SFL and problems of equivalence in translation*

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1. Introduction

It is commonly accepted in translation studies that text or discourse analysis is becoming a fundamental tool in understanding source language (SL). This is because there is an awareness growing that the basic unit of translation is text, not words, phrases or even sentences (Zlateva, 2000). Attempts have been done to find the most appropriate model of text analysis for translation (Dimitriu, 2000). The existence of different kinds of translation theories, from word for word, literal, socio-linguistic, pragmatic translations, to skopos, indicates the underlying linguistic perspective. However, despite the agreement that discourse analysis should be incorporated in translation and translator training curriculum, they still have problems on what model, how and to what extent discourse analysis should be practiced (Schaffner, 2000).

Regardless of the strength and weaknesses of other models of linguistic perspectives on translation, the following discussion is an attempt to formulize the SFL as a model for source text (ST) analysis in translation.

2. Concept of SFL for translation

SFL, developed by Halliday since 1960s, is a linguistics theory, with social-semiotic perspective, which is constructed based on system and function. Firstly, it is systemic in the sense that it views language as a set of multi levels of linguistics units which expresses a particular meaning. The multi levels of linguistic units inside the language such as: phonology/graphology, lexicogrammar, cohesion system, and text structure as a system work simultaneously and systemically, from the lower to higher levels of units of language (from

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phonology/graphology to text structure), to realize the holistic meaning. The whole levels of linguistic units cannot be separated from one another, because each level has its own particular role in realizing the holistic meaning (Halliday, 1985a; 1994). Besides, SFL also believes that language is a set of choice resulted from the contextual configuration in context of situation and culture. The configuration underlies the choices of the given sets of language. (Halliday, 1985a, 1994; Christie, 1988)

Secondly, it is functional because this theory is constructed to account for why and how language is used to express a particular social process. In this tradition, then, function also means use, that is, social meaning which is accomplished by the simultaneous work of the whole linguistic units. In this tradition the function comprises three meta-functions, namely: ideational (construing reality: experiential and logical), interpersonal (construing social reality), and textual (semiotic reality which symbolizes the ideational and interpersonal meaning of a wording system) (Butt, Fahey, Spinks, & Yalop, 1998; Halliday, 1994).

Thirdly, this theory is in fact also a theory of semiotics from a social-semiotic perspective. It considers language as a set of semion which realizes a particular social process in a context of situation and context of culture. Thus, in this concept, language is an expression domain, whereas a context of situation and a context of culture are resources of meaning or the meaning makers.

Context of culture may involve values and norms which represent a belief in a culture. Value includes what is wrong and right, what is good and bad in a culture, including ideology which maintains a given social order that conceal the dominant interest (Bhatt, 2002). Meanwhile norms are the realization of values in the form of rules which guide social processes, what the member of a society must and must not, should and should not, can and cannot do in performing a social process or genre. In this way culture influences how genres are constructed, which ultimately affects how language is used (Martin, 1992; see also Liddicoat, 2009).
Figure 2.1: Social Perspective on Language

(illustrated from Halliday’s concept in Halliday and Hasan, 1985, pp 44-47)

Context of situation, despite an opposition of static and dynamic concept (O'Donnell, 1999; Liebscher & Dailey-O’Cain, 2009), is an immediate environment accompanying a language which is being used. According to Halliday (1985a; Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1985) it comprises three aspects: field, tenor, mode, which work simultaneously to produce a configuration of meaning. This configuration will determine the form and meaning of its text, including its ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings. Field refers to a happening, participants, and environments where, when, and how it happens. Tenor covers the types of participants involved in the happenings, their statuses, and their role relationship. Mode includes channel, the types of language (style of language) used to express the happening; and medium, a means of media which is used to deliver the message.

In SFL, there is a close relation between the three aspects of context of situation: field, tenor, and mode, and the concept of language meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal and textual (Eggins & Martin, 1997; Rose, 2006). Field has a closer relation with ideational, because it covers a physical environment such as what happens, where, when, and how it happens, whereas ideational meta-function discusses experiential and logical meaning. Tenor is close to interpersonal meta-function. This is because tenor talks about participants who are

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involved in the happening, their role relationship and statuses, whereas interpersonal meta-function bears social meaning of discourse, including interactional and transactional meanings. Finally mode is relevant to textual meaning, because mode deals with channel and medium used in the happening, while textual meta-function covers how symbols or semions are organized to express the ideational and interpersonal meaning.

Figure 2.2: Configuration of Language as Social Semiotics

From this figure, it can be seen that language is an expression, or a symbol which realizes any values, norms in the culture, the immediate environment: physical, social, and semiotic realities in context situation, and also realizes its meta-function simultaneously. In other words, the variation of language is affected by the variation of social contexts (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Liddicoat, 2009). In this sense, language in the context of use is called register.

The following figure depicts the relationship between context, language function and linguistic units.

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**Figure 2.4: The relationship between context, language function, and linguistic units**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context of Situation</th>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Tenor</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language Function</td>
<td>Ideational</td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Textual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse Semantics</td>
<td>Cohesion and Text Structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>Transitivity</td>
<td>Mood</td>
<td>Theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexis</td>
<td>Descriptive lexis</td>
<td>Attitudinal</td>
<td>Congruent &amp; Incongruent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonology &amp; Graphology</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

From the brief overview of SFL, there are a number of fundamental concepts involving: context of culture, genre, context of situation: contextual configuration of field, tenor and mode, register: language function (ideational, interpersonal, and textual), text structure, texture, lexicogrammar, and phology and graphology.

**3. Problems of Equivalence in translation and SFL**

The basic problems in translation involve equivalence. To some extent, translation is almost an impossible mission. We may be able to translate the textual, logical and interpersonal meanings, but we will find it difficult to bring about the ideational: particularly experiential meaning in the target text (TT), since the happenings occur in the socio-cultural contexts of source text (ST). However, translation theorists agree that translation is possible in the sense of relating two different texts to have in common or “relevant aspects of equivalent values in both texts (Tack, 2000).

Most experts in translation agree that what is meant by translation equivalence is *textual equivalence* (see Robinson, 1997; Tack, 2000; Zlateva, 2000; Dimitriu, 2000). This is actually very complicated process since, in SFL point of view, it involves the equivalence of the whole semiotic planes involving.

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socio-cultural context, genre and register. The genre equivalence involves the
equivalent choices of type of genre and its social function or intentionality of text
producer.

Meanwhile, the register equivalence involves the equivalent choices of
unity of the three metafunctions, realized in text structure and texture (discourse
semantics, lexicogrammar and phonology and graphology).

3.1 Equivalence of socio-cultural context

This is almost the most impossible activities in translation to present the
contextual configuration of field, tenor, and mode of the ST into that of the TT.
The real happenings of ST with their immediate environments of place, time,
people, and others and their social structure, and cultural norms and values must
be unlikely to be impossible to be brought about to those of TT. So what the
translator do to encounter this problem is what the translator theorists call
foreignization, a process of holding the socio-cultural context of ST in TT, and
domestication, a process of challenging the ST’s socio-cultural context with a new
context closer to TT. However, the two ideological processes in translation will
still leave problems in equivalence.

3.2 Equivalence of genre and social function

In fact, there are three prominent schools in genres studies i.e. English for
Specific Purposes (ESP), New Rhetoric (NR), and Australian Genre Theories
(AGT) (Hyon, 1996). Each school has different concepts of genre and social
functions. On the one hand, ESP places genre in a more sub ordinate culture that
ESP produces more specific types of genres, what they call professional genres
(see Swales 1990; Bhatia; 2004; Belcher, 2004). On the other hand, Australian
genre theories place genre in super-ordinate culture that they produce more genre
genres, what they call micro genre (see Martin and Rose, 2003; Martin, 2006). In
subordinate culture, the micro genres are complexly interconnected to produce
more specific genres, for example professional genres (Santosa, 2009).
Meanwhile, NR suggests that genre must be dug up through ethnography to understand the holistic picture.

Thus, to assess the equivalence of genre and their social functions, translators have to understand the underlying paradigms of genres. For example, if we apply the AGT, then we have to realize whether the genres we study belong to micro (factual or story) (see Martin, 1992) or macro genre, how they are staged, and their social functions. The social functions are reflected in their stages to achieve the goal. For example, recount is used to entertain and to record past events. The social function is achieved through orientation, sequence of events, and reorientation (optional). Meanwhile, explanation is used to explain why or how something happens. It is constructed through statement to position readers and sequence of explanation, and others.

3.2 Equivalence of Register

Register can simply be defined as a language variation based on the use, whereas dialect is a language variation derived from the user. In a particular occasion register and dialect will overlap each other (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). The users use a particular register so that this produces a language consisting of dialect and a register (see also Lyons, Coates, Deuchar, & Gazdar, 1987). In this concept, register is not limited only to the variation of word choice or diction (just like in the sense of traditional definition) but register in this concept includes the choice of texture (which includes phonology or graphology, lexicogrammar, cohesion system) and text structure. That is why, linguists very often call register as style, because style also discusses the choice of phonology or graphology, lexicogrammar, cohesion system, and others. (Fowler, 1977, 1986).

The variation of the language choice will depend on context of situation which bears three aspects: field, tenor, and mode (Christie in Reid, 1988). The three aspects work simultaneously to figure out what Halliday calls configuration of meaning or what Hasan calls contextual configuration (Halliday & Hasan, 1985) or predictable configuration of codal resources (Malcolm, 2005). The term
‘configuration’ in this concept refers to concept of meaning resulted from the three aspects of context of situation: field, tenor, and mode.

3.2.1 Equivalence of text structure

In general, text structure is identified as the global structure or organizational structure of the message of the text (Hasan in Halliday & Hasan, 1985). Traditionally, it is often structured in sub-texts as opening, body and closing. Text structure, or rhetorical structure (Mann and Thomson, 1988; Stuart-Smith, 2007), is a unity of textual, ideational and interpersonal meanings of a discourse as a whole which realizes the social goal of the text. In general, it is the unity of a text which indicates sub-texts which express the stages of particular rhetorical functions, which simultaneously reflect the social goal of the text (Martin, 1992). The sub-texts are groups of clauses developed through the logic of discourse: relation of conjunction, the grammar of clause-combining, and non-signalled parataxis (Mann & Thomson, 1988; Power, 2000) or through conjunctive relation (Martin & Rose, 2003; Matthiessen, 1992; Stuart-Smith, 2007). Thus, text structure is a realization of generic or schematic structure of particular genres in the level of language (Martin, 1992). The difference is generic structure will contain only the obligatory elements of genres, while text structure may also contain the optional elements due to context of situation (Hasan in Halliday & Hasan, 1985).

Like a generic structure, text structure expresses the social function of the text. The middle levels of text organization express different rhetorical functions, which simultaneously build up the top level of text organization, according to the social functions and to contexts (Toboada & David, 2003; Stuarts-Smith, 2007). For example, an editorial in a magazine or newspaper will mainly begin with an issue and then continue with arguments of both sides or of different points of views. Then it will finally end with a conclusion. Another texts of recount in news, for example, it will start with an orientation and follows with a sequence of events. It may end with a reorientation.
Thus, equivalence of text structure must evaluate the relevance of groups of clauses (including the conjunctive relation used to connect the clauses), representing rhetorical functions, realizing the social function of text.

### 3.2.2 Equivalence of texture

Texture in SFL involves the use of cohesion system, lexicogrammar, and phonology or graphology in a discourse. Thus, the three aspects of texture should be evaluated when we assess the equivalence of texture.

#### 3.2.2.1 Equivalence of cohesion

SFL acknowledges cohesion as both forms and meanings. Thus, SFL does not differentiate cohesion and coherence as what other linguists do. There are two types of cohesion: grammatical and lexical. The grammatical includes reference item, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction. Meanwhile, lexical cohesion will involve taxonomic (super ordination and composition) and non-taxonomic relation (nuclear experience and expected activity) (Martin, 1992; Ventola, 1987). Thus, assessing the equivalence of cohesion involves the whole aspects of cohesion.

#### 3.2.2.2 Equivalence of lexicogrammar

Lexico-grammar means the use of lexes in grammar. It realizes the three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. In grammar, the ideational is realized in transitivity, interpersonal in mood system and structure, whereas textual meta-function is realized in theme-rHEME structure. The equivalence of lexicogrammar should involve the assessment of the three metafunctions realized in the grammar. The unequivalence of the three meanings in ST and TT may result in the unequivalence of meaning in general or shift in language style.

For example, in assessing the equivalence of ST and TT, one thing to be noted is that the same reality can be symbolized in different transitivity systems which result in different language styles.

1. It rained heavily last night in Solo, *so that* the water flooded some areas of the city.
2. The heavy rain last night *made* the water flood some areas of Solo city.
3. The flood in Solo city was due to the heavy rain last night.
4. The main factor of the flood in Solo was the heavy rain last night.

In Clause 1, the conjunctive relation is realized a external conjunction so that which produces a clause complex, constructed in two clauses of material processes rained and flooded. In clause 2, the conjunctive relation is realized in process made, which makes the clause complex into a simplex clause with Extra causer: Initiator – pro-actor – cess – goal. In clause 3, the conjunctive relation is realized in attribute due to the heavy rain last night, producing carrier – process-attribute. Finally, in clause 4, the conjunctive relation is realized in the participant factor, resulting in the value – process – token (See Bell, 1991).

The other important thing that should be taken into account is the movement of theme. Theme is a point of departure in developing discourse. It is related to the central theme in the discourse. There are three types of themes: clause, hyper, and macro themes. Clause themes are used to develop topics in the level of clause. It has topical, interpersonal and textual. For example:

These forms are often treated in the linguistics literature as though they were in free variation (ST).

Dalam buku-buku linguistik sering dianggap seolah-olah bervariasi bebas. (TT)

In the example above, it can be seen that the translator moved the theme from the unmarked topical theme these forms in ST into a marked topical theme Dalam buku-buku linguistik (TT). This movement raises two problems. First, it shifts the central topic ‘(linguistic) forms’ into ‘Dalam buku-buku linguistik’. Secondly, marked topical theme is usually used to develop ideas under the marked topical theme. In the above example is Dalam buku-buku linguistik. But, the rest of the text is checked, it is quite clear that the topic is not about Dalam buku-buku linguistik, but still the forms (ibid).

The other aspect to be noted in SFL point of view is the interpersonal meaning of a clause. It is a broad aspect to discuss, which include proposisiton and proposition meaning of a clause, including the use of modality. The following example indicate that the translator do not realize how important this aspect is.

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We could characterize this as a discussion of the beneficial effects of a good physical appearance on the confidence of someone addressing an audience.

Ini mungkin dapat kami gambarkan sebagai pembicaraan tentang pengaruh yang menguntungkan penampilan fisik yang baik pada kepercayaan diri seseorang yang berbicara didepan para hadirin.

It can be clearly seen in the data that the TT has lessened the level of ability (could) in the ST by adding low probability modalization mungkin dapat.

Next, the other problem of equivalence is lexical equivalence. The lexical equivalence also involve the ideational and interpersonal equivalences. Ideational equivalence is in fact an experiential or logical equivalence. For example, ideationally, the above example characterize that is translated into gambarkan is not equivalent. This is because the word characterize bears an attempt of an early categorization, but this meaning cannot be found in gambarkan ‘illustrate or depicts’.

The author then has to manipulate the knowledge which the reader needs so that it can be plausibly known to and recountable by the narrator.

Maka, pengarang harus memanipulasi pengetahuan yang diperlukan pembaca sehingga ini secara masuk akal dapat dikenali dan diceritakan oleh narator.

We have to be careful in assesing the logical reality of the discourse. For example, then in ST is in fact similar to a successive time external conjunction kemudian’ or an expectant cause consequence external conjunction ‘maka’.

As can be seen that a lexis may have both experiential and attitudinal meanings. The attitudinal meaning of a lexis may have difficult equivalence due to the level of attitude in the lexis. For example is the problem with the level of attitude in the experiential meaning of the following lexis.

“Don’t be a fool,” his bride said. “Do you think I want to marry to a law clerk? You’ll go into the family business.”

The level of an attitude goblok may be higher than that in a fool, or may be not. It depends on the cultural background of the readers, because goblok is more equivalent to stupid, which may be too harsh to be directed to a husband.

3.3 Concluding remark

It can be clearly seen that what is meant by textual equivalence in translation will involve equivalence in socio-cultural contexts, genre and register which include: text structure and texture: cohesion and lexicogrammar.

On the one hand, SFL has provided a holistic view on equivalence in translation, but on the other hand SFL also given wider possibilities for students who are interested in investigating partial equivalence as their final reports of their theses.

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