

Translation through Cultural Appreciation

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Abstract

Recognizing the limitation of the linguistic-orientated approach to translation, this study holds that cultural interpretation is among the dominant variables in translation. The study does not simply relate lexical items and syntactic structures of the source language to the equivalents of the target language but ‘translates’ the meaning as linguistically realized in the source language through cultural appreciation. It presents a model of information processing at two interrelated levels. The conceptual level deals with the semantic-pragmatic feature bundles in the source language for comprehending the intended meaning, which sends the successfully processed information to the functional level. It is the functional level which deals with the lexical and syntactic realization in the target language. This model proposes that source language culture must be the center of information processing at the conceptual level, and any translation product at the functional level must reflect source language culture to the extent possible.

Keywords: source, target, culture, original, lexical, language-specific, conceptual, functional.

1. Introduction

Unlike most previous studies of translation skills which remain at surface configurations of the two languages involved, this paper studies cross-linguistic and cross-cultural phenomena as reflected in the translation process from some psycholinguistic perspectives (De Bot, 1992; Grainger & Dijkstra, 1992). It deals with several specific issues in relation to the nature and the mechanisms of translation. One of the most important issues in translation is how the meaning as linguistically expressed in the original language is fully comprehended before the actual translation process comes into play. Another equally important issue is how what is translated from one language into another accurately reflects the intended meaning as expressed in the original language (i.e. the source language (SL)) by means of linguistic realization in the target language (TL) (e.g., from English (SL) into Japanese (TL)). Departed from most previous studies of translation, either in terms of abstract translation theories or specific translation skills, this paper explores such specific issues at a more abstract level of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comprehension and production.

Based on the studies of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences in language comprehension and production, this paper argues that any translation process must involve several interrelated levels of information processing and realization (Bierwisch & Schreuder, 1992; Green, 1986; Levelt, 1989). Language comprehension always plays an initial but determining role before actual translation, and this comprehension must take place at the conceptual level. At the conceptual level, the reader (i.e., the translator) must understand what phenomenon is involved and how it is conceptualized in the SL. The comprehended meaning at the conceptual level then sends information to the functional level for linguistic realization. It is at the functional level that the translator transforms the comprehended meaning into the TL lexical items and the required syntactic structures. These two fundamental levels are interrelated in that the comprehension of the content in the original at the conceptual level sends information to the functional level for linguistic realization in the TL, and the linguistic realization at the functional level in turn must reflect the intended meaning in the SL at the conceptual level (Jake, 1998; Kroll & De Groot, 1997; Roelofs, 1992; Wei, 2002). The translation samples for this study are from a particular translation task (Liu, 2014). The original is written in English by a native speaker of English. The selected original English sentences describe Chinese historical and cultural aspects of Buddhism and are translated into Japanese for those interested in Chinese Buddhism and civilization (Liu, 2014).

Based on the analysis of the translation products, this study explains the translation process and mechanisms in terms of these two levels of information processing and then makes some proposals regarding cross-linguistic and cross-cultural factors involved in translation. It concludes that without certain psycholinguistic explanations, any study of translation would remain at a superficial level.

2. Translation and culture

Most translators or translation theorists in 1960s-1980s took for granted that translation deals only with the cross-linguistic aspects of the two languages involved, and the translator's job is to seek equivalent textual material in the TL which reflects as closely as possible the original meaning in the SL. What is emphasized is the notion of linguistic 'equivalence' between the SL and the TL for the translation product. For example, Catford (1965) defines translation as the replacement of textual material in the SL by equivalent textual material in the TL. Brislin defines translation as

The general term referring to the transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language (source) to another (target), whether the languages are in written or oral form; whether the languages have established orthographies or do not have such standardization or whether one or both languages is based on signs, as with sign languages of the deaf (Brislin, 1976: 1).

Pinhuck offers an explicit definition of translation by saying that "Translation is a process of finding a TL equivalent for an SL utterance" (1977: 38). Such definitions obviously share the assumptions: (1) the translation process mainly involves a change of expression from one language to the other, (2) the meaning realized in the SL must be rendered in the TL, and thus (3) the translator's obligation is to find the closest equivalent in the TL. Such assumptions obviously exclude any cultural aspect in translation.

Later translation theorists tried to define the translation process in more explicit terms but still avoided or did not realize the relevance and importance of cross-cultural matters in translation. For example, McGuire holds that Translation involves the rendering of a source language (SL) text into the target language (TL) so as to ensure that (1) the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar and (2) the structure of the SL will be preserved as closely as possible, but not so closely that the TL structure will be seriously distorted (McGuire, 1980: 2). Similarly, Newmark states that

Translation is a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language (Newmark, 1981: 7).

Departing from such theoretical assumptions or the traditional approach to translation, Halliday and Hasan (1985) and Snell-Hornby (1988), among others, see language as an integral part of culture. According to them, cultural consideration must be taken if the textual material to translation is related to or embedded in a particular culture. Directly relevant to the relationship between translation and culture, Goodenough's broad definition of culture comes into play.

As I see it, a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and do so in any role that they accept or any one of themselves. Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end product of learning: knowledge, in a most general, if relative, sense of the term. By definition, we should note that culture is not material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models of perceiving and dealing with their circumstances. To one who knows their culture, these things and events are also signs signifying the cultural forms or models of which they are material representation (Goodenough, 1964: 36).

According to Goodenough, culture is the totality of knowledge, which refers to all socially conditioned aspects of human life. Snell-Hornby (1988) argues that language is a verbal or written expression of culture and speakers' individual perception of the world through language. Halliday and Hasan (1985) proposes that the first requirement for translating should take the context of situation and culture into consideration because without understanding the context, adequate understanding of the textual material will be insufficient or even impossible. In other words, understanding textual material for translating is necessary but not sufficient enough if its cultural elements are not fully considered or understood. As now commonly realized, in addition to language itself, other structures need to be considered in order to better understand a particular society. One of these structures is regarded as a particular culture. This is because language, to a great extent, is an expression of culture and influences the way its speakers perceive the world (Whorf, 1973; Humboldt, 1977; Sapir, 1994).

Thus, as a matter of fact, good translators must be familiar with the culture, customs, and social norms of the SL and TL speakers. Such a cultural awareness becomes necessary and indispensable for the effective translation of high quality and value. According to Hatim and Mason (1990), the social context in translating a text is an important variable, and any translation product must be judged in a particular social context. As explained by Paluszliwicz-Misiaczek (2005), apart from an excellent linguistic knowledge of both the SL and the TL, a good translator also has to possess sociolinguistic competence or contextual knowledge in order to understand the textual material, without which accurate translation for the target reader is impossible. Like these translation scholars, Venuti (1998) questions the linguistic-oriented approach to translation and so-called scientific models. In dealing with literary translation, he believes that translation studies must take into account cultural issues. He proposes two types of translation strategies: domestication and foreignization. Domestication is the strategy to make the target text read as fluently as possible, and foreignization is the strategy to choose a text that is obviously not of the target culture and render the linguistic and cultural differences in the translation.

Along the lines of the above thinking about the relationship between translation and culture, the study presented in this paper not only relates linguistic features of the SL to those of the TL to the extent possible but, more importantly, also ‘translates’ the meaning as linguistically realized in the SL through cultural appreciation.

3. Theoretical assumptions

Based on the theoretical assumptions underlying this study, two interrelated levels of information processing in translation are proposed (Levelt, 1989; Wei, 2002). The first level is called the conceptual level, and the second level is called the functional level. The conceptual level plays a crucial role in processing and comprehending the meaning as expressed in the SL before the actual translation comes into play. This is because in order to translate the original into another language, the intended meaning must be fully and accurately understood in terms of the semantic-pragmatic feature bundles as conceptualized in the original. However, the conceptual level alone cannot accomplish the translation task. The comprehended meaning at the conceptual level will send the semantic-pragmatic information to the functional level for linguistic realization in the TL. It is at the functional level that language-specific lexical items and syntactic patterns are realized (Talmy, 1985). The relationship between the conceptual level and the functional level is schematized in Figure 1.

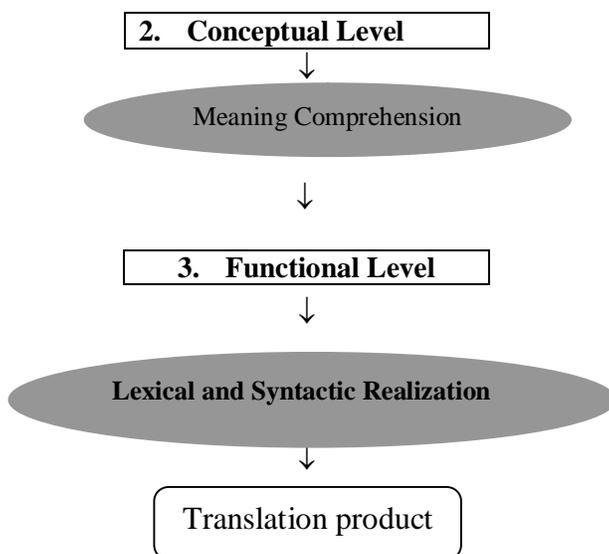


FIG. 1: Two levels in translation

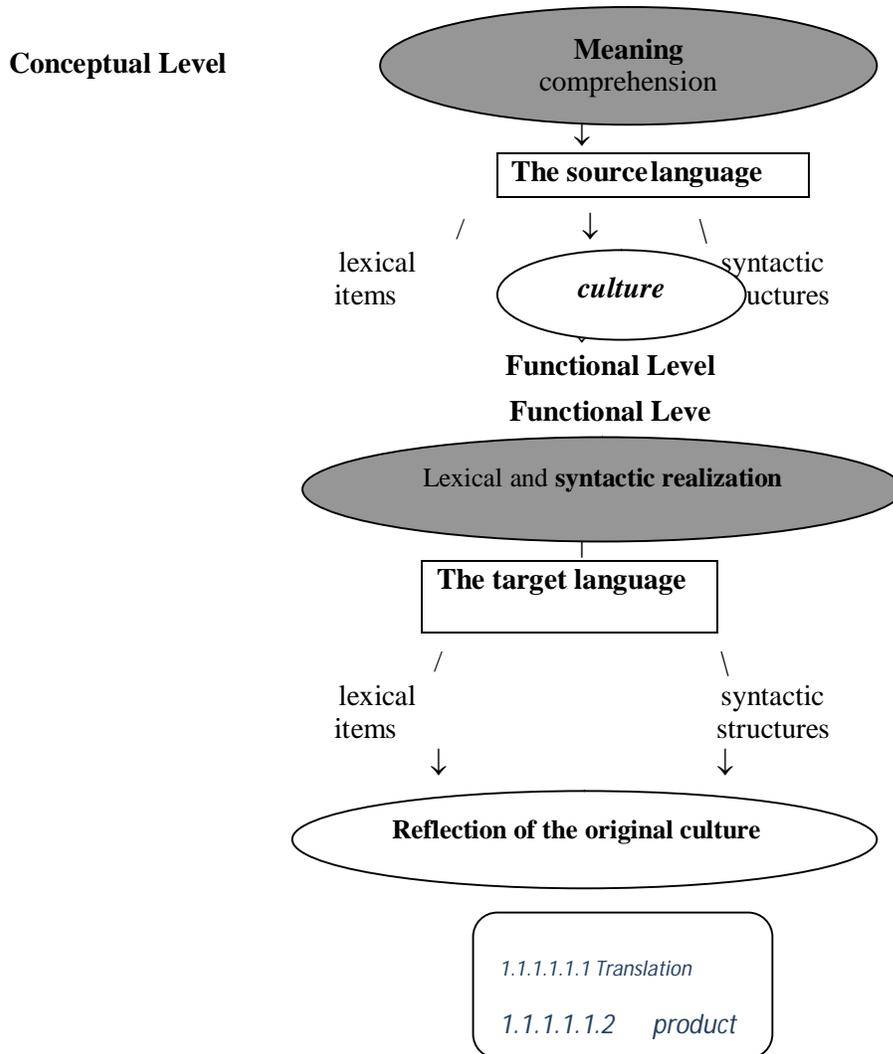


FIG. 2: Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural realization

Figure 1 shows that the translation process starts from the meaning comprehension at the conceptual level, which relates to the lexical and syntactic realization at the functional level. If each of these two levels works out successfully in terms of semantic-pragmatic features and lexical and syntactic realization patterns, the result will be the translation product as desired by the translator. In addition to the two sequential and interrelated levels of information processing and linguistic realization, each level contains its own mechanisms to achieve its designated task. Such mechanisms at each level are illustrated in Figure 2.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the designated task at the conceptual level is meaning comprehension. Figure 2 illustrates the mechanisms required for meaning comprehension, which specify that in order to comprehend meaning as linguistically realized in the SL, because of the existence of cross-cultural differences or variations, the translator must try to understand how a particular culture (i.e., culture-specific meaning) is expressed by means of the SL's specific lexical items and syntactic structures (De Bot, 1992). As commonly recognized, one of the most fundamental skills of any successful translation is the accurate comprehension of the meaning in the SL, without which, the original meaning would be incomplete or even distorted in the translation product. One of the most frequently occurring problems at the conceptual level lies in the fact that cross-cultural differences in conceptual structure may influence or interfere with accurate and full meaning comprehension. This problem can only be resolved by understanding the language-specific lexical items and syntactic structures used for the culture-specific meaning. The general assumption is that the language that the speaker/writer uses reflects his/her way of thinking, and, on the other hand, his/her way of thinking is framed by the language he/she speaks. To overcome this potential problem, the translator must in the first place try to understand the SL in order to understand the intended meaning.

As mentioned earlier, meaning comprehension at the conceptual level determines the degree of success in the subsequent translation stage at the functional level. This is because at the functional level the original meaning will be translated into the TL. Without an accurate and full understanding of the meaning as realized in the SL, successful translation would be difficult or even impossible.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the fully comprehended language-specific meaning sends the relevant and required information to the functional level for the translation task itself. It is at the functional level that the TL-specific lexical items and syntactic structures are employed to reflect the original culture (i.e., the original meaning). At this level, cross-linguistic differences in lexical and syntactic realization patterns may appear. Consequently, another frequently occurring problem lies in the fact that because of cross-linguistic differences or variations may influence or interfere with the choice of the TL-specific lexical items and syntactic structures for accurate or near-accurate realization and reflection of the original meaning.

It is generally assumed that although some concepts are universal, other concepts are language-specific. Relevant to the current study are how to comprehend the original meaning at the conceptual level by understanding language-specific items and how to translate the original meaning into the TL by choosing appropriate language-specific items to fully and accurately reflect the original meaning. In other words, any translation process must go through these two independent but sequentially interrelated levels of information processing and linguistic realization, and the quality of the final translation product depends on the degree of success at each of these two levels. That is, the translator must be in command of both the SL and the TL regarding their respective cultural meanings and corresponding linguistic realization patterns, including both language-specific lexical items and syntactic structures. The following two sections present some empirical evidence that translation is a process which unavoidably involves these two levels of information processing and realization. This study is focused on the relation between these two levels with a special reference to lexical items and expressions.

4. Meaning comprehension at the conceptual level

One very common difficulty in translating meanings expressed in one language into another is caused by certain cross-cultural conceptual differences. As mentioned in the previous section, in order to make the translation faithful to the meaning in the SL, accurate and full comprehension of the intended meaning at the conceptual level becomes not only necessary but also crucial. In order to accomplish a particular translation task, the translator's foremost job is to catch the intended meaning in the SL without any misinterpretation or distortion; otherwise, the functional level will receive inaccurate information for the translation itself. Below are a few examples of cross-cultural differences as observed in a particular translation task? The SL is English (italics and boldface added), and the Japanese version is the translation product.

Nothing was said by any of us at the general's table for the first half hour. But our glasses of warm *sherry-like wine* were filled and refilled rapidly. Each time that Wu *drank bottoms-up he showed his empty glass around the circle* and we had to do the same. *Then at his signal we began to wipe our chopsticks on our sleeves and our breeches* and to reach over to the center of the table for the six or seven different dishes, little lumps of mutton, bean curds, omelet, and dumplings, and so forth.

Below are the three translated paragraphs from the SL 'English' into the TL 'Japanese' (Liu, 2014). The directly translated items or expressions are indicated by the < >, and the indirectly translated the items or expressions are indicated by the 「 」.

最初の三十分ほど、將軍のテーブルを囲む私たちは無言だった。しかし、グラスには温かい「シェリー一酒のようなワイン」が注がれ、「空になる」とすぐにまた溢れるほど注がれた。<呉將軍はグラスをあげるたびに、空のグラスをくるりと廻してみせる>。それで私たちもやむをえず彼の真似をした。<それから彼の合図によって私たちは箸を自分の服の袖やズボンで拭いたのち>、テーブルの真ん中に六つか七つ置かれた、羊肉の小さな塊とか豆腐、オムレツ、ギョーザなどの盛られた皿に一斉に箸をつけた。

In paragraph (1), the translator should pay close attention to certain lexical items and expressions (italicized and boldfaced) which reflect some particular aspects of the Chinese culture at the time. For example, *sherry-like wine* is a very typical Chinese amber-colored wine made from rice rather than from grapes. ... *Drank bottoms-up* in Chinese basically means the same as in English, but ... *he showed his empty glass around the circle* is a very old and traditional table manner.

It not only means that the person ‘drowned a drink’ but after he did so, *he showed his empty glass around the circle* to let the others know that he truly finished the drink. Such a table manner is a culturally bounded one which is usually, if not always, initiated by the person of a higher social status. It is this person who always takes the lead in drinking and eating. That is why only *at his signal that we began to wipe our chopsticks on our sleeves and our breeches*. The reader of the English original may ask why they wipe their chopsticks on their sleeves and their breeches. Such a table manner is even strange or abnormal in today’s China but it was a very common practice in that particular region and in that particular period of the old China. In order to reflect this particular scene of drinking and eating, the translator must understand such aspects of the old Chinese culture. What is important here is not the drinking and eating manners themselves but the importance of the general’s particular social status and power. Thus, the question is how the translation reflects such a cultural meaning.

The inn compound was hedged about with sheds which were the guest rooms. In each *clay chamber* a full half of the floor space was taken up with the *kang - a clay platform* built two feet high against the wall with *an oven below* to warm the bed in winter. On this *platform* Jayne and I set our folding army cots in the vain hope that their crisscross legs might puzzle the hopping and crawling legions that sought to climb from the *kang* below.

宿の敷地はぐるりと客室で取り囲まれていた。土で出来た客室はいずれも床の半分ほどが炕（カン）、すなわち壁に沿って造られた高さ二フィートほどの土壇で、冬にはその下に火気を通してベッドを暖めるための装置で占められていた。ジェイニと私はその土壇の上に折り畳み式の軍用簡易ベッドを据え、その脚がベッドに這いあがる蚤の軍団を防いでくれるのではないか、とはかない望みを抱いていた。

In paragraph (2), some lexical items and expressions attract the translator’s attention before he/she puts them into Japanese. A *clay chamber* in Chinese is a private room made of special mud in that particular region. *kang* is a traditional type of bed typical in the north and west of China, so-called *a clay platform* on which all kinds of daily activities are performed. Thus, a *kang* itself functions like a living room, a guest room, a dining room, a bed, and so on. In addition, every *kang* has *an oven below* to warm the bed in winter. If the translator catches the cultural meaning of those lexical items and expressions, the relevant and appropriate words will be selected from the TL to convey the original meaning.

It did not need ten minutes in the streets to tell the reason, for everywhere *the little clay opium pipes* were for sale and in the shade of the temple enclosures lay *bundles of rags which were men with their heads on bricks*, forgetting in merciful sleep that they were doomed to be Chinese and in misery. *One big tumbledown temple compound* must have had twenty such forms, *each one with a tattered quilt of patches over its bones and a brick on edge beneath its head. Beside everyone was the telltale lamp and pin and pipe*, with a smear of dried poppy juice on a chip or a piece of paper nearby.

町を十分ほど歩くとその訳が分かった。町のあちこちで＜阿片用の小さな土製の煙管＞を売っている。そして寺の中の塀の陰には＜煉瓦を枕にした＞男たちが、中国人であることの運命や貧困であることも忘れて、＜襤褸切れのように＞心地よい眠りをむさぼっていた。崩れ落ちそうなひとつの大きな寺の庭だけでも、そんなようすの者が二十人あまりもあり、＜どの男も痩せこけた身体をぼろぼろの布団にくるみ、煉瓦の角に頭を乗せている。いずれの傍にも蠟燭とピンと煙管＞、そして木片や紙の上に塗られて乾いたアヘンが置かれていた。

In order to understand the intended meaning of the highlighted words and expressions in paragraph (3), the translator must have some cultural background knowledge of this particular scene. *The little clay opium pipes* made from special clay represent a particular Chinese regional tradition and cultural phenomenon; *bundles of rags which were men with their heads on bricks* vividly describe those homeless people or drifters who were opium (drug) addicts. The translator must understand that *bundles of rags* are symbolic representation of those poor and dirty people and *with their heads on bricks* indicates that such people have nothing more than *bricks* as their personal property. ... *each one with a tattered quilt of patches over its bones and a brick on edge beneath its head* further tells that such individuals are truly those living at the bottom of the society. *Beside everyone was the telltale lamp and pin and pipe* further reveals that it is such people who became drug addicts. The whole paragraph is a description and revelation of a discarded population located in *one big tumbledown temple compound*.

The scene effectively creates a sense of a breakdown of not only those people but also the Chinese traditional culture and religion. Without fully and accurately comprehending the author's intended meaning, the translation would fail to reflect the real message. The above examples clearly show that in order to comprehend the meaning at the conceptual level as expressed in the SL, the translator must in the first place catch the hidden cultural message intended by the author. If the meaning comprehension at the conceptual level is successful, the right message or information will then be sent to the functional level for linguistic processing and realization.

5. Lexical realization at the functional level

As discussed in the above section, the meaning as expressed in the SL must be comprehended at the conceptual level before it can be translated successfully at the functional level. As claimed by many translation scholars, cultural elements need to be fully considered before accurate translation becomes possible. It is also clear that language-specific culture manifests in two ways: the concept or reference of the lexical items is specific for the given culture, and the concept or reference may be general across cultures but expressed in a way specific to the SL culture. As demonstrated in the translation examples in the above section, the purpose of translating the culturally-bound lexical items is to reflect the cultural meanings as intended.

As commonly observed, culture and translation are among the most determining variables in human communication and culture influences the translational discourse or cross-cultural communication. The relationship between culture and translation is essential for successful translation because culture operates largely through translational activity. Thus, the role of culture in translation needs to be fully considered because of the cultural gap between SL and TL communities. Cultural asymmetry between two linguistic communities is necessarily reflected in culturally-bound lexical items. Though, as commonly recognized, perfect translation of culturally-bound lexical items may be impossible, the cross-cultural gap can be narrowed if TL lexical realization at the functional level becomes successful to the extent possible.

As discussed earlier, it is at the functional level that the translator linguistically puts what is comprehended at the conceptual level into the TL. One of the major difficulties in translation is the accurate and appropriate choice of lexical items from the TL to convey the original meaning without any distortion (De Bot & Schreuder, 1993). In other words, the translator may find more than one or several so-called equivalent lexical items in the TL. If this happens, the translator must decide which one will truly or most closely reflect the original meaning. The translated version of the above selected paragraphs is presented illustrate two of the most fundamental translation strategies or techniques: One is commonly called 'direct translation', and the other is commonly called 'indirect translation'. The advantage of direct translation is that it may help the translator make the original conceptually vivid by keeping its original cultural taste. The advantage of indirect translation is that in many cases translation for meaning may become necessary and effective in order to make certain culturally peculiar concepts or meanings more accessible to the reader. This means that indirect translation can help the reader understand what is really expressed in the original. This study argues that both translation strategies may become necessary and effective depending on either cross-cultural or/and cross-linguistic factors.

6. Conclusion

This paper proposes a model of two levels of translation from some psycholinguistic perspectives. At the conceptual level, the translator must comprehend the meaning as expressed in the SL by overcoming cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences. The fully comprehended meaning then sends conceptual information to the functional level for linguistic processing and realization in the TL, including both lexical items and syntactic structures appropriate for translation. In order to be faithful to the original, two translation strategies can be adopted, either 'direct translation' or 'indirect translation'. At a certain point of translation, the direct translation strategy may become necessary and effective since the directly translated item can make the original conceptually vivid by keeping its original cultural taste visual in the mind. However, the direct translation strategy alone cannot accomplish the translation task. The indirect translation strategy is also very often adopted in order to fully and accurately reflects the original meaning and makes it easily accessible to the target reader from a different linguistic and cultural background. This study proposes that both translation strategies should be adopted as the need arises. The model proposed in this paper opens a new window through which the translation process can be described and explained in terms of two sequentially interrelated levels of information processing and linguistic realization. More studies of translation process and mechanisms are needed in order to understand the bilingual's mind and linguistic capability and strategies.

4. References

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