Towards a Sense-Making Approach to Translation: A Case Study

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Abstract. Yuyan Zhuanhuan (literally 'language conversion'), a preliminary instinct of a translation learner and beginner translator in face of an assignment, and an intuitively empirical approach to translation upheld by some Chinese scholars, should be dismissed, as the so-called 'equivalence' has been disregarded in the West. Sense making could be taken as an indispensable principle/requirement instead, for successful translation as smooth interlingual/intralingual communication facilitation is simply meant to "make sense" purposefully. Based on the six factors and six functions of human language proposed by Jacobson, and a starter case, this paper put forward a contrastive sense-making approach to translation: a comprehensive framework as well as a hypothesis. We analyzed one more cases and surveyed the popularity of different translated versions. The case basically verified our hypothesis. Thus, our contrastive sense-making approach to translation might be theoretically viable and practically workable.

Keywords: Yuyan Zhuanhuan (language conversion), Sense-making, Translation units, Functional senses, Aesthetic senses

1 Introduction

1.1 Sense-making in Communication

When it comes what a speaker says or what a writer writes, we Chinese people always have some slightly thoughtful remarks like "Yan Zhi Youli (That makes sense!)" or "Hushuo Ba Dao! (That's nonsense!)". Apparently, "Yan Zhi Youli (sense-making)" could be regarded as the essential principle or requirement for language expression, for we speak and write to communicate with others based on the Cooperative Principle[1], except for some rare cases where our expression is meant to convey special subtle implicature between or beyond the words or the lines.

In other words, we should make sense of what we say or write so as to help our audience to make sense (get the point). Sense making could also be taken as one indispensable principle/requirement, if any from the monistic perspective for effective and efficient translation, for translation is also a language activity. Therefore, as translators we should make some effort to ensure that we can make sense of what and how the

speaker has said, what and how we translators should convey in our translation and whether our audience can make good sense of the points.

1.2   Yuyan Zhuanhuan and Translation Equivalence

Language has been formed by the demand for and during the process of human interaction and communication. Like language, translation is also a means, process, and product of human communication. Yuyan Zhuanhuan (literally "language conversion", similar to "word for word translation" or "segment to segment conversion", upheld by some scholars[2][3][4] seems to involve only one step: conversion/transformation. Based on this intuitive and empirical sense and some linguistic knowledge, many scholars tend to probe into equivalence or correspondence or translation conversion between source language and target language segments[5].

Seeking for equivalents in the target language is actually a preliminary instinct of a beginner translator in face of an assignment. They take "word for word translation" based on the so-called 'equivalence' for granted before thinking twice. Equivalence, which is some linguists' intuitive coinage for the nature of or the principle for translation probably based on 'word for word translation', has been a central concept for our intuitively empirical approach, or presumably, the linguistic approach to translation, but it has also been quite controversial, and numerous cases have proven otherwise. Just as the concept 'word for word translation' was warned by Cicero, Horace and St. Jerome[6] , the term 'equivalence' in the narrow sense of the word[7], together with the "science of translating"[5], was even denied by Nida himself, and is now disregarded by scholars in translation studies in the West, as shown in the latest 3rd edition of *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*[8]. Apparently, promoting Yuyan Zhuanhuan does more harm than good, and we have to go far beyond this detrimental concept, so we need scientific claims that are unfalsifiable, and invulnerable to evidence. It is still necessary for us to address the nature and process of translation. In addition to processing linguistic segments for communicative purposes as bases, translation could be taken as a process to hold onto cultural and aesthetic senses of the source language text in context, and convey them in the target language to our audience in a faithful, grammatical, idiomatic and even poetic manner, so as to purposefully help others to communicate better.

2   Theoretical Bases

2.1   Sense Making

Our sensuality, cognition and recognition could be coordinated and associated between different senses when synesthesia takes places, between partners when the so-called chemistry occurs and we find our soulmate or mate, between other different people from different backgrounds when common senses are shared, between language users when language communication arises, and between different codes and languages when translation works. When it comes to language communication and translation, mainly audio and visual senses of sound waves or mechanical vibrations in the air and light

images, and awareness which is associated with and reflects all various senses including awareness itself, are involved. Human language is such a powerful tool of communication and thinking (i.e. the process of sense making) that we would like to use the term "sense" to cover all sensory information and awareness involved in language communication and beyond including translation. Accordingly, successful communication and translation are simply meant to "make sense" purposefully.

2.2   Factors and Functions of Human Language

Roman Jacobson has probed into various linguistic segments and distinguished six factors involved in language communication: (1) context, (2) addresser (sender), (3) addressee (receiver), (4) contact, (5) common code, and (6) message[9]. Each factor reflects the focal point of a relation, or function that operates between the message and the factor. Thus, we can see the six functions of a given unit such as linguistically a word, a text, or intersemiotically an image, as is illustrated in the following figure:

CONTEXT
(Referential)

MESSAGE
(Poetic)

ADDRESSER   **ADDRESSEE**
(Emotive)   (Conative)

CONTACT
(Phatic)

CODE
Metalingual

Fig. 1. Six factors & six functions of language by Roman Jacobson (Source: www.el-comblus.com, 2022).

As we can see from Fig. 1, based on the six factors, we have referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual and poetic functions. Some examples could be listed below to understand the factors and functions more clearly: referential ("The Earth is round"), (2) emotive ("Yuck!"), (3) conative ("Come here"), (4) phatic ("Hello?"), (5) metalingual ("What do you mean by 'krill'?"), and (6) poetic ("Smurf")[10]. These examples show that if a linguistic segment bear a strong functional sense, its understanding and translation should highlight this sense.

3   A starter Case, Theoretical Proposal and Hypotheses

3.1   A Starter Case

In 2013, a witty episode was spreading on weibo.com, telling a girl on the metro calling her boyfriend, and asking him to come and get her at the metro station of Tianfu Square (in Chengdu, Sichuan, China) she is arriving at. She says: Ruoguo Ni Daole, Wo Hai Meidao, Ni Jiu Dengzhuo Ba! Ruoguo Wo Daole, Ni Hai Meidao, Ni Jiu Dengzhuo Ba!

A lot of people were amazed and amused by this couplet and their wittiness, beauty and subtlety. A quite influential blogger @Jiang Lienong helped by translating the couplet into: If you get there before I do, just wait. If I get there before you do, just wait.His followers just loved this translation. Nevertheless, if we take a closer look, and we will find that the subtle difference between the two Chinese sentences have not been clearly conveyed yet. The two English sentences together make no difference in tone, and thus do not make much sense. A new blogger on weibo.com, @Translatorrobinjobs, analyzed the couplet and tried to adjust a little bit and rendered a translation as follows (Source: https://weibo.com/leadtotheworld. 2014-7-13):

If you get there before I do, YOU JUST wait.

If I get there before you do, JUST YOU wait.

Instead of repeating "just wait", this version has "YOU JUST wait" in the first sentence, and "JUST YOU wait" in the second sentence. The two sentences of course also make a quite neat couplet, and more importantly the subtle difference between the two Chinese sentences is clearly presented. "YOU JUST wait" expresses a common request, which alone would not have rich implications unless it is followed by "and see". This expresses the girl's requesting her boyfriend to wait for her there in case he arrives at the place earlier. "JUST YOU wait", however, is an idiom used as a way of threatening someone according Cambridge Dictionary[11]. This clearly shows the unreasonable attitude of a sassy girl.

To translate, the translator actually tried to analyze the six factors involved the girl's speaking. First, the social, cultural and situational context, and her words preceding the couplet; second, the addresser: a sassy girl; third, the addressee: her boyfriend; fourth, the contact: calling over the phone; fifth, the common code: Sichuan dialect; and sixth, the message: She is arriving at the metro station and expecting that she can see her boyfriend soon. On this basis, he found that out of the six functions proposed by Jacobson, the emotive, conative, and poetic functions are quite strong. Bearing this in mind, the translator managed to render this version that conveys these emotive, conative, and poetic senses. As a result, readers easily got these senses and their subtlety, and immediately accepted this translation.

3.2   Theoretical Proposal

This translation represents a product of the translator's professionalism, which has helped him to come up with a contrastive sense-making approach to translation. To translate is to work between two languages. How? Except for some rare cases where bilingual scholars study between two languages, sense for sense translation has been hailed all the time. To do so, what linguistic segments should we work on?

Based on the above starter case, Chen and Feng have differentiated the units for actual translation operation, and the units that convey essential senses. The former ones are various, and the most frequently-operated should be sense groups and sentences[12]. The latter could be boiled down to sense genes (like DNA gene in genetics) [13]. Translation, conveying and delivering senses in the source language to the target language speakers, is possible in that between different languages there are common grounds—similar, if not the same, underlying logic thanks to the same sense perceiving

and processing human organs and mechanism, as demonstrated by numerous master translators like Kumarajiva, Lin Shu and Xu Yuanchong. Human languages which differ in their surface structure are able to bear sense genes in the same deep structure, or in other words, these senses are shared between languages for they share the same deep structure[14]. Thus, to translate, we should work on the source language first, so as to hold onto the sense-genes; we may then intentionally or unconsciously decide to discard, highlight or add some senses to serve our communicative purposes. After that, we need to translate the senses in a user-friendly way, as is essential for translation.

The 'sense' and 'sense gene' concepts are far better than the so-called 'meme' in memetics[15][16].Upholding and developing our finest tradition like 'sense-for-sense' translation is the least we should do as translation scholars to build up a systematic theoretical framework. To put it simply, our sense- or sense gene-centered methodology could be called a contrastive sense-making approach to translation. This approach features ONE NATURE; TWO KEYS; THREE STEPS; FOUR PRINCIPLES; ALL KINDS OF STRATEGIES, METHODS AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS when we work between two languages in A CONTRASTIVE MANNER; and ZERO-TO-ONE-AND-EVERYTHING LEARNING PROCESS.

ONE NATURE: Translation in nature is a purposeful activity to help others to communicate where a translator works with the author (speaker/sender), the customer (receiver), and most importantly readers (receiver) in a specific context; TWO KEYS: structural and contextual analyses; THREE STEPS: sense-decoding, sense-holding, and sense-encoding. FOUR PRINCIPLES: Translation must be at once faithful (so as to have successful communication and purposeful sense-delivery in the specific context) and grammatical, preferably conventional, and beautiful so as to convey aesthetic senses in form, music and even yijing (ideorealm) in their translated texts.

This approach, however, gives its top priority to ZERO-TO-ONE AND EVERYTHING LEARNING PROCESS, as observed by Confucius in one of his Analects, "If you know something, you acknowledge it; if you do not know it, you admit it readily; this is true wisdom"[17]. The strategic tools include a contrastive perspective, various strategies like foreignization, domestication & globalization; conventionalization, defamiliarization & innovation; simplification, explication & de-manifestation; covert vs. over translation; musical, physical and ideorealm beautification by appealing to our audio and visual senses; abstraction vs. materialization, non-predicate expression vs. verbalization, hypotactic vs paratactic enhancement, adaption, rewriting, and so on.

3.3   Hypothesis

To verify the sense-making approach to translation, we can have a primary hypothesis: Readers tend to prefer translation that delivers functional and aesthetic senses of the source language text adequately.

4   Case 2: Translating"Ren Xing Qi, Tai Shan Yi"

On March 22, 2020, a cargo plane arrived at Ethiopia, loaded with anti-novel corona-virus pandemic goods like test kits, masks and protective garment from China. On the packaging box, we saw Chinese and English texts (Source: Chinadaily.com.cn, 2020-03-22): "Renxin Qi, Taishan Yi". When people are determined, they can overcome anything." The Chinese text, quoted from Gujin Xianwen[18], is a catch phrase slang and slogan. The English sentence is an observation made by Nelson Mandela, a great leader in South Africa. It serves this purpose quite well, but it might not be called translation.

We can take this case as a typical translation activity, and try to verify the proposal of the contrastive sense-making approach to translation. The blogger @Translator-robinjobs managed to render a couplet in English as follows (Source: https://weibo.com/leadtotheworld, 2020-09-07): "Work side by side; Move Mountain Tai!"Apparently, the six factors involved are: First, the situational context of the spreading novel coronavirus outbreak around globe and aids from China to African countries arriving at an airport. And the source language text "Ren Xing Qi, Tai Shan Yi" bears rich cultural implications. Second, the addresser: Ma Yun, a representative of Chinese people. Third, the addressee: African people and other English speakers including Chinese around the world. Fourth, the contact: text on the package box. Fifth, the common code: Chinese and English language. Sixth, the message: calling for solidarity to fight the pandemic outbreak.

Of the six functions, in addition to the referential sense, the source language text has quite strong emotive, conative, and poetic senses. We can find that "Work side by side" appeals to Chinese, African and all peoples around the world to fight together in the pandemic outbreak, demonstrating strong friendship, solidarity and everything. As for the conative function, "Work side by side; Move Mountain Tai." is indeed an imperative slang-like slogan. In terms of poetic (aesthetic) senses, first, the words, letters and even punctuations of the couplet in English are put together neatly just like the source language text, visually beautiful; second, we may find both lines of the couplet have six syllables, and they can be read in the same rhythm and beats: "WORK, SIDE by SIDE; MOVE, MOUNtain TAI". Of course, we can read and feel re-duplication and alliteration "side by side" and "Move Mountain", and end rhyme 'side' and 'Tai', like the source language characters "Qi" and "Yi". Most importantly, we may readily visualize the information and see a vivid scenario: people work hard together to overcome difficulty like 'moving a mountain'.

As for the essential referential senses, "Work side by side" conveys the sense of solidarity 'Ren Xin Qi' very well and the implied imperative sense 'We should make concerted efforts together' adequately by presenting a scene where people are working shoulder to shoulder. "Move Mount Tai" is literally faithful to the source language text. Although the source language text looks like a statement, it is imperative, for it is a slogan calling forth our energy to take action. Of course, "Mountain Tai" bears strong Chinese culture, symbolizing heavy burden or responsibility. It should be noted that even if some foreign friends do not know this Chinese mountain, they would readily guess this is an important mountain in China, for this cultural sense can be easily shared

by English-speaking people around the world. 'Move a mountain' is an idiomatic expression in English and we can search on NOW Corpus and find more than 100 samples from recent news media coverage as below, and they actually bear the same metaphorical sense of 'overcoming a huge challenge'. Nevertheless, we still need to know how our readers respond to this translation. To this end, we listed this translation, together with the original official translation and a free translation to conduct a survey on Weibo.com.

Table 1. English expressions for 'Ren Xing Qi, Tai Shan Yi'

No.	Translation	Approach	309 participants
A	When people are determined, they can overcome anything	Localization	54 Likes
B	Work side by side; move Mountain Tai!	Sense-making	180 Likes
C	Solidarity works a miracle.	Free translation	58 Likes
D	I have a better version; see my comment:		17 new versions

As we can see from Table 1, among 309 participants, 58.3% (180 readers) like Version B, resulting from the sense-making approach (based on sense for sense translation), more than three times higher than the official Version A (localization) and Version C (free translation). We can safely conclude that in this case, this sense-making approach does work a miracle.

To sum up, the sense-making approach has helped the translator to work out a sense-for-sense Version B that delivers the functional senses (emotive, imperative & conative) and some aesthetic senses of the source language text adequately, in addition to its referential senses. Readers do like this approach. This has basically confirmed the hypothesis and verified the proposal.

5   Conclusion

Translation, like any other language-involved communication, could be regarded as a process of sense making: A translator tries to make sense of what he has read, hold onto important senses, and convey all necessary senses to readers. This contrastive sense-making approach to translation, based on Jacobson's language factors and functions and Noam Chomsky's surface structure and deep structure, and referring to some terms in genetics, can be elaborated as: ONE NATURE; TWO KEYS; THREE STEPS; FOUR PRINCIPLES; ALL KINDS OF STRATEGIES, METHODS AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS when translating in A CONTRASTIVE MANNER; and ZERO-TO-ONE-AND-EVERYTHING LEARNING PROCESS.

Based on the first case, we assume that readers tend to prefer translation that delivers functional and aesthetic senses of the source language text adequately. To verify the the hypothesis, we analyzed one more case which demonstrates that our contrastive sense-

making approach has worked much better than other two popular conventional approaches in delivering the functional and aesthetic senses of the SLT and winning popularity among readers.

In short, our explorative proposal and case study have demonstrated that our contrastive sense-making approach to translation is theoretically viable and practically workable. To make it more thorough and common among translation practitioners and learners, there is much to be done, so we expect more findings to come out soon.

Acknowledgments

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