Translation of Discourse Context and Reconstruction of Textual Coherence in the Target Discourse

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Linguistic studies of context benefit translation a lot, as context is first accepted as a social linguistic concept in its long history of development. Obviously, context has become increasingly crucial for translation and translation studies. Some scholars even suggest that an independent contextual vision of translation be established to distinguish context of translation from those of text linguistics, pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, etc. It is a set of cohesive devices that constitute the coherence of a discourse. Some linguist classifies the devices into two groups: internal cohesive devices and external cohesive devices. Absolutely, each coherent discourse is contextually adapted and the thesis attempts to transplant context of translation into the soil of discourse, so that contextual elements can be categorized accordingly and translation process will be considered as reconstruction of textual coherence in the target discourse under the constraint of context. Therefore the translators should enhance their contextual awareness and internalize contextual knowledge into their minds in a bid for an effective translation.

Keywords: context translation, context of discourse, textual coherence, reconstruction

Introduction

Text linguistics was inextricably tied up with translation since its emergence, especially in the recent decade when a great many treatises have been brought out by scholars in Great Britain such as Halliday (1985, 1994/2000), Hatim and Mason (1990/2001), Bell (1991/2001) and Baker (1992/2000), etc. Among them, Halliday’s functional linguistics has contributed most to translation studies. At home, however, research into discourse and translation started later due to some historical reasons. Yet to our joy, the past seven years has witnessed the coming out of many articles and treatises on translation and discourse analysis. The most outstanding representative Chinese scholars include Li (2001), Huang (1988), Zhang and Huang (2002), Tan (2002), an expert in text linguistics. They probe into translation by means of functional linguistics and from the

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angle of actual language use, which differs from traditional methods. Discourse translation studies emphasize that text is the basic unit of translation and meaning is conveyed through language structures instead of words or sentences in the traditional sense. In that case, the standard of translation should be textual or communicative equivalence, but not lexical, phrasal or syntactical equivalence. Besides, the research focus of translation includes not only those inner-language elements but also context of situation and context of culture, social situation, but not a mere interlanguage transformation. Li Yunxing's “Introduction to Discourse Study” is the classics of theoretical monograph which has made a perfect combination of translation and text linguistics. In *Discourse and the Translator*, Hatim (2001) gives us his comment on the history of context, from Malinowski’s context of situation and context of culture to Halliday’s register theory. Besides, he marries them to translation studies and also makes further research into translation context from semantic, pragmatic and semiotic dimensions, pragmatic and semiotic dimensions.

In a word, text discourse and context are frequently used in translation studies. Each of them constitutes a crucial part of translation approach, but how about combination of them? This will be the theme of this thesis.

**Context of Discourse as Contextual Vision of Translation and Textual Coherence**

Both context and discourse are key elements of translation study whose research object has proved to be discourse analysis. Meanwhile, analysis of a discourse should be matched with that of its context. Therefore, the establishment of an independent discipline requires translation studies to pay equal attention to discourse and context. Context research without reference to discourse analysis will make translation study generalized to be a case study of culture. This thesis tends to adopt “context of discourse” instead of the general notion “context”, and take context of discourse as contextual vision of translation and textual coherence.

**Inner Relationships Between Context and Discourse**

Correct massage transformation in translation process requires a thorough understanding of the relationships between context and discourse. So far the bi-directional relation between them has been prevalent among the linguists who believe that they can restrict and construct mutually. John Lyons (1972) indicates definitely that they are mutually complimentary and presupposed. A discourse is produced in context and conversely makes up, changes and even reconstructs the context. He (ibid.) also says that derivation of implicature and presupposition is closely related to context. The meaning of a discourse exceeds the total sum of the meaning of those sentences in it. Therefore, translators must take into account context of situation and context of culture so as to comprehend accurately the discourse, especially the ambiguous sentences in it. Halliday and Hasan’s (1985) research and metaphorical into relationships between discourse and context has three points worth of our attention. Firstly, they believe that context and discourse belongs to the same phenomenon. Discourse is considered as the instantiation of context and proves a graphic account of their relation. Secondly, they insist that the relation between context and translation can be bi-directional prediction. Specifically, context provides the situation where discourses are developed, while none of the discourses can divorce from context. Finally, they hold that there presents between them an interactive relationship which can also be defined as mutual creation. Discourse is the result of the comprehensive force of context variables, that is to say, it is the context that brings about a discourse. On the contrary, discourse can create new context, a new language environment or a kind of virtual reality.
On the whole, context and discourse are interdependent upon each other. No discourse may gain its meaning without the involvement of context, while the meaning of a discourse is ambiguous and indefinite without reference to context. Ignorance of context results in the reader’s failure to understand the discourse. Both context and discourse are key elements of translation study whose research object has proved to be discourse analysis.

**Textual Coherence and Its Relationships With Context of Discourse and Translation**

Context of discourse plays a leading role in both construction and perception of textual coherence by communicators. In another word, a coherent discourse must be contextually compliant. Therefore, it is reasonable that context of discourse plays a directive role in translators’ excavation of the coherent ties of the source discourse and in his reconstruction of the coherence in the target discourse.

Coherence is defined by Halliday and Hasan (1976) as texture, which is entirely appropriate to express the property of “being a text”. A text has texture, which distinguishes it from being something that is not a text; it derives the texture from the fact that it functions as a unity with respect to its environment. They (1985, p. 48) also propose that “a text is characterized by coherence: it hangs together.” This indicates that coherence makes a property of discourse. And Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 23) also suggest, “the cohesive relations and ties which take the form of reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion are semantic relations or threads that link the elements of the text together and tie them into a whole.”

Context of discourse plays altogether three major roles in production of textual coherence. They are specified by D. L. Zhang and A. J. Zhang (2006) as follows.

1. to activate the internal cohesive mechanism of a discourse which will serve as the actual devices to help establish the wholeness and unity of the discourse;
2. to uncover the cohesive ties of a discourse with the external world: context of situation and of culture;
3. to reveal the implicature in the discourse and make it a critical part of the wholeness and unity of the discourse.

In line with this summary, textual coherence involves not only text internal cohesive devices (intratextual context) but text external ones (cohesive relationships between discourse and extratextual context). The external cohesive devices will come into effect when a discourse makes no sense with reference only to intratextual context. Context of discourse is necessary in decoding these devices and in producing a coherent discourse.

In the process of translation, translators always presume that the source discourse is coherent and that the target discourse is also supposed to be. Now that both the source discourse and the target one are embedded in context of discourse, the precise meaning of a word, a phrase or a sentence should be sought in the context, and reconstruction of textual coherence is also dependent upon the context. The translator’s efforts to reconstruct coherence in the target discourse should be made from the perspective of context because coherence is “taken as a cover term for the way in which contextual values are relayed” (Hatim & Mason, 2001, p. 210).

Accordingly, what the translator should do is to explore all the contextual factors, both internal and external, which will influence the coherence of the source discourse, and then to compare them with the corresponding aspects of the target discourse which, as a result, will be cohesive, coherent and accurate. Obviously, translation of a discourse is to reconstruct semantic coherence in the target discourse under the constraint of context of discourse.
Context of Discourse in Translation—Reconstruction of Textual Coherence

There always presents divergence between context of a source discourse and that of the target one, so their coherent mechanisms may differ greatly. Therefore, for the sake of textual coherence, some adjustments are unavoidable in translation. Context of discourse will assist translators in making semantic choices and producing a loyal translation as cohesive and coherent as the source discourse. This thesis will elaborate the directive significance of context of discourse in translation in line with its categorization.

Intratextual Context

Intratextual context is composed of all “text internal factors” that will affect a translator’s comprehension of the source discourse and reproduction of the target one. It has been described by many scholars as “linguistic context” or “co-text”. The discourse itself constitutes part of the context. Halliday and Hasan (1985, p. 48) also propose that “every text is also a context for itself.” All the “text internal factors” are likely to enter translators’ contextual vision and be identified by translators. This will at the same time provide evidence for translators’ correct understanding of the source discourse and reproduction of the target one. According to contextual mode of functional linguistics, co-text is the ground floor of the context tower; it displays in the form of discourse the features and allocation of contextual variables in context of culture and of situation; it belongs to linguistic context which employs specific language forms to express meaning potential; it decides whether the discourse is an intact and coherent semantic unit in form. Although it is on the grassroots level, it should not be neglected.

Lexical cohesion. Lexical cohesion refers to semantic relationship between two words or between a word and a clause in a discourse. It can be further divided into two groups: synonymy and collocation, in accordance with Li (2000).

(1) Synonymy

Synonymy is a lexical chain linked by synonyms, near-synonyms, superordinates, hyponyms and general words, etc. If two or more lexical items constitute the relation of synonymy, the interpretation of one lexical is obtained with reference to that of its related lexical items. With the aid of synonymy translators can choose the appropriate words to make the target discourse coherent.

(2) Collocation

Collocation means co-appearance and association of all linguistic elements, and it is an important component of linguistic context. (Chen, 2004). In view of this, collocation of words is not static and their meanings are very closely connected to and highly dependent upon each other. Li (2000) also suggests that collocation of words in a discourse is dynamic and the meanings of those words are closely connected with each other, which is the so-called collocative cohesion. As part of intratextual context, lexical cohesion is independent of extra-textual referential identity. It operates between text-situated forms, specifically, between words that have certain semantic relation with other words in the text. The text determines what belongs together (Neubert, 1992). Collocation attaches importance to linguistic context’s constrictive effect on words, that is, a particular mechanism of organizing words into a discourse.

Each language has its own habitual collocations so should take into full consideration both the source that translators and the target language environments and should not resort easily to word-to-word translation.
**Structural cohesion.** Structural cohesion is another type of intratextual context. According to Hu (1994), through syntactic comparison of a certain word, phrase or clause with another presupposed structure in the discourse, structural cohesion can help us make clear the implicative meaning of another word, phrase or clause that does not appear in a clear-cut form in the discourse. Structural cohesion represents a relationship of inheritance or enlightenment and is also an essential form of linguistic context. It falls into two groups: substitution and ellipsis. The former can be further divided into nominal substitution, verbal substitution and clausal substitution (Li, 2000), while the latter includes such phenomena as nominal ellipsis, verbal ellipsis and clausal ellipsis. Ignorance of structural cohesion will result in false comprehension and incoherent interpretation.

1. **Substitution**

   Substitution implies that anaphors, as substitutes of the previous expressions in a discourse, will make the discourse brief and smooth. Anaphora is far more frequently used in English than in Chinese. Application of anaphors can refrain a discourse from wordiness and long-winded sentences. However, the substitutive relation is not obvious which is bound to bring barriers to the readers’ understanding of it. Thereof, in order to clarify the relation, the translator, as a reader of the source discourse, should manage to find the structural points of cohesion with the assistance of context.

2. **Ellipsis**

   Ellipsis aims at cohesion of a discourse by means of zero expression. As is known to all, Chinese is parataxis while English is hypotaxis. A complicated Chinese sentence often has several predicative structures with only one subject. The subjects left out should emerge in the corresponding English clauses according to English syntactic rules. The following example will demonstrate that.

3. **Logical coherence**

   As for coherence, a translator should first of all recognize the logic sequence of the source discourse, that is, he should try to ponder on the discourse as the author once did, and thus develop a good knowledge about its coherence mechanism which may be overt or covert. Overt coherence means adoption of conjunctions in a certain discourse; covert coherence refers to the interrelationships between messages of a certain discourse. Improper logical coherence will make the whole discourse irrational.

**Extratextual Context**

In correspondence to intratextual context, extratextual context is defined as “text external factors” which effect as hints for the translator’s comprehension of a word, a sentence or even the whole discourse. It involves context of situation and context of culture which are termed as “external cohesive devices of a discourse” by D. L. Zhang and A. J. Zhang (2006). The following two sections will elaborate respectively its two constituents and display how they exert a directive influence on the translator’s activity.

**Context of situation.** Context of situation refers to the situational factors related to a discourse. In Halliday’s words, it means “situations of language use”, and specifically, “the non linguistic factors which serve as the controlling environment” (Liu, 1988, p. 186). It plays an important part in determining the meaning of a word in a discourse. A word in different situations may mean poles apart.

As it has been introduced in the first chapter context of situation originates from Malinowski who concludes that the meaning of any language must be interpreted in context of situation and culture. Enlightened by
Malinowski’s theory, Halliday brings about the main components of context of situation, from which he has developed his register theory. This section will borrow from Halliday’s register theory to elaborate how context of discourse effects on translation process, i.e. on reconstruction of textual coherence in the target discourse. Halliday (1994, p. 87) proposes that “the category of register is postulated to account for what people do with their language. When we observe language activity in the various contexts in which it takes place, we find differences in the type of language selected as appropriate to different types of situation.” According to him (1976, p. 23) “a text is coherent with respect to the context of situation and therefore consistent in register”. Halliday (ibid, p. 22) further explains that “the linguistic features which are typically associated with a configuration of situational feature—with particular values of the field, mode and tenor—constitute a register”. In accordance with his approach, “field of discourse” is defined as the whole setting in which a piece of language occurs; “tenor of discourse” as relationships between the participants; “mode of discourse” as the chosen channel of communication. He also points out that these are the general concepts needed for describing what is linguistically significant in the context of situation.

(1) Field of discourses

Field, one of the components of Halliday’s situational context, is where subject-matter belongs. Blankly speaking, each discourse has a topic and all those linguistic materials are mantled together to support the topic or to be relevant to the topic. Therefore, in order to make clear the exact meaning of a specific word, the translator has to sometimes turn to “field of discourse” for help. If he is not clear about the field that the discourse deals with, it is quite possible for him to make mistakes especially in conveying the exact meaning of polysemies. In addition, the role of field in interpretation of a discourse lies in that it makes the translator’s or the reader’s expectation further constrained both lexically and syntactically.

(2) Mode of discourse

Mode refers to the medium of the language activity, including not only the choice spoken and written medium, but other choices relating to the role of language in the situation. (Halliday, 1976). It is the manifestation of the nature of the language code being used. Simply speaking, mode means how contact between the participants in the event is being maintained—by speaking or writing. These two channels produce discourses of different styles. Oral style is casual and informal, while written style is often formal or even frozen. For example, a professor is supposed to employ highly accurate, formal and logical expressions in his work, but give lectures to his students in a casual way. The mode of delivery constitutes the style of the discourse being developed. The translator must be sensitive to the subtle differences so as to avoid the stylistic incoherence of the target discourse.

(3) Tenor of discourse

In addition to field and mode discussed above, tenor is also of vital importance in text translation. Tenor refers to the relationship between participants, including their social status and role relationships (Halliday, 1978). According to Halliday’s definition, tenor involves at least two participants. They may be the text producer and the reader, or the addressor and the addressee in a discourse. In the following, we will focus mainly on tenor’s effect on reconstruction of coherence in the target discourse from the two aspects.

Context of culture. Each discourse may be grounded on culture. Relationships between a discourse and its cultural background constitute its cultural context (Li, 2000). Cultural context is another important factor in
discourse translation. As Hatim and Mason (2001) point out,

The cultural context is crucial in the interpretation of the message because meaning is something that is negotiated between producers and receivers of texts. The translator, as a special kind of text user, intervenes in this process of negotiation, to relay the meaning of the texts across not only linguistic and situational boundaries but also cultural boundaries. (pp. 33-37)

Each language community has its own history, customs, culture, social conventions, ideology, ethics and values, etc. According to Huang (1988), the cultural patterns and factors reflecting the features of a particular language community constitute the so-called cultural context. Culture is rather an intricate notion of wide range. With further research and development of pragmatics, it has in recent years expanded to include such social phenomena as colonism, slavery trade, sexual discrimination and crime, etc. When people in certain cultural environment convey their perceptual knowledge, sentiment and experience about the objective outside world, they always unconsciously impose objects and events with their personal feelings, such as good or bad luck, kindness or evil, beauty or ugliness, and the like, thus producing cultural connotation. Besides their conceptual meanings, those culture-loaded words gain certain metaphorical meaning. Translation of a discourse without the analysis of cultural context will result in an incoherent discourse and then misunderstanding among the target readers.

In addition to the common features of context, cultural context possesses its own attributes: subconsciousness and logic connection.

(1) Subconsciousness: as a social phenomenon taking shape in the long history of a language community, culture context is the outcome of human beings’ mental activities and there is underlying a sort of collective consciousness which is understandable to that community words, phrases and sentences of a language may receive an extra meaning accepted subconsciously by the members of the language community. Additionally, subconscious meaning of the same word in different cultural contexts is not identical. For example, “dragon” in Chinese culture is symbolic of grandness or a powerful position while in English culture evil and viciousness.

(2) Logic connection: cultural context forms logically a link in a discourse and serves as a clue for the consistence of thinking. Ignorance of cultural context will result in a failure of communication.

(3) The two features inspire us that cultural context plays two major roles in translators’ production of a coherent target discourse. Firstly, it provides the translator with clues to the meaning of the culture-loaded words and the tactics to transform them into the target discourses coherently; on the gaps between the other hands, it can help translators bridge the logic source language and the target one due to the two nations’ distinctive way of thinking and ideology. As a branch of context of discourse, cultural context also affects translators in understanding the source discourse and in the selection of proper expressions to form a target one. It is obvious that translation activity involves two cultural contexts. To translate is to strike a balance between the two contexts which are divergent in many facets. Torn between two cultural contexts, translators should possess not only bilingual competence but what Nida (2001) proposed, bicultural competence. To sum up, context of culture implements a significant effect on translators’ reconstruction of a coherent discourse. Discourse translation without proper treatment of culture-loaded words will be incoherent and even wrong. Meanwhile, culture is complicated and the most challenging problems a translator often comes translation. Nida and Reyburn rightly point out: across when doing “in fact, difficulties arising out of differences of culture constitute the most serious
problems for translators and have produced the most far-reaching misunderstandings among readers” (Guo, 1999, p. 2). Bassnett (1988, p. 23) even warns us that “to attempt to impose the value system of the SL culture onto the TL culture is dangerous ground…”. Therefore, disposal of the cultural elements proves a demanding job for translators.

**Conclusion**

Context of discourse makes a marriage between context discourse, which conforms to the law of their development. The concepts are indispensable to each other from the very beginning. They are both transplanted into the soil of translation in this thesis. Their cooperation benefits both of them and defines translation as reconstruction of textual coherence into the target discourse under the constraint of context of discourse. Highly directive as the context of discourse, the subjective role of translators cannot be neglected. Gutt’s (2004) view of cognitive context has entrusted the subjective role on translators. From the angle of a translation researcher, comments are always made after the translation has been a finished product. Context in his eyes is relatively ideal, but in most translators’ eyes is indefinite and messy. Therefore, as for the translator, he should keep mind open to the knowledge about context of discourse and its latest development, and at the same time, improve his linguistic competence—comprehensive and expressive capabilities. Confronted with the constraint of context of discourse, the role of translators should not be a passive one, but an active one. As the subject of translation process, the translator is supposed to apply in a flexible way his accumulated experience and knowledge to make contextual assumptions of both the source discourse and the target one, between which compromises will be made to ensure that the meaning potential can flow into the target discourse in an appropriate way.

Highly directive as the context of discourse, the subjective role of translators cannot be neglected. On the cont it should be given full play to in the process of reconstructing textual coherence under the constraint of context of discourse. Therefore, translators should enhance their contextual awareness and internalize contextual knowledge into their minds in a bid for an effective translation.

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