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Interpretation Errors and Error Interpretation Through Conceptual Integration Theory

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The article suggests an overview of the theory of conceptual integration and analyses its applicability to cognitive modeling of interpretation processes at the hermeneutic stage of translation. Various types of sense deformations in the course of interpretation are listed to illustrate the potential of this approach in combination with the theory of errors.

Keywords: mental spaces, conceptual integration, hermeneutic stage of translation, cognitive domain, ambiguity.

Modeling of cognitive processes as a framework for exploring the phenomenon of understanding is one of the key trends of present-day humanities and natural sciences. Contemporary linguo-philosophical research is focused on modeling world perception as a prerequisite for understanding an individual message. Postulates of several inter-disciplinary studies are applicable to the analysis of the processes of conceptual integration resulting in the formation of blended mental spaces as a stage of understanding the initial text, in particular in the course of translation.

Cognitive model of translation describes translation process as perception of certain kind of information and its transformation into another kind of information. Translator's cognitive system is where transformation takes place. A new utterance is produced following integration of the author's and translator's

mental spaces, such integration generating a new (blended) mental space. The translated text is a verbal representation of blended mental space, thus, translation as such is a form of existence of semiotic experience of one linguo-cultural community within the system of signs of another linguo-cultural community. The model represents ethno-mental aspect of translator's activity, with the problem of correlation between cognitive units and verbal meanings coming to the fore.

Hermeneutic stage is key to understanding: the path it takes determines whether reproduction stage will prove to be a transformation or a deformation of the initial text. With the issue of translation unit being highly debated, a cognitive approach to construction and functioning of hermeneutic stage may suggest a way to trace primary algorithms of human perception.

The very possibility and efficiency of communication is directly related to the affinity

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of communicants' mental spaces and not solely to the purely linguistic aspect of understanding. Therefore, there is a stratum of cognitive models between linguistic expression and reality.

Blending theory or theory of conceptual integration results from the synthesis of theory of mental spaces by G. Fauconnier and theory of conceptual metaphor by M. Turner. Instead of bi-domain metaphor model, which had been earlier developed by G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, M. Turner and G. Fauconnier justified the efficiency of multi-space model introducing the notions of input spaces, generic space and blended spaces into earlier proposed terminological system.

Understanding and interpretation of a real life event or a message is effected through building of a certain mental construct (element of an intermediate language), which becomes possible provided the receptor's cognitive apparatus is equipped with generalized images of similar events. Common cognitive conscience of communication partners forms a prerequisite for understanding. "Language activity is one the modes of cognition, the tip of the iceberg underlain by cognitive abilities, which are not purely linguistic, but constitute the basis of the latter" (Dem'yankov, 1994:46).

Communication partners' common (generic) space incorporates maximally schematized components included in both input spaces, that is it is located at the lowest level of concreteness. Blended space is a field of interaction of input spaces, which brings to life a self-supporting conceptual structure with the development opportunities, which do not depend on the initial spaces.

According to G. Fauconnier (Fauconnier, 1994), mental spaces are areas of hidden cognition, abstract mental constructs, which are formed on the basis of general scenarios. They incarnate potential reality reflected in the recipient's imagery during perception of verbal

or non-verbal message. Thus, looking at a picture the recipient visualizes a fragment of reality reflected by it. Nevertheless, one and the same picture will be perceived in a different manner by different recipients (or even by the same recipient at different times) due to a number of factors. The same holds true for perception of a piece of art or literary work. Their description by a primary recipient addressed to an interlocutor or a reader is an act of inter-semiotic translation, which, as well as intra-semiotic translation we are focusing on, incorporates two major phases – hermeneutic and transformational.

Individual subtleties of perception are sure to affect the latter phase – nomination of the referent – that is an attempt to give it a new name. It is not accidental that Cicero got disillusioned about the efficiency of paraphrasing as a rhetoric exercise – attempting to retell the read passage in his own words he noticed that he either repeated the exact words of the author or used a phrase, which was far surpassed by the original in respect of lexical and grammatical elegance. Among key factors of transformational phase of translation A.I. Shein (Shein, 2009) emphasizes lack of the very notion expressed by SL unit in TL, that is absence of the required lexical or grammatical correspondence in TL; the availability of TL correspondence the use of which results in the violation of the TL norm; availability of TL correspondence, which is beyond the paradigm of language forms typical of the given style of genre, etc. Factors affecting the hermeneutic phase can hardly be reduced to a closed list. A recipient-translator's individual world picture as a cluster of mental spaces forms a basis for perception of the new information or knowledge. The theory of referential structures offers background for the analysis of this cognitive basis. Within this approach the meaning "depends on our ability to define boundaries of reference" (Coulson, 2001: 25). The theory

of mental spaces was initially developed in an attempt to resolve complex problems of indirect reference and referential non-transparency closely related to metaphoric nature of human cognitive processes; its later developments proved to involve other phenomena of human thinking and language.

The very idea of ambiguity as an inherent language property has been discussed at length. C. Quiroga-Clare (Quiroga-Clare, 2003) distinguishes between lexical and structural ambiguity accounted for by a number of basic linguistic features, such as polysemy, connotation, implication, tropes (metaphor, metonymy, allegory, homonymy, paradox), each providing room for maneuvering or getting lost in the maze of interpretation. She believes that “Since there is no one “truth” and no absolutes, we can only rely on relative truths arising from groups of people who, within their particular cultural systems, attempt to answer their own questions and meet their needs for survival” (Ibid.:65).

Nonetheless, at the face of an immense number of possible interpretations people still manage (or happen) to understand each other more often than to misunderstand. The concept of “intermediate language” introduced by Y.N. Karaulov (Karaulov, 2010) may be a valuable tool in the study of understanding phenomenon. He suggests a reconstruction of N.I. Zhinkin’s model of speech understanding and production: “intermediate code” is regarded as a blended code with one side (“internal speech”) facing the sound speech constituent, and the other (“language of thought”) turned to intellect. In our view, the binary nature of intermediate code may be graphically presented as a Möbius strip – a two-dimensional surface with only one side.

Such representation is akin to G. Fauconnier’s and M. Turner’s concept of blended mental space. Mental spaces are not a precise mirror reflection of reality, they represent

constructs of potential reality, selective cognitive configurations of certain realms of reality. According to S. Coulson (Coulson, 2001: 21), they contain “partial representation of entities and relations in a concrete scenario, in such a form, in which they are perceived, represented, fixed in the memory or otherwise understood” by the recipient. Therefore, as implicit structure in-built in the spaces is minimal and as the structure is inevitably subjected to reviewing along with the discourse development, spaces are quite different from possible worlds researched by logics and philosophy, and imaginative worlds studied by psychologists and literary scholars. Mental spaces function as “temporary containers of relevant information in respect of concrete domain” (Coulson, 2001: 21). With their character being of local rather than global nature, their description seems impossible from the viewpoint of truth conditions. Consequently, elements of the given mental space are not directly related to the entities of real world. In effect, the very domain of obvious objective reality may be viewed as a cognitive domain, that is mental space of “REALITY”.

Emergence and existence of fictional reality is conventionally studied by the theory of possible worlds, but it may also be put in the perspective of the theory of mental spaces. There are numerous examples of lack of correlation between mental space of emergence and that of perception of a message produced, perceived and reproduced in one and the same language. One class of such non-correlations – so called mondegreens – arouses from mishearing (Verhören in Freudian terminology). The very term “mondegreen” originates from Sylvia Wright’s article “The Death of Lady Mondegreen,” (Harper’s Magazine, 1954) and denotes “the mishearing or misinterpretation of a phrase as a result of near homophony, in a way that gives it a new meaning” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mondegreen>). Having misinterpreted

the last line of the stanza of “Reliques of Ancient Poetry”:

“Ye Highlands and ye Lowlands,
Oh, where hae ye been?
They hae slain the Earl O’ Moray,
And laid him on the green”,

she believed it was “And Lady Mondegreen” and later suggested “mondegreen” as a term for such misinterpreted phrases.

Another class of such non-correlations arises from the difference in structure and configuration of constituents of communicants’ mental spaces. “Human beings perceive in part based on past experiences, including what words we hear. We are more likely to see or hear what we expect to see or hear than something completely unexpected or something that is not part of our normal everyday experiences” (Ibid.). Thus, Charles Dickens visiting the USA was perplexed when he heard the hotel servant ask: «Would you like your lunch right away?». Assuming that he is offered a lunch elsewhere, he answered: «No, I would like it here». Interpretation of this incident within the framework of the theory of mental spaces would suggest that referent of the lexical unit «away» in the world picture of the speaker is an element of mental space “TIME”, whereas in the recipient’s world picture it is an element of mental space “SPACE”.

From the viewpoint of cognitive grammar, mental spaces are “conceptual constituents”, which might or might not obtain individual verbal “incarnation”. Names are indicators, which either open new mental spaces or shift the focus of the existing ones. A salient example of the second case is a fragment of translation of P. Süskind’s novel “Das Parfüme. Die Geschichte eines Mörders” by Ella Vengerova. She translated “virgin oil” into Russian as “devich’ye maslo” (“maiden oil”) – the choice often criticized by her readers, but this expression, being the translator’s slip (E. Vengerova preferred not

to opt for any other alternative, although she recognized it as a slip), yet contributed to the integrity of the new mental space. This “maiden oil” happened to generate a construct of mental space, which was not actuated by the author in this particular fragment of the novel, but formed one of the fundamental components of the author’s intention.

Mental spaces are metaphorically described by linguists as colored lenses, each of which communicates its color to the object observed. Modeling function explicating the referential structure of spaces is crucial. Based on the assumption that various spaces model elements in a different fashion, one and the same element may be expected to be differently represented depending on the domain it belongs to at a particular moment, as demonstrated by the above examples. However, although the speaker’s and the recipient’s spaces may differ and, regardless of the effect of this difference on each space elements, a sign, which is meant to nominate an element of one space, may be used to identify an analogous (but not necessarily identical) element of the other space.

Not infrequently, an individual element proves to contain a constituent falling outside the cognitive base of the author. This constituent may become a pivot point of misunderstanding, a seemingly insignificant push triggering communication failure. A set of processes resulting in misunderstanding of a message may be defined as butterfly effect. The term “butterfly effect” was suggested by E.N. Lorenz, an American mathematician and meteorologist, who demonstrated that flapping of butterfly wings at a certain point on the globe may cause a hurricane or other drastic climatic changes elsewhere on the planet. The term has later become popular in psychology, chaos theory, game theory to point to a large-scale and, possibly, delayed consequence of a certain action.

V. Nabokov's essay on translation lists a number of translation errors, which are liable to produce a butterfly effect. Thus, he mentions a German translation of A. Chekhov's short story, where a teacher "plunges into his newspaper" upon entering the classroom. Apparently the Russian word "zhurnal" (teacher's note-book registering those present and their marks) was mistaken for French "journal" – a newspaper. In Nabokov's view, such misunderstanding may make the German reader infer a deplorable state of affairs in Russian school education (Nabokov, 1996).

As human mind tends to interpret the unknown through the established patterns, it is often tempted to convert (or divert) the received messages into forms, which are suitable for understanding. Thus, translation unit should be sought not in the language itself, but in the translator's cognitive luggage (Kaplunenko, 2011)

Therefore, the theory of conceptual integration may account for diverse phenomena of human cognition related to a wide range

of events – from the so called Freudian errors and mondegreens through to translation deformations.

According to G. Fauconnier and M. Turner, conceptual integration is an instant unconscious cognitive operation – a stage of creation/recreation of meaning, during which elements of initial mental spaces are projected onto a new – blended – mental space. In our view, explanatory potential of this theory may be used for conceptualization and reconstruction of processes of source text perception at the hermeneutic phase of translation.

Thus, the theory of conceptual integration or blending along with the theory of errors and the theory of possible worlds provide a foundation for exploring the nature of sense transformation and deformation, the latter involving unintentional distortion of the original sense by the recipient. This integrated approach offers a dynamic perspective to cognitive modeling of such a complex phenomenon as sense reconstruction at the hermeneutic phase of translation.

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Ошибки интерпретации и интерпретация ошибок в свете теории концептуальной интеграции

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В статье приведен краткий обзор теории концептуальной интеграции с точки зрения возможностей ее использования в процессе когнитивного моделирования герменевтического этапа перевода. Приведены различные примеры деформации смысла на этапе интерпретации, иллюстрирующие потенциал применения теории концептуальной интеграции и теории ошибок в ходе анализа алгоритмов понимания.

Ключевые слова: ментальные пространства, концептуальная интеграция, герменевтический этап перевода, когнитивный домен, неоднозначность.
