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RESEARCHING CORPUS- BASED TRANSLATION STUDIES: Implications and Applications

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Abstract. Until very recently, two assumptions dominated all discussions of translation and were never questioned in the literature. The first is that of the primacy of the source text, entailing a requirement for accuracy and faithfulness on the part of the translator. The second is a consequence of the first and is embodied in the notion of equivalence which has been the central concern of all discourse on translation since time immemorial. Translations should strive to be as equivalent to their originals as possible, with equivalence being understood mainly as a semantic or formal category. The implied aim of all studies on translation was never to establish what translation itself is, as a phenomenon, but rather to determine what an ideal translation, as an instance, should strive to be in order to minimize its inevitable distortion of the message, the spirit, and the elegance of the original.

Key words: translation, corpus-based translation studies, cognition processes, translation cognition, the semantic view of translation.

Introduction. The essentialist question of how equivalence per se might be established in the course of translation has gradually been tempered by experience and by an explosion in the amount and range of texts which have come to be translated in a variety of ways on a regular basis. Hence, we now have a massive amount of literature which attempts to classify the notion of equivalence in a multitude of ways, and the question is no longer how equivalence might be achieved but, increasingly, what kind of equivalence can be achieved and in what contexts. The attempt to extend and classify the notion of equivalence has brought with it a need to explore not only the source text as the model to be adhered to but also the target language, and the specific target language text type, in order to give meaning to such categories as stylistic equivalence and functional equivalence. If the idea is not simply to reproduce the formal structures of the source text but also to give some thought, and sometimes priority, to how similar meanings and functions are typically expressed in the target language, then the need to study authentic instances of similar discourse in the two languages becomes obvious. There have been other developments which have played a more direct role in preparing the ground for corpus work. One such development is the decline of what we might call the semantic view of the relationship between source and target texts. For a long time, discourse on translation was dominated by the idea that meaning, or messages, exist as such and can, indeed should, be transferred from source to target texts in much the same way as one might transfer wine from one glass to another. The traditional dichotomy of translating word-for-word or sense-for-sense is a product of this view of meaning. At about the same time that the notion of equivalence began to be reassessed, or perhaps a little earlier, new ideas began to develop about the nature of meaning in translation. The importance of this change in orientation, from a conceptual to a situational perspective and from meaning to usage, is that it supports the push towards descriptive studies in general and corpus-based studies in particular. Conceptual and semantic studies (in the traditional sense) can be based on introspection. Studies which take the context into consideration, and even more so, studies which attempt to investigate usage, are, by definition, only feasible if access is available to real data, and, in the case of usage. Apart from the decline of the semantic view of translation, another, and very exciting, development has been the emergence of approaches which undermine both the status of the source text vis-à-vis the translated text and the value of the very notion of equivalence, particularly if seen as a static relationship between the source and target texts. The move away from source texts and equivalence is instrumental in preparing the ground for corpus work because it enables the discipline to shed its longstanding obsession with the idea of

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studying individual instances in isolation (one translation compared to one source text at a time) and creates a requirement which can find fulfilment in corpus work, namely the study of large numbers of texts of the same type. This constant state of flux suggests that no literary system or sub-system is restricted to the periphery by virtue of any inherent limitations on its value. Thus, the approach stresses that translated literature may, and sometimes does, occupy a central position in the polysystem and is therefore capable of providing canonised models for the whole polysystem. Moreover, given that polysystem theory recognises that intra- and inter-relations exist within both systems and polysystems, leading to various types of interference and transfer of elements, models, canons, and so on, it becomes obvious that "semiliterary texts, translated literature, children's literature - all those strata neglected in current literary studies - are indispensable objects of study for an adequate understanding of how and why transfers occur within systems as well as among them. In the above statement, which is one of the very few Sinclair has made on translation, the concern is merely with improving the performance of translators and of machine translation systems in terms of approximating to the structures and natural patterns of a given language or languages. This same concern underlies most of the expressions of interest in corpus studies which are beginning to take shape in the literature.3 It is of course a legitimate concern and one which will be shared widely by scholars within and outside translation studies, theorists and practitioners alike. I would, however, like to think that the 'profound effect' which Sinclair refers to will not be understood merely in terms of knowing enough about the languages concerned to approximate to their patterns.

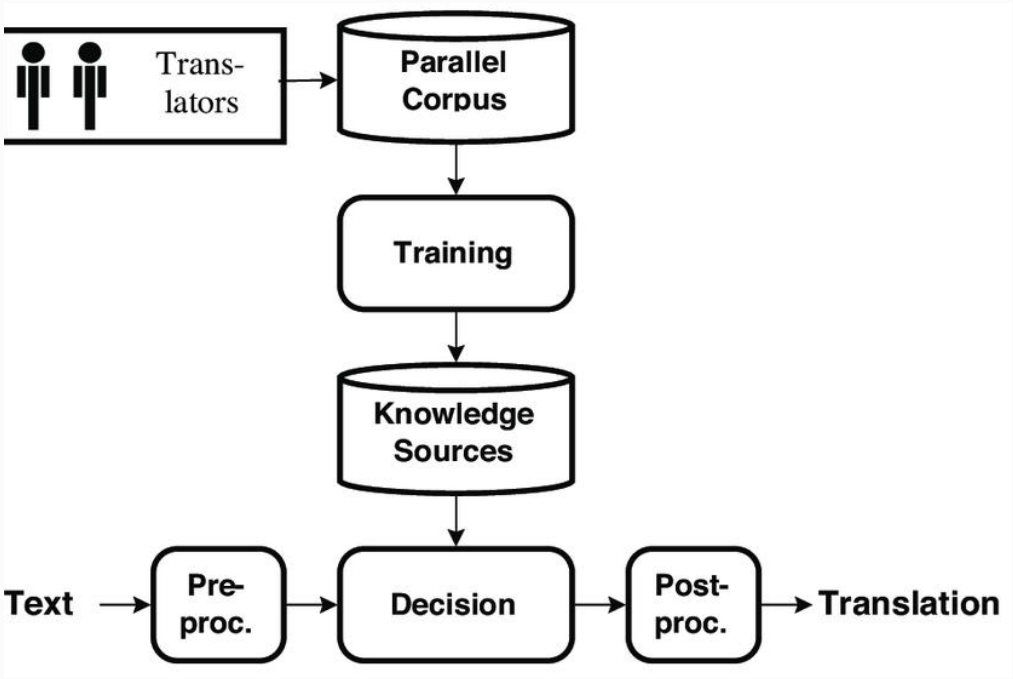


Figure 1. Corpus-based machine translation

After all, once we are in a position to describe and account for our object of study, namely translation, we might find that approximating to the patterns of the target language, or any language for that matter, is not necessarily as feasible as we seem to assume, and that it is not the only factor at play in shaping translational behavior. A great deal of our experience of and knowledge about other cultures is mediated through various forms of translation, including written translations, sub-titling, dubbing, and various types of interpreting activities. The most obvious case in point is perhaps literature. Most of us know writers such as Ibsen, Dostoyevsky and Borges only through translated versions of their works. But our reliance on translation does

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not stop here. Our understanding of political issues, of art, and of various other areas which are central to our lives is no less dependent on translation than our understanding of world literature. The starting point of this paper is that translated texts record genuine communicative events and as such are neither inferior nor superior to other communicative events in any language. They are however different, and the nature of this difference needs to be explored and recorded.

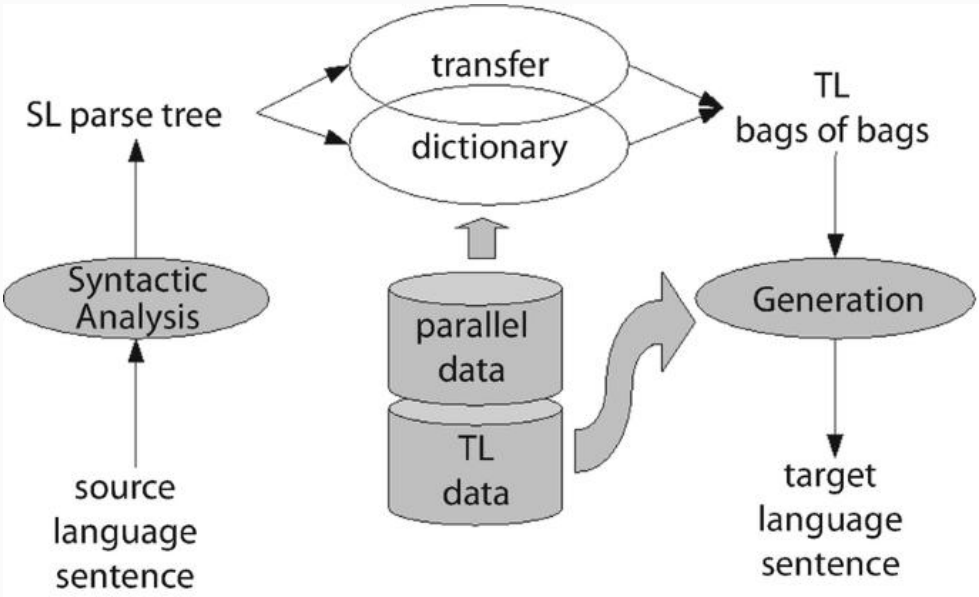


Figure 2. Parse and corpus-based machine translation

The most important task that awaits the application of corpus techniques in translation studies, it seems to me, is the elucidation of the nature of translated text as a mediated communicative event. In order to do this, it will be necessary to develop tools that will enable us to identify universal features of translation, that is features which typically occur in translated text rather than original utterances and which are not the result of interference from specific linguistic systems. It might be useful at this point to give a few examples of the type of translation universals I have in mind. Based on small-scale studies and casual observation, a number of scholars have noted features which seem, intuitively, to be linked to the nature of the translation process itself rather than to the confrontation of specific linguistic systems. At the same time, as a phenomenon which pervades almost every aspect of our lives and shapes our understanding of the world, the study of translation can hardly be relegated to the periphery of other disciplines and sub-disciplines, those listed above being no exception. What is needed is an academic discipline which takes the phenomenon of translation as its main object of study. For many scholars, this discipline now exists. Some refer to it as the 'science of translation', others as 'thanatology', but the most common term used today is 'translation studies'. It is my belief that the time is now ripe for a major redefinition of the scope and aims of translation studies, and that we are about to witness a turning point in the history of the discipline.

Conclusion. There is now an urgent need to explore the potential for using large computerized corpora in translation studies. It seems to me that most of the components for realizing this potential are in place. The emphasis has shifted from meaning to usage, and the notion of equivalence is gradually giving way to that of norms. The status of the source text has been undermined and we have managed to make the leap from source-text-bound rules and imperatives to descriptive categories. There is increasing interest in features of translated texts per se and we are beginning to develop a descriptive branch of the discipline with well-defined objectives and an explicit program.

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