
² The most straightforward cases are those contained in *Festschriften*, like Newmark (1987) or Yallop (1987). Besides there are systemic working papers which include, for instance, Taylor (1993).

2. LINGUISTICS AND TRANSLATION: A LANGUAGE APPRAISAL

In principle it is legitimate to notice that a theory of translation must in a way consider language as an instrument of some kind. By the same token, for a linguistic theory adequately to provide a basis for a theory of translation it must include communication as one of its major components. It is difficult not to agree with the idea that the primary concern of the translator is to transfer (=communicate) the intended meaning of the source language message to the target language. Meaning is both the point of departure and the end product of translation operations (Ping 1996: 74). Meaning is encoded in language, that is, language could be argued to represent the instrument by means of which meaning is transmitted. In like manner, Halliday developed a theory of language in which at least two links can be traced with translation:

- i) language does not exist, it is activity; and
- ii) the organization of language is such that it answers the demands of what it serves.

On the one hand, language is not thought of as if it were an organism, as many 19th c. linguists saw it, nor an edifice, as it was considered in the early modern structuralist period of linguistics; language is activity, it is a communicative, socializing process that takes place between a speaker and a listener in a certain context of situation, and by extension, in a certain context of culture (Joia & Stenton 1980: 90-91). Translation is a procedural activity between a writer and a translator and a reader, between a source text and a target text, between a source language, a source grammar and a source lexicon, and a target language, a target grammar and a target lexicon. Language, in text format, is responsible for putting together the participants of the linguistic practice of translation (Fig. 1: adapted from Newmark 1992: 19).



On the other hand, Halliday's aim is not, let's say, to disclose the internal mechanisms of Chomsky's Faculty of Language; on the contrary, he seeks to characterize a system which can be best explained in the light of the social functions which language has evolved to serve. "Language is as it is because of what it has to do." (Joia & Stenton 1980: 91). Language is a

tool to communicate, to exchange meanings in a certain social environment. Halliday's theory is fundamentally meaning-based. What is translation all about? Transfer of meaning, not of form (see Zhongying's 1990 interesting contribution).

Newmark (1992: 61) has posed that any translation is an exercise of applied linguistics. For Halliday one of the theory's most relevant validity criteria, as a scientific theory, is its applicability. Whereas grammars born in the Chomskyan tradition claim that a linguistic theory should be defined in terms of explicitness, exhaustivity and the like, Halliday maintains that the value of the theory lies in its capacity to be put into practice. The theory itself is worthless unless it has an immediate practical application, whatever it may be. On the list of possible applications of SFG is certainly "to help train translators and interpreters" (Halliday 1994: xxix). In fact, for Halliday the test of a theory of language, in relation to a particular purpose, is "does it go? Does it facilitate the task in hand?" (Halliday 1994: xxx). The proof of the pudding lies in the eating of it, that is, the value of the theory lies in applying it.

Another advantage of systemic linguistics for the purpose and needs of the translator is the relationship between the theoretical object and the theory itself. Halliday's approach is basically descriptive, not so much explanatory. The idea that SFG is not really an explanatory model of grammar does not sit well with many Halliday-followers; however, they should be credited with the development of one of the most comprehensive descriptive English grammars available nowadays. This represents an extremely rich data source for the translator using English. However, it should be pointed out that only the English language has achieved such a level of grammatical insight in the systemic framework. Other languages—German, Japanese, Spanish—are gradually being studied from Halliday's fundamentals of language; yet, there is still a great deal of research to be done in this area.

This is in fact very much connected with the metatheoretical question of the identification of the object of study of systemic grammar. Generally speaking, any linguist is given the possibility of examining, in principle, either human language on the one hand or particular languages on the other. It is basically a question of degree of abstraction. The choice, of course, depends on the decisions the linguist has made in more general linguistic issues, such as the way in which language is conceptualized in the overall grammar framework. Systemic linguistics offers translators a wide range of analyses of particular languages and varieties of such languages, in their attempt to describe and compare those languages/varieties. Consistent with this stance, it should not be forgotten that one of Halliday's primary aims is to construct a grammar for the purpose of text analysis, which seems to justify the comparison of varieties and registers of a particular language.

3. A QUESTION OF LINGUISTIC ARCHITECTURE

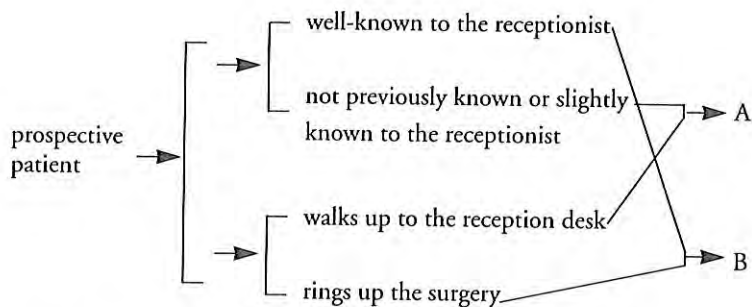
After an early taxonomic stage inherited from Firth's ideas and the London School of Linguistics, Halliday's work on linguistics revolves around one and only premise: language is part of the social system, and man is a social agent. In order to understand the social system, how it persists and changes in the course of the transmission of culture from one generation to another, one has to understand the key role that language plays in the socialization process. Translation, among many other things, is also a way of transmitting culture, and behind the text in the original language lies a complex of interwoven semantic alternatives which the translator should keep in the target text. All good translators know that extralingual factors,

or knowledge of the world, weighs heavily in the correct comprehension and interpretation of the source message. Certainly, this is not a one way, all-purpose mechanism: a good theory of translation should be careful to characterize the best possible translating method for each type of text, on the understanding that parallel work is done to achieve a repertoire of sufficiently well-defined text types.

In Martín Miguel (forthcoming) I address the role of context in translation practice. Systemic grammar links any piece of linguistic material to two types of context, the *context of situation* and the *context of culture*, derived from the incontestable evidence that a single token of linguistic material may have many different possible meanings depending on the context. In an overall grammatical framework, this idea cannot simply remain an abstract, intellectual entity included in the body of doctrine of a theory of linguistics. If we want it to be applicable to, and operative in, text analysis and translation practice, some sort of explicit formulation is called for, preferably in unambiguous terms. This can be very easily represented in the needs expressed by Bateman and Paris, computer linguists using Halliday's grammar, as regards the incorporation of a computational model of register theory in their text generation machine (Bateman & Paris 1991).

The main claim made by these linguists is that registers are definable in terms of selections of situational features that call for the selection of particular corresponding linguistic features. The situational features which define registers are assumed to pattern paradigmatically, similarly to other levels of linguistic organization in systemic grammar, that is, a network of interdependent choices, each of which may constrain the linguistic alternatives available in the discourse organization and the grammar (see an example taken from Berry 1989: 20-21 in Fig. 2). In this perspective, there is a link between this strategy and some of the tips Newmark gives to translators in his handbook. He (1992: 29 ff) defends that the analysis of the source text should be done through the identification of, for example, the type of text (narrative, descriptive, argumentative, dialogic), or the scale of formality (official, formal, neutral, colloquial, jargon), all of which points in the following direction: the reason why the source text has been written in a certain way and has taken a certain shape responds to contextual, textual and meaning factors, which have to be identified first and then rendered into the context, text and meaning of the target language.

In a strong defence of literal translation –whenever possible– against those who favour a more or less free rewriting of the original text in the translation process, Newmark (1992: 105, 160 ff) insists on the fact that we have nothing to translate but words, mere words, not grammatical structures or paragraphs. However, we do not translate isolated words, but words which are conditioned by their syntactic, collocational, situational and cultural contexts (hence the paramount importance of componential analysis in translation). Any given linguistic form may not only have other connotations besides its information content, but as Schweda Nicholson (1992: 94) contends, “it is important to remember that, pragmatically speaking, the various uses of words are best determined by examining them not in the language system in general, but in context.”



A: My name is Mrs. Lee. I wonder if I could see Dr. Scott today

B: Maria, this is Julie here. I wonder if I could see Dr. Scott today

Fig. 2

In this perspective, one very clear contribution of SFG to translation practice is what Halliday and Hasan call levels of discourse of a text (Halliday & Hasan 1989: 29 ff), which bear a direct relationship with the presence of context in linguistic analysis. The notion of *context of situation* can be made explicit –recall Bateman and Paris’s claim– by means of a conceptual framework using the terms *field*, *tenor* and *mode* of discourse, labels which are extremely useful in constructing and decomposing meaning, depending on whether we are translating or making translation analysis. Under the *field of discourse*, we may capture:

- i) the linguistic processes pertaining to a particular situation: existence, possession, movement, location;
- ii) the particular grammatical patterns associated with these process types, determining the participants that are involved in them;
- iii) the particular objects involved in the processes, that is, the names of the participants, as well as possible accompanying features including identifying terms such as adjectives, for example;
- iv) the system of time reference in which the processes and the participants are located.

Secondly, the *tenor of discourse* mirrors the relationships involved between the participants of the process, in other words, the choice of mood made by the participants:

- i) whether they make statements, questions, demands;
- ii) whether the text is a monologue or a dialogue;
- iii) whether the participant in question is the speaker or the addressee;
- iv) whether the polarity terms are positive or negative.

Finally, the *mode of discourse* captures all aspects of texture, that is, of the meanings derived from the textual component, reflect the mode, the particular role that is assigned to the text in the situation. Particularly relevant here are:

- i) the analysis of the theme/rheme structure of the text;
- ii) the study of cohesive resources that make some number of sentences be a text: reference, conjunction, ellipsis, and so on;
- iii) the information structure, that is, its distribution into text units and into given/new pieces of information (in other words, recoverable/non-recoverable information).

In sum, the *field of discourse* stands for the referential system of the situation, the *tenor of discourse* represents the interpersonal framework of the situation, and the *mode of discourse* analyzes the textual characteristics of the linguistic material produced in that situation which make discrete sentences be a unitary text. The analysis of source texts in these terms reveals features which might be left unnoticed to the eye of the translator, and, who knows, may constitute the key to a successful translation. The same could be argued about the translated text, of course: a metafunctional analysis could hint at the disclosure of a number of pitfalls the translator may encounter in his everyday practice.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Studying issues on translation and their linguistic consequences, especially from a functional viewpoint, could in fact be an endless voyage. In this paper I have shown that some clear links do exist between the practice of translation and Halliday's view of language, such as the functional view of language study, and the recognition of text types characterized by social and contextual features which bear direct bonds with linguistic realizations. There are some other aspects worth exploring: the lexicogrammatical status of translations, the way systemic linguistics tackles componential analysis, the use of congruent vs. metaphorical language. These questions, and others, I will leave open for future research. My fondest hope is that the observations made throughout have aroused the translator's keen interest in systemic grammar, which should be demonstrated in more frequent direct references to it in the literature on translation.

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