

## Coherence as a Parameter of Translation in the Context of Culture

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### Abstract

Meaning and equivalence plays a critical role in translation, but how to get equivalence is a great difficulty. The paper, by extending coherence from the language category to the context of culture and treating it as a dynamic process of cognition, holds that coherence refers not only to the semantic and logical relationship within the context of language, but also, with the use of a certain text genre, to the accurate expression of the physical and mental world in the context of culture. In this sense, translation is that the translator, based on his analysis and understanding of the source text and the coherence of the language in the cultural context, reproduces the information of the concepts and genre expressed in the source language, realizing its counterpart coherence in the other language and culture. A model is established to clearly show the translating process, with equivalence substantiated.

**Key words:** Coherence; Context of culture; Translation

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### INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that "meaning" plays a critical role in translation. However, meaning is not simply those

definitions offered in the dictionary, but deeply determined by the culture where the language is used. With the development of linguistics, the concept of "coherence" is well discussed and can be employed to identify meaning. Context is necessary for the clarification of both "meaning" and "coherence". This paper is to take coherence as a parameter to study translation in the context of culture so as to understand the nature and criteria of translation from a new perspective.

### 1. MEANING, EQUIVALENCE AND COHERENCE

A classic statement on translation was proposed by Nida and Taber (2004, p.12): Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. Two key interwoven elements are mentioned – equivalence and meaning.

Equivalence is "a term used by many writers to describe the nature and the extent of the relationships which exist between SL [Source Language] and TL [Target Language] texts or smaller linguistic units" (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2004, p.49). Catford suggests that translation equivalence occurs when ST [Source Text] and TT [Target Text] have approximately the same referent, and thus he relies on an essentially referential theory of meaning (Catford, 1994, cited in Baker, 2004, p.78).

Then the general view in translation studies soon came to be that equivalence is a relation between texts in two different languages, rather than between the languages themselves... Once attention was focused on texts and utterances, many of the potential multiple meanings and functions of words and structures in a language system could be eliminated by reference to their co-text and context, making translation not only more tractable, but also more realistic (Ibid., pp.78-79).

The study of meaning itself also attaches importance to texts, or context, in a larger sense. "For language users,

meaning is the central fact of language, and meaning emerges from a seamless union of wording and context” (Thompson, 2000, p.36). It is explained in the preface of Zhao Yanchun’s book *A Reductionist Approach to Translatology* (2005, p.10) that the study of meaning should focus on the relationship of people with language, thoughts and substances. It involves the nature, or cosmos, the comprehensive culture covering almost all the aspects of human life and thoughts, and the internal relationship among people.

The recall of past experience and knowledge of the world are not part of the meaning of a text, but part of the human apparatus for working out the meaning of a text, which again suggests that meaning exists in texts but can only be accessed through various processes of interpretation on the part of the reader (Baker, 2000, p.221).

Therefore, “meaning” is the “relation” to be found in terms of equivalence in translation, and this “meaning” lies in “co-text” and “context”. The thorough understanding of meaning in a text involves language in use, the study of which is known as pragmatics. “It [pragmatics] is the study of meaning, not as generated by the linguistic systems but as conveyed and manipulated by participants in a communicative situation” (Ibid., p.216).

Thus, an important concept – coherence – has to be introduced because coherence is defined by Blum-Kulka as “a covert potential meaning relationship among parts of a text, made overt by the reader or listener through processes of interpretation” (1986, p.17, cited in Baker, 2000, p.221), and “in the case of coherence, they [stretches of language] are connected by virtue of conceptual or meaning dependences as perceived by language users” (Baker, 2000, p.218). According to Hatim and Mason (2001, p.195), coherence can be defined as the procedures which ensure conceptual connectivity, including (a) logical relations, (b) organization of events, objects and situations, and (c) continuity in human experiences. So, coherence is a dynamic process of cognition. It connects the real world with language and connects different parts of the language itself.

## 2. COHERENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURE

The theory of context is about the background where the language takes place. There are three types of context, namely, the context of culture, the context of situation, and context of language. The terms were formulated by British anthropologist Malinowski. Context of culture is the cultural background of the language, being general and abstract. Context of situation refers to the concrete conditions where the utterance is made. Context of language is the concept of linguistic setting formed by the words in the text.

This paper probes into coherence in the context of culture is to explore a new approach to the concept and criteria of translation. If it works, the approach can also be applied to the other two contexts, which is the prospect of the research.

The term “context of culture” was originally put forward by Bronislaw Malinowski in 1935. He studied the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands and their language, and realized “Language is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture... it cannot be explained without constant reference to these broader contexts of verbal utterance” (Malinowski, 1923/1938, p.305, cited in Katan, 2004, p.72). Firth further developed this notion. He maintained that “meaning should be viewed in terms of what an utterance is intended to achieve rather than merely the sense of the individual words making up the utterance... Given this orientation, meaning could best be viewed in terms of ‘function’ in ‘context’” (Hatim, 2001, p.19). Sapir, an anthropologist, wrote these words in his essay: “Language has a setting... language does not exist apart from culture” (Katan, 2004, p.73). In systemic-functional grammar, language “is defined in terms of the basic distinction between context of culture and context of situation. Within the context of culture, language is envisaged as: A form of behaviour potential, an open-ended set of options in behaviour that are available to the individual” (Hatim, 2001, p.19).

Context of culture involves all the aspects of a language community. First, it is closely related to the material civilization of the community which is the basis of spiritual civilization. Therefore, the meaning communicated is connected with its material civilization. People living in ancient times could never have had the chance to talk about those that are developed in modern society, such as the internet, computers, smart mobile phones, etc. Second, context of culture is related to the political system and religious beliefs. For example, socialism is carried out in China, so the rules, regulations, policies, and administrative patterns are all based on the theory of socialism. As a result, there are many particular terms and expressions, such as “科学发展观”, “联产承包责任制”, “一个中心两个基本点”. For another example, Christianity is the belief of most Americans, so their words and activities are typical of the religion. Presidents take an oath of office with their hands on the Bible. The Bible becomes one of the most important sources of their literature and daily expressions while they seldom appear in China where the culture is characterized by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Finally, the history is an important root of a language community. It is reflected in people’s words, thinking patterns, and behaviours.

In functional grammar, context of culture is also called genre. Genre comes from a certain context of culture, and it itself is a kind of context of culture (Zhang, 2005, p.108). It includes the more general idea of what the

interactants are doing through languages and how they organise the language event in order to achieve that purpose (Thompson, 2000, p.36).

Genre is reflected in two aspects: schematic structure and realizational patterns. Schematic structure refers to the organization with phases and procedures. For instance, a recipe usually has a schematic structure like name, brief introduction, ingredients, and cuisine. According to Zhu Yongsheng and Yan Shiqing (2001), there are differences in ways of organization between Chinese people and Western people in writing a letter, answering a telephone or going shopping. Realizational patterns refer to the specific linguistic structure. For instance, when a text begins with "Once upon a time", it shows that it is a narration of a fairy story or a fable. When a conversation starts with the question "Can I help you", most probably it is between a customer and an attendant in the service industry.

Eggs (1994, pp.30-31) points out that the following text can easily be recognized as "dealings" in terms of genre although the concrete situation – who are the participants and what is dealt with – is unknown.

S1: yes please  
S2: can I have these two like that  
S1: yes  
S1: one's forty-five  
S1: one's twenty-five  
S2: and have you got ... the... of...  
S1: yes  
S1: how many would you like  
S2: four please  
S1: two of each?  
S2: what you have got  
S1: uh there's two different designs on the –  
S2: I'll take two of each  
S1: uhuh  
S1: right... that's a dollar seventy thank you  
S1: here we are  
S2: thank you  
S1: thank you  
S1: dollar seventy that's two four and one's five thank you very much  
S2: thank you  
S1: they'll be right I'll fix those up in a moment  
S2: okay

In other words, the context of culture, or genre, refers to the set of events that exist in a culture. Considering the cognitive process of coherence, put into the context of culture, coherence can be regarded as the agreement of the language form with the concept it expresses. It lies in the accurate expression and interpretation of the events, notions, and concepts that are particular to that culture.

For example, the idea embedded in the Chinese sentence "他转身去看报上登载添丁得女, 红白喜事的专栏" (Wang, 2006, p.52) is retrievable from the Chinese culture because the Chinese people are familiar with what

the words stand for, especially "红白喜事". In the Chinese culture, "红喜" includes births, marriages and birthdays, and "白喜" refers to the death of the aged. The Chinese sentence exactly expresses the segment of the Chinese culture. The example may suffice to illustrate the coherence of the conceptual meaning of language with the cultural context.

However, the accurate expression of the conceptual meaning alone is not enough. The particular way of organizing the concepts in a culture has to be taken into consideration for the purpose of coherence. The following two notes are cited to show the coherence in the context of culture in terms of schematic structure and realizational patterns. The Chinese note came from a bathroom of a hotel in Guangzhou, China, in 2002, and the English one was originally in the bathroom of a hotel in Hobart, Australia in 2002. Both the notes were about the change of towels for guests.

The Chinese note:

尊敬的宾客:

你能否设想如下画面: 世界各地的酒店每天清洗数万吨无需清洗的毛巾, 由此耗费的洗衣粉会怎样污染我们的水源。

因此, 我们恳请您的帮助, 如果无需更换毛巾, 请将毛巾放回架上; 如需更换, 请将毛巾放在浴盆内。

谢谢您的合作 (Dai, 2007, p.77)!

The English note:

Dear Guest,

In the interest of making a contribution to lessening environmental pollution and reducing waste, you are invited to place your used towels on the hand-rail for further use. If you wish your towels to be washed daily, please place them in the shower recess/bathtub (Ibid., p.78).

Both notes have the same genre – operating instructions, but they have different schematic structures and realizational patterns. In terms of the schematic structure, the Chinese note is: address, background facts, instructions, gratitude, and the English one is: address, purpose, instructions. In terms of realizational patterns, each one has its own characteristics, such as "尊敬的宾客", "我们恳请您的帮助", "谢谢您的合作" in the former and "Dear Guest" and "you are invited" in the latter. Although there are differences in wording and organization, both texts are coherent with the schema in the minds of their native readers, which results from different contexts of culture. The sense of environmental protection in China is still under way, so the situation is explained and there is much room left for the guests to make the choice. However, with Australia as one of the countries where very much importance is attached to environmental protection, the sense in this respect is felt in the minds of the Australian people, so the instruction is given more directly without much explanation.

Therefore, as a dynamic process of cognition, coherence in the context of culture conveys the accurate

description of the physical and mental world in the form of cultural schema. In terms of functional grammar, it complies with language's ideational metafunction (Thompson, 2000, p.36). Metafunctions refer to the "broad functions" to any of which all the more specific functions can be assigned. The ideational metafunction refers mainly to the people's experiences in this world, including their mental world (Ibid.).

### 3. TRANSLATION IN TERMS OF CULTURAL COHERENCE

In light of the understanding of coherence, translation in the context of culture is that the translator, based on his analysis and understanding of the coherence in the source language, reproduces in the target language the information of the physical and mental concepts expressed in the source language by following the new text genre to realize the ideational metafunction of the target language.

Firstly, the concepts that the source language stands for must be accurately rendered to realize the coherence between language and its referent, or in other words, to accurately convey the information in terms of "field".

For example, the words "the first floor" in the sentence "Shall we meet on the first floor?" expresses different concepts for the American and the British. The translator has to retrace the coherence on the part of the addresser and reproduce it on the part of the addressee. For another example, it is very important to recognize the real concept of "农业大国" in the Chinese sentence "中国是一个农业大国, 农业是国民经济的基础" (Feng 2008, p.43). The following translation fails to recognize its real meaning. As a result, the effect of coherence is not reached and the error in terms of the ideational metafunction is caused. "An agricultural superpower, China's agriculture is the foundation of its national economy" (ibid). The real meaning is actually reflected in the following two versions: (a) As a large country dominating in agriculture, China takes the agricultural industry as the foundation of its economy. (b) China is a country with a large sector of agriculture that is taken as the cornerstone of its economy (Ibid.).

Therefore, the most important part in this sense is how to realize coherence in the new context of culture while the meaning remains unchanged. Thus, the debate about the literal and liberal translation, or the argument of foreignization and domestication has got a standard for choice: coherence. If coherence can be satisfied in the context of culture, literal translation or the method of foreignization should be employed because it is advantageous to introduce the alien culture while the information is rendered. However, if foreignization results in the loss of coherence in the target context of culture, compromise must be made, or even domestication has to be adopted.

For instance, *John can be relied on. He eats no fish and plays the game* (Bao, 2001, p.18). If it is translated as "约翰为人可靠. 他不吃鱼, 还玩游戏", it is not coherent in Chinese. It violates coherence because what is expressed, the real idea, is not rendered. In other words, it fails in the aspect of the ideational metafunction of language. In fact, there is a cultural background for *eats no fish and plays the game*. In British history, in order to show their faithfulness to the government, Christians struggled against the Roman Catholicism by refusing to eat any fish on Friday, while eating fish on Friday was the rule set by the latter. So "to eat no fish" means "to be faithful". "Play the game" is originally a term in games and matches, meaning to comply with the rules of the competition. Metaphorically, it means to be just and honest. Therefore, the sentence can be translated as 约翰为人可靠. 他既忠诚又正直 (Ibid.).

Secondly, translation in terms of cultural coherence concerns genre with which concepts are expressed. A common genre in one culture may not exist in another, which is clearly reflected in some culture-specific texts, especially in terms of rhetoric with the unique characteristics of the language.

For example, there were three poems composed at a party in the Qing Dynasty in China.

三字同头左右友, 三字同头官宦家, 三字同头哭骂咒,  
三字同旁沽清酒. 三字同旁绸缎纱. 三字同旁狼狐狗.  
今日幸会左右友, 若非当朝官宦家, 山野声声哭骂咒,  
聊表寸心沽清酒. 谁人配穿绸缎纱. 只道多多狼狐狗.

(Feng, 2002, p.180)

This kind of text is sometimes untranslatable, but the effort of compensation should be made as much as possible. For example, "祸福" can be translated as "weal and woe". For another example,

— Why do we say the river is rich?

— Because it has two banks. (Zhang, 2005, p.160)

The dialogue with "pun" can be rendered as:

— 为什么说河水富有?

— 因为它年年有鱼 (余) 呀. (Ibid., p.161)

For the same genre, the schematic structure and its correspondent realizational patterns may be different in different contexts of culture. In order to reach the effect of coherence, some adjustments are necessary.

For example, 八月一日第AG-3号合同项下的10万吨小麦, 原定于十月底以前交货, 你方在合同中保证提前交货, 并且以此作为签订合同的条件. 但是, 这批小麦迄今尚未装运. 对此, 我们深表遗憾 (Si, 2008, p.59). This is the beginning of a complaint letter. The background is stated first, then the narration of facts, and finally the opinion, which complies with the schematic structure of such a text type in the Chinese language. Therefore, it is coherent. In translation, different characteristics of the

schematic structure must be taken into consideration so that the target text can be coherent. As for this example, the sequence should be adjusted so that it conforms to the schematic structure in English that the result is followed by reasons or background. It can be rendered as:

We very much regret that the 100 000 tons of wheat under Contract No. AG-3 of August 1, scheduled to be delivered by the end of October, is up to this moment not dispatched, in spite of the fact that you have guaranteed an early delivery in the contract, which was actually signed on this understanding (Ibid., p.59).

For another example, 一见面是寒暄, 寒暄之后说我“胖了”, 说我胖了之后即大骂其新党 (Lu, 1990, p.143).

*When we met, after exchanging a few polite remarks, he said I was fatter, and after saying that immediately started a violent attack on the revolutionaries* (Bao, 2001, p.21).

“说我‘胖了’” in the source text is coherent because Chinese people have the habit of complimenting each other when they meet, and it is a usual form of compliment, especially in the past, to compliment someone as “getting fatter”. It follows the schematic structure in terms of genre, and hence it is coherent in the respect. However, people in the English-speaking culture do not have this kind of habit, and in particular, the foregoing form of address is usually avoided. The literal translation of “I was fatter” fails to achieve coherence because it does not comply with the schematic structure and the realizational patterns in the new context of culture. The translation can be revised as: *After exchanging a few polite remarks when we met, he observed that I looked “fat”, and having made that complimentary remark he started a violent attack on the revolutionaries* (Ibid.).

Of course, the concept of coherence in the context of culture is not static, but changes with the development of the society. It is well known that with the development of

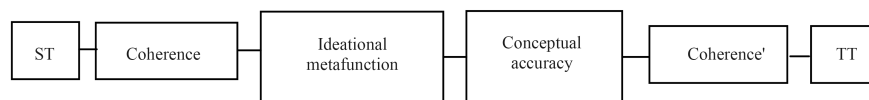
globalization, different cultures influence each other more than ever. Some concepts in one context of culture, though not coherent in another in the past, may become acceptable with time going on. Accordingly, different strategies may be adopted in translation. There are many examples of this kind. In the past, “crocodile tears” could only be translated domestically as “假慈悲”, because it does not fit into the Chinese culture if translated literally as “鳄鱼的眼泪”. With the cultural blending, it is now appropriately rendered as the latter. The precondition for the change is exactly the effect of coherence. The translation of the word “vitamin” is another example. In the past it was translated as “维生素”, but now is transliterated directly into “维他命”. Many Chinese words become parts of English by experiencing the same procedures, such as kongfu (功夫), yin (阴), yang (阳), and so on.

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that translation in terms of coherence in the context of culture lies in the accurate expression of the concepts of the source language word by following the genre of the target language, reflecting the ideational metafunction of language.

## CONCLUSION

In light of this understanding of coherence in the context of culture, translation is that the translator, based on his or her analysis of the coherence of the source text in the context, reproduces the coherence in the target text in the same dimension. The key is to have an accurate understanding and expression of the source text meaning. The concept of equivalence is thus substantiated, being retrievable from the ideational meaning.

A model is established to show the finding, which sheds light on the quality evaluation, teaching and practice of translation.



**Figure 1**  
**A Model of Coherence as a Parameter for Translation in the Context of Culture**

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