

Cultural Presupposition and Decision-Making in the Functional Approach to Translation

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ABSTRACT

Baker (1992, p. 259) defined the term “presupposition” as a pragmatic inference relating to the linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge that a sender assumes the receivers to have or which is necessary to retrieve the sender’s message. For example, the sentence “Bill’s wife is beautiful” presupposes the fact that he is married, and the sentence “Helen regrets being angry with her boyfriend” presupposes that she was angry with him in the past. Regarding the concept of presupposition in translation, what matters is the concept of cultural presupposition because culture- or socio-culture-specific information may exist anywhere in source texts (ST), a detail that a responsible translator should not ignore when translating STs.

By following Holz-Mänttari’s (1984) translation action theory, translation is viewed as a human activity having purposes and involving intercultural transfer. When a professional translator, being an intercultural mediator, translates the Chinese word 豆腐 into English as “tofu” instead of “bean curd,” it may be supposed that the target readers have seen the word “tofu” and know that it is a kind of Chinese food made from soybeans; alternatively, it may be assumed that the target readers are vegetarians or persons who like oriental meals. However, a problem may occur when a translator discovers that the target readers do not possess the aforementioned knowledge about 豆腐. The translator then has to make a decision to choose either “tofu,” “bean curd,” or “bean curd” plus an explanation as the translated version. In Nord’s (1997) model, she asserts that a translator should first compare the ST and TT profiles defined in the commission, such as the intended text function and the addressees, to determine where the two texts may diverge before starting translation; then, the translator analyzes the ST to decide on the functional priorities for the translation strategies. Nord then provides a list of intratextual factors for an ST analysis, a presuppositional analysis being one of them. When analyzing the presupposition, a translator may discover that many difficult problems result from the divergence in cultural backgrounds between the TT and the ST readers.

When examining the study of translation from a prospective angle, cultural presupposition is considered to play a large role in the impression that a translator makes on the TT readers. A translator providing sufficient or poor cultural backgrounds for these readers, whether consciously or unconsciously, will cause a different effect and impact on them. A translator well acquainted with the concept of cultural presupposition has an advantage to apply it freely to successfully achieve goals based on the translation purposes.

Key Words: translator, purposes, cultural presupposition, decision-making

文化預設與譯者之抉擇

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摘要

中文字“豆腐”到底是要譯成英文的 *tofu* 或 *bean curd* 或 *bean curd* 加上註解呢？翻譯者如何從這三種可能的譯法中，選出適合其譯文的譯詞呢？而譯者在做抉擇時，所依據的原則又是什麼呢？本文要探討的就是類似像豆腐這樣的文化詞彙的譯法問題。

以像“豆腐”這樣的文化詞彙做為討論的題材，本文在研究譯者如何在一些似乎都合適的譯法中做取捨，並且找出最符合譯文讀者需求的翻譯。作者採用功能學派（*functional theories to translation*）中諾德（Nord, 1997）的理論，試著要找出譯者在做抉擇時可遵行的法則。諾德的理論中，談論到預設（*presupposition*）這樣的問題，他認為譯者在翻譯前，須預先猜測其讀者背景知識的多寡，尤其是與文化相關的翻譯，更是須要做到這一點。本篇將深入探討文化預設和譯者的抉擇之間的關係。

關鍵詞：翻譯目的，譯者，文化預設，抉擇

I. INTRODUCTION

The term *presupposition* is a pragmatic inference defined by Baker (1992, p. 259), and it relates to the linguistic and extra linguistic knowledge that a sender assumes his receivers to have, or which are necessary in order to retrieve the sender's message. Following Fawcett (1997, p. 124), I distinguish two types of *presupposition*: linguistic and nonlinguistic. The former is related to linguistic *presupposition* whereas the latter consists of contextual and cultural types. In this paper¹ I shall focus on the study of cultural *presupposition*, and ignore the rest. In translation, cultural *presupposition* is the cultural knowledge of source text that a target reader is assumed to have by translators. The key point is that not all target text readers can be assumed to possess the same knowledge as the source text readers have due to the cultural differences between them. The translator thus must take account of target readers' background knowledge and decide how to meet the needs of their cultural settings. Translation is a process of substitution

on the basis of simple one-to-several correspondence². Since one-to-several match is possible, which candidate in translating becoming an optimal depends on the decision-making of translators. With this observation in mind, my aims in this paper are to examine the various cases of cultural *presupposition*, to appraise the relation between cultural *presupposition* and decision-making, and to discover a proper guideline for a translator to adopt in selecting the best correspondent among several.

II. FUNCTIONAL THEORIES OF TRANSLATION

The functional theories of translation are considered as a promising approach to deal with the issue of the translator's decision-making in relation to cultural *presupposition*. Several main strands of functional theories of translation are recognized, and each contributes to the growth of functional theories. They are translational action theory (Holz-Mänttari, 1984), text type theory (Reiss, 1971/2000, 1981/2000), *skopos* theory (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984), text analysis model (Nord, 1988/91, 1997), translation quality assessment model (House, 1997, 2002) and so on.

¹ This paper is revised from my unpublished conference paper presented on June 9, 2007 at NCCU Translation Center 3rd International Conference: "Translation and Cross-Cultural Research". In order to meet the requirement of no more than 20000 words, some less important theoretical background knowledge existing in my conference paper is thus not provided in this paper.

² For example, the Chinese word 豆腐 has three acceptable English translations: *tofu*, *bean curd* or *tofu* plus the explanation in the footnote.

Unlike House's (1997, 2002) text analysis focusing on register and genre levels, Nord (1988/91, 1997) emphasizes the source text (ST) analysis at text level within culture context by situating her translation events in the same communicative/functional framework. From the aspect of translational process, she makes a distinction between documentary translation and instrumental translation. The former aims at producing in the target language a kind of document of certain aspects of a communicative interaction via the ST under source-culture conditions, and the latter aims at producing in the target language an instrument for a new communicative interaction between the source-culture sender and target-culture readers. The result of a documentary translation is that the main function of the text is metatextual³ while the result of an instrumental translation is that the text may achieve or not achieve the same range of function as an original text does.

Nord (1997) asserts that a translator first needs to set up a translation brief before translating. The translation brief must contain the profile of the source text-target text (TT) including the following information: (a) what the (intended) text functions of ST and TT are, (b) who the target-text addressee(s) are, (c) when the text is used and where it is used, (d) the medium over which the text will be transmitted (i.e. speech or writing), (e) the motive for the production or the reception of the text. The reason for establishing the brief is, first, to allow the translator to find out whether there is divergence between ST and TT; second, to allow him to set up functional priorities of the translation strategies. In her ST-TT analysis model, a cultural presupposition analysis is necessary. She indicates that when analyzing the presupposition, a translator may find out that the occurrence of many problems actually results from the divergence in the cultural background between the TT and ST readers. Her solution for this phenomenon is to make a comparison of the intended functions of ST and TT, and then to sketch out the hierarchy of functions in the TT. Subsequently, the translator should be in a position of deciding on the optimal candidate.

III. CULTURAL-SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND PRESUPPOSITION

The English TT readers will make no sense whatsoever of the sentences in example 1⁴ below if they do not share the

same cultural knowledge presupposed by the Chinese ST author.

Example 1

- (a) 101 是台北的新地標。
- (b) 我被捆得像粽子一樣。
- (c) 他老人家是豆腐心。

The sentence (a) in example 1 presupposes the knowledge that 101 in this context refers to the tallest building and the landmark of Taipei city. To comprehend the sentence 1(b), the English readers must have the knowledge of the word 粽子, i.e. a pyramid shape, made of glutinous rice and wrapped in bamboo leaves. The metaphorical use of the food 豆腐 in 1(c) implies that the elder has the heart which is soft like 豆腐, i.e. a soft-hearted person. Similarly, the sentences in example 2 would mean little to most Chinese TT readers if they did not possess the same background knowledge as the English ST readers did.

Example 2

- (a) Helen told me that to give Tom money was like carrying coals to Newcastle.
- (b) She bought me Wellingtons yesterday.
- (c) My Gladstone kept banging hell out of my legs.

Most English readers know that Newcastle is the place rich in coals, so they know the sentence (a) in example 2 means that Helen believed that it was unnecessary to give Tom money because he was rich just like Newcastle has plenty of coals. Likewise, the words Wellingtons and Gladstone⁵ in 2(b) and 2(c) are tied to a particular English culture and historical background. The problem for the translator who translates example 1 or 2 has to face is how to deal with the situation when his TT readers cannot be assumed to possess the cultural background of the language. All problems, occurring in examples 1 and 2, in fact result from the cultural gap between the two languages. Cultural conflict is another one causing the issue of the cultural presupposition problem in addition to the cultural gap, see example 3.

Example 3

- (a) 請神容易送神難。(柯平, 2000)
- (b) I sent my sympathy to her on the death of her husband.

According to 柯平 (2000, p. 106), the notion of god in Chinese differs from that in English, i.e. the notion of 神 in Chinese covering the concept of evil spirit in English. Caution must be taken when translating the sentence in example 3(a). The translator who produces the translation of

³ According to Nord (1997), producing of a metatextual function of translation is generally a matter of relatively straightforward linguistic recoding.

⁴ The examples in this paper that are not specified the sources are my own data.

⁵ Wellington boot is named after Arthur Wellesley (1769-1852) who defeated Napoleon at the war of Waterloo. Gladstone bag is named after William Gladstone (1809-1898), the English statesman and premier in the past.

example 3(a) in the following way: *it's easier to call upon a god than to send it away* would wrongly presuppose a fair amount of cultural knowledge on the part of the English TT readers. The literal translation of 神 as *god* has misinterpreted the meaning of the sentence, and the safe translation should be *evil spirit or ghost*. Likewise, the existence of cultural conflict in 3(b) is that traditionally Chinese tend to lament the dead whereas English pays much sympathy to the living. So, when translating 3(b) into Chinese, an adjustment must be made, e.g. *sympathy* corresponding to 弔唁 rather than 同情 to meet TT readers' presupposition.

VI. CHOICES AND DECISION MAKING

Translation is not a process of one to one substitution. Table 1 lists the possible but non-exhaustive translations for some of cultural-specific words in example 1~3.

It is unquestionable that the process of translation needs to engage in a great deal of decision-making activities. Levy (1967/2000) indicates that the process of translation resembles the process of playing the game of chess. Decision-making is important when playing chess because every succeeding move is influenced by the knowledge of a previous decision and by the situation that resulted from it. Considering that decision-making in translation is a particularly complex procedure, Wilss (1997) suggests that one should focus his attention on pre-choice behavior, i.e. the factors that inhibit or promote choices, rather than on the choices themselves. He further indicates that the final decision depends on a host of factors, e.g. adequate knowledge bases and the individual's own preferences or a value system. One particular technique to study translators' minds is called Think-Aloud Protocols (TAP)⁶. Several researchers (e.g. Börsch, 1986, Tirkkonen-Condit, 1993) employed TAP to study translation alternatives that show (a) how professional and trainee translators take into consideration in executing a task, and (b) how they approach a final decision.

Nord's (1997) text-analysis approach is applicable to deal with decision-making problems related to the issue of cultural presupposition. Her top-down analysis allows the cultural-specific phenomenon to be dealt with before the lower linguistic one. In the following, Nord's (1997) approach will be applied in detail to the translation between English and Chinese texts.

1. Documentary Translation

Most translators have experienced the situation of being unable to making a decision on the best choice among several options. He knows the result will be different whether he chooses to leave his TT readers in the dark or in the light. When he chooses the first one (i.e. in the dark), he provides nothing needed to make sense of the TT by assuming that they have processed the relevant knowledge, e.g. *zhongzi* for 粽子 as in Table 1(b)(i). By contrast, when he selects the second (i.e. in the light), he is supposed to provide all the information required to be known for readers, e.g. the variants in Table 1(b)(iv) and (v).

Nord (1997) indicates that the translator must find out the function of his translation before translating. If his translation is going to provide the local color of ST and have no attempts to make adjustments in the light of target context, the documentary translation would be his choice. The documentary translation consists of four kinds of translation forms, i.e. interlineal, literal, philological and exoticizing, shown in Table 2 below.

In Table 2, the interliner translation is normally found in the text of comparative linguistics while the literal translation is in technical texts. The philological translation of 粽子 as *zhongzhi* plus the footnote in (c) shows that the necessary knowledge about Chinese food is provided. The translator who adopts philological translation strategies, on one hand, wants to reproduce the ST form, and on the other he assumes that his readers know nothing about ST. Under this cultural presupposition, he cannot avoid not to accommodate the relevant information for them. The translator who adopts

Table 1. Possible translations

	ST	TT
(a)	101	(i) 101, (ii) 101 building, (iii) 101 plus footnote, (iv) 101, the tallest building in the world.
(b)	粽子	(i) zhongzi, (ii) a parcel (iii) a fowl ⁷ , (iv) zhongzi plus footnote, (v) zhongzi is a typical Chinese food eaten in Dragon-Boat Festival with pyramid shape and bamboo wrapping.
(c)	豆腐心	(i) tofu heart, (ii) tofu heart plus footnote, (iii) soft-hearted, (iv) the heart is as soft as tofu, (v) a bean-curd heart.
(d)	神	(i) god, (ii) the providence, (iii) demon, (vi) evil spirit, (v) ghost
(e)	sympathy	(i) 同情卡, (ii) 弔唁函, (iii) 弔唁金
(f)	wellington	(i) 威靈頓, (ii) 威靈頓長靴, (iii) 橡膠長靴

⁶ TAP is a technical term used to prove the cognitive processes entailed in different kinds of mental activity. When used in the field of translation studies, it will typically involve the subjects verbalizing everything that comes into their minds and all the actions they perform as they work on the creation of a TT. (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997)

⁷ In Table 1, the variant *fowl* in (b) and the variants of 神 in (d) are borrowed from 柯平 (2000).

Table 2. The application of documentary translation

Translation forms	Examples of documentary translation
(a) Interlinear	ST: 我被捆得像粽子一樣 TT: I bei tie de like rice-tamale particle one kind
(b) Literal	ST: 我被捆得像粽子一樣 TT: I-sub bei-passive tie particle like rice-tamale particle one kind (I was tied like rice-tamale one kind.)
(c) Philological	ST: 我被捆得像粽子一樣 TT: I was tied just like zhongzi. (in the footnote: zhongzi is a typical Chinese food eaten in the Dragon-Boat festival with pyramid shape and bamboo wrapping.)
(d) Exoticizing	ST: 我被捆得像粽子一樣 TT: I was tied just like 粽子.

exoticizing translation strategy will translate 粽子 as 粽子 as shown in (d) with no provision of other extra information at all. This kind of translation, i.e. reproducing the ST form, content and situation, creates strong exotic impression and strangeness to the readers. The focus of documentary translation is to keep the morphological, lexical or syntactic feature of SL system in TT.

2. Instrumental Translation

The instrumental translation is characterized by its flexibility constrained by the intended function of target text. It is intended to fulfill a new communicative purpose in the target culture, and the result is that TT readers are not aware of reading a translated text. The intended function of TT plays an important role in this type of translation. The TT may be intended to provide information (i.e. referential function), to express emotion and attitudes (i.e. expressive function), to persuade to the readers (i.e. appellative function), or to establish, maintain or end the contact between the translator and readers (i.e. phatic function⁸).

Consider the Chinese text in example 4 below. Assuming that the text of example 4 was an extract from the 2007 brochure introducing the 101 building for local tourists, this brochure was going to be translated into English and used in the year of 2008 for foreign tourists who visit the building. The cultural-specific word *101* can cause the problem for the translator who translates the Chinese brochure. Since the word *101* can be translated into several ways, referring to Table 1(a), he has to decide which one is suitable in the English text.

Nord (1997) proposes the solution for this kind of situation. She indicates that the translator needs to compare

ST and TT profiles before translating. Four aspects are required to be in the comparison, and they are (a) intended functions of ST and TT, (b) the ST and TT addresses, (c) the time and place of reception of ST and TT, (d) the motive of writing ST and translating TT, shown in Table 3 below.

Example 4:

位於信義計畫區的 101 是台北的新地標，其宛若勁竹節節高升的外形，融合了東方古典文化和台灣地方文化的特設...

In Table 3, the intended function of TT is referential, i.e. to provide the relevant information of *101* to the foreign tourists, which is similar to ST's. In this kind of situation, Nord's equifunctional translation can be employed. That is, the translator's translation has to reach the same range of function as the original text. When comparing the background of addressees on two sides, the translator may understand that the addressees on both sides own different cultural backgrounds. It is obvious that the ST readers know about 101, but the same situation cannot apply to TT readers. To allow the ST and TT sharing the same function, the cultural-specific word *101* in TT must be carefully handled. That is, the translator may have to make an adjustment of the relationship between explicit and implicit information about *101* in his TT. The following example 5 shows the possible translations of *101* appearing in example 4:

Example 5:

Possible translations of *101* appearing in example 4:

- The world tallest building** 101, located in the District of Hsinyi, is the new landmark of Taipei city...
- With 508 meter height** and located in the District of Hsinyi, **Taipei 101 is the tallest building in the world**, and is the new landmark of the city...
- Located in the District of Hsinyi, 101 **building** is the new landmark of Taipei city...

In example 5 the translator makes efforts to make the word *101* clear by employing the method of textual expansion, i.e. the boldfaced words shown in 5(a), 5(b), and 5(c). In the

Table 3. The example 4 (ST) and its TT profile

Translation profile	ST (Chinese)	TT (English)
Function of text	Referential	Referential
Addresses	Tourists from everywhere in Taiwan who can read Chinese	Tourists from foreign countries who can read English
Time and place	Used inside of 101	Used inside of 101
Motive	Provide the information about 101	Provide the information about 101

⁸ The phatic function is excluded in Reiss's (1981/2000) text typology, and the referential type in Reiss' model is called informative.

ST these boldfaced words do not exist, but they appear in the TT to let his readers know as much as possible about the word *101*. Of three ways of translation in example 5, the (c) way is the most simplest by adding one word *building* only in the TT. Incorporating the word *building* makes the meaning of word *101* immediately explicit; the TT readers at least will not presuppose it is a statue or other such things. On the contrary, without the word *building*, *101* wouldn't make any meaningful sense for TT readers.

When ST and TT are found not to share the same text function, Nord (1997) suggests the translator to adopt heterofunctional translation. The following hypothetical example shows the case: the ST sentence in example 6 is assumed to appear in the quotation of news report in the newspaper dated on Jan. 21, 1995. The incident is about a rich businessman who was kidnapped a few weeks ago before Jan. 20, but was saved by the police on Jan. 20, 1995. He described how he was badly treated by radicals in the news conference, and the reporter quoted the businessman's words in his news report in the next-day's newspaper. Ten years later the businessman published his English version of the Chinese autobiography including the incident which happened 10 years ago, and the sentence in example 6 this time appeared in the passage of the chapter describing the incident in the autobiography. In translating example 6, presupposition may cause a problem for the translator when he tries to translate the Chinese culture-specific word 粽子 into English. The problem that the translator faces is which one in Table 1(b) is the most suitable variant to be placed in the text of autobiography. To overcome the difficulty, a comparison of ST and TT profile is firstly set up, as shown in Table 4 below.

Example 6

...那時，我被捆的像粽子一樣，一動也不能動。我開始喊叫...

In the text type of autobiography, the individual feelings or emotion of the businessman shouldn't be left out in the TT in

order to let TT readers receive similar feelings as ST readers received. If the TT text includes the information of explaining that how 粽子 is made and when it is eaten, it will reduce the expressive effect that ST author wants to reveal. This observation thus provides the translator with a justification to ignore or reduce the informative elements of the text in favor of the expressive ones. Example 7 shows the possible translations of example 4 after deciding that the expressive function will have priority over the informative.

Example 7

Possible translations for example 6

- (a) ...At that time, I was tightly tied like **a fowl**, and cannot move any step at all. I start screaming...
- (b) ...At that time I was tightly tied like a **parcel**, and cannot move any step. I start screaming...

If the Chinese word 粽子 is translated as *zhongzi* in this English autobiography context, the TT readers would not understand the meaning of the word at all. The reason is that *zhongzi* is part of Chinese culture and is not that of English culture. This is not even to mention that the word 粽子 is a metaphoric word in the ST context, in which the author used it to describe how he had suffered. For those English readers who had not seen this food before, it would be very difficult for them to imagine how the author was treated by radicals. Obviously, the information of how to make 粽子 and of when to eat it are not very important. Instead, to let the TT readers know the ST author's strong emotion about the incident is more important than to tell them about the ingredient of 粽子. That is why 粽子 is translated as *a fowl* in 7(a) or *a parcel*⁹ in 7(b) which is more close to ST culture. In this way, the TT readers can draw a picture from the things they are familiar with to perceive the bitter and sorrowful tone that the ST author displayed. This TT-cultural oriented translation thus allows the TT readers to receive the same effect that the ST author gave it to his ST readers¹⁰.

V. CONCLUSION

The issue of cultural presupposition is highlighted in Nord's (1997) model, and the translator is required to pay special attention to it. She proposes two types of translation methods: instrumental and documentary translations. The translator who adopts the method of instrumental translation, first, needs to compare the profile of ST and TT. From the comparison, he can learn the function of ST and the intended function of TT. With the TT's intended function in mind, he

Table 4. The ST-TT profiles of example 6

Translation profile	ST (Chinese)	TT (English)
Function of text	Referential	Expressive
Addresses	Newspaper readers who can read Chinese	Autobiography readers who can read English
Time and place	In the newspaper on Jan. 21, 1995	In the year of 2005 and in the autography
Motive	To provide the information about incident	To record the incident occurred 10 years ago

⁹ The word *fowl* is 柯平's (2000) translation, and the word *parcel* is mine.

¹⁰ This kind of analysis bears a strong resemblance to Nida & Taber (1969/1982) dynamic equivalence translation.

can then carefully consider the cultural background knowledge of TT readers and decide how to select his optimal candidate among several.

By contrast, in the method of documentary translation the consideration as to whether the TT readers share the presupposition knowledge of TT becomes less important for the translator. As a result, in this kind of translation the content of cultural-specific terms in ST often remains in the TT in the sense that there is not any attempt to make adjustments in the light of target context and culture.

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