



Exploring the Dynamics of Translation Units in Translation Studies

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Abstract

This study explores how experienced and inexperienced translators select translation units. Using think-aloud protocols and interviews, it reveals that text types and translator skills significantly affect this choice. Skilled translators prefer larger units, adapting to text familiarity, while less experienced ones opt for smaller units. The research highlights the dynamic nature of translation units.

Keywords: Translation Unite, Empirical Study, Think-Aloud Protocol

Introduction

The existence of translation units has been a contentious topic within translation studies, with scholars holding contrasting views. This concept arose to address the question of equivalence—whether it should be achieved at the level of individual words, phrases, sentences, or even longer text segments between the source and target texts. The choice of translation units often correlates with the translation strategies adopted by translators. For instance, when employing a literal translation approach, translators tend to prioritize adhering to individual words (Hatim & Munday, 2004, p. 17). Conversely, in free translation, the focus is on capturing the essence of a more extended language segment (Hatim & Munday, 2004). Furthermore, text types and translator proficiency can also shape the choice of translation units. Thus, this article explores the disparities in translation unit selection between experienced and inexperienced translators, along with the underlying reasons for this divergence.

Research Methodology

Research Methods

The implementation of the think-aloud protocol was utilized to examine the translation process, recognized as a pivotal approach for gathering data on cognitive processes (Jääskeläinen, 2011, pp. 96-103). To ensure the reliability of the data obtained via think-aloud protocols, this study integrates interviews as a supplementary research method, adhering to a triangulation approach.

Think-aloud protocols require participants to verbally report their spontaneous thoughts while engaged in a task. This enables researchers to acquire valuable insights into translation processes and scrutinize the events transpiring during these procedures. Nevertheless, critics argue that think-aloud data tends to be subjective, fragmented, and unstructured, thereby inadequately reflecting translators' cognitive processes. To mitigate this concern, an auxiliary method is employed to corroborate the validity of think-aloud data.

Interviews constitute another effective means of eliciting pertinent information from participants (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010, p. 176). They offer a distinct advantage by allowing researchers to directly query participants on key matters (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014, p. 169). Interviews often prove more effective than verbal reports, as participants may not consistently articulate their reasons for decision-making during think-aloud sessions. Consequently, this approach can serve to verify or refute findings derived from think-aloud protocols.

Research Participants

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, fifteen university students were selected for the experiment. This group is comprised of five senior undergraduate students in their final year, five first-year postgraduate students, and five senior postgraduate students due to resource limitations. The participants were categorized into three groups based on their translation experience and academic marks to ensure comparable language proficiency and translation skills. Of the participants, the five senior postgraduate students have practical experience as intern translators in publishing agencies, magazine companies, or translation firms, with a cumulative translation volume exceeding thirty thousand words, thus earning them the title of "professional translators".

All participants are native Chinese speakers with a high proficiency in English. The participants were fully informed about the study's details, including the recording of their performance and voices, and were assured that no identifiable personal information would be stored or disclosed in any published academic papers featuring excerpts from their think-aloud protocols, thus maintaining their anonymity. Additionally, they were

briefed on how their protocols would contribute to the research without revealing the study's objectives, as outlined in the participant instructions.

Before the study begins, the fifteen participants will be given comprehensive instructions to ensure they understand the “think aloud” methodology and the precise details they must verbalize. Clarifying the thoughts and specifics that participants need to express is essential, as any uncertainty may cause extended pauses, potentially compromising data integrity or resulting in the loss of spontaneous thoughts. Hence, participants must be aware that they are expected to vocalize all their internal thoughts during the experiment, thoughts they would ordinarily keep private. Furthermore, to prevent any complexities during data analysis, it is critical to emphasize that participants should use Chinese for verbalizing their thoughts during the experiment. This refers to the expression of their internal monologue, rather than the translation of written texts.

Source Text

Sharon O'Brien (2015) emphasizes the significance of source text selection in translation research design. She advises evaluating four factors in choosing source texts: suitability for participants, level of specialization or generality, exhibition of particular linguistic characteristics, and difficulty level. Guided by these criteria, this study has handpicked two Chinese texts. These texts strike a balance between challenge and simplicity, as overly complex texts may discourage participants or produce translations devoid of logical and analytical thinking, thereby compromising research quality and objectivity. Conversely, excessively easy texts would fail to accurately reflect variations in participants' problem-solving skills.

For this study, excerpts were taken from *The Analects of Confucius* and *the 2015 Report on the Work of the Government*. These texts exhibit contrasting categories: one is expressive, while the other is informative. According to Reiss (2000/2014), informative texts prioritize the conveyance of specific matters, data, or information. Conversely, expressive texts, as noted by Liu and Xu (2015), emphasize the author's emotions or stance on a subject, giving precedence to form. By selecting distinct text types, this study aims to explore their potential impact on information processing, translation unit choice, and translation strategies.

Specifically, the excerpts from *The Analects of Confucius* comprise three individual sentences, whereas the excerpt from *the 2015 Report on the Work of the Government* consists of a paragraph. The selected texts are presented below:

Source Text 1 :

子曰：仁远乎哉？我欲仁，斯仁至矣。（《论语·述而》）

[The Master said, “Is benevolence really far away? I want to be benevolent, and then benevolence is at hand”.]

Source Text 2 :

子曰：居上不宽，为礼不敬，临丧不哀，吾何以观之哉？（《论语·八佾》）

[The Master said, “If one occupies a high position but is not magnanimous, performs rituals without reverence, and faces mourning without sorrow, how can I bear to witness it?”]

Source Text 3 :

子曰：为政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而群星共之。（《论语·为政》）

[The Master said, “Governing with morality is like the Northern Star: it stays in its place while all the other stars revolve around it.”]

Source Text 4 :

大力调整产业结构。着力培育新的增长点，促进服务业加快发展，支持发展移动互联网、集成电路、高端装备制造、新能源汽车等战略性新兴产业，互联网金融异军突起，电子商务、物流快递等新业态快速成长，众多“创客”脱颖而出，文化创意产业蓬勃发展。同时，继续化解过剩产能，钢铁、水泥等 15 个重点行业淘汰落后产能年度任务如期完成。加强雾霾治理，淘汰黄标车和老旧车指标超额完。

[Official English Translation: We channeled great energy into making adjustments in the structure of industry. We focused on fostering new areas of growth by encouraging the service sector to develop more quickly, and supporting the development of strategic emerging industries, including the mobile Internet industry, the integrated circuits industry, high-end equipment manufacturing, and the new-energy vehicles industry. Internet-based finance rose swiftly to prominence. E-commerce, logistics, express delivery services and other emerging businesses developed rapidly. We have seen creators coming thick and fast, and the cultural and creative industries have been developing with great vitality.]

When the texts are chosen, a pilot experiment was conducted with the researcher and an additional participant being the subject. The purpose of this pilot experiment is to acquaint myself with the task and to test whether the texts are fit for the experiment that follows. There exists the need to be familiar with the difficulties that the subjects may encounter during the task, *i.e.* the part where the subjects will take longer time for thinking and when the verbalization stops automatically until a solution is found. This process requires a few seconds and therefore no need to press the subjects into verbalizing.

Analyzing the Selection of Translation Unites

What constitutes a translation unit? Debates around this question have persisted since the concept's inception, centering primarily on what qualifies or should be designated as such a unit.

Initially, Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/1995) discussed potential segments of

translation units based on Saussure's linguistic sign theory. They characterized the translation unit as "the smallest segment of utterance where signs are interconnected to such an extent that translating them individually is inappropriate" (1995, p. 21). In essence, they disputed the notion that a word can serve as a translation unit, emphasizing that a sentence's meaning exceeds the mere summation of each word's semantic content.

Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere introduced a new perspective in 1990, asserting that culture, rather than the word or text, constitutes the functional 'unit' of translation. While culture's significance in translation is undeniable, considering it as the translation unit appears impractical. Translation, inherently a linguistic exercise, should operate within linguistic frameworks.

Snell-Hornby (1995/2006) identified translation units as "a cohesive segment positioned between the word and sentence levels" (p. 16). This definition excludes the 'word' as a potential translation unit and restricts units to the sentence level, excluding any units beyond this scope.

Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997) defined the 'translation unit' as "the linguistic level where the source text is recoded into the target language" (p. 192). However, this definition remains vague and might not align with practical translation processes.

Malmkjær (1998) emphasizes that the clause appears to be a logical structure to target as a translation unit due to its manageable size for attentional focus (p. 26). However, Malmkjær's emphasis on the translator's attention may overlook the fact that translators often opt for units smaller than the clause, prioritizing practicality in the translation process. The actual units utilized by translators, as described by Hatim and Munday (2004), are the linguistic units directly employed during translation (p. 25).

The present authors concur with Hatim and Munday's (2004) definition. This alignment reflects the understanding that the translation unit is not static at any particular linguistic level. Instead, it adapts to the nature of the source texts and the linguistic conventions of the target language. This flexibility resonates with Newmark's (1988) observation that various lengths of language can serve as translation units during the translation process, either simultaneously or at different moments (pp. 66-67).

The Translation Unit in the Transfer between Languages

This part concentrates on the selection of translation units during the translation processes, and the preliminary results of the research show that there indeed exists such thing as translation units, and differences in the selection of translation units exist between experienced and inexperienced translators. The following part will illustrate the differences mentioned above through detailed analysis of the think-aloud protocols of Subject 3 and Subject 12, and discuss how text type influences the selection of translation units. Table 3 is the data about the selection of translation units during the translation processes of the

expressive text, *The Analects of Confucius*, and Table 4 is the informative text, *Report on the Work of the Government (2015)*:

Table 1: Units percentage of Material 1-3

Units Number Subjects	Subjective translation units			Objective translation units		
	Words	Phrases	Clauses	Words	Phrases	(Clauses)
S ₁ M ₁	3(37.5%)	2(25%)	3(37.5%)	7(87.5%)	1(12.5%)	0
S ₁ M ₂	4(40%)	3(30%)	3(30%)	10(76.9%)	2(15.4%)	1(7.7%)
S ₁ M ₃	5(45.5%)	3(27.3%)	3(27.3%)	9(81.8%)	2(18.2%)	0
S ₂ M ₁	4(44.4%)	3(33.3%)	2(22.2%)	6(66.7%)	2(22.2%)	1(11.1%)
S ₂ M ₂	5(50%)	4(40%)	1(10%)	9(75%)	3(25%)	0
S ₂ M ₃	4(50%)	3(37.5%)	1(12.5%)	8(80%)	2(20%)	0
S ₃ M ₁	4(57.1%)	2(28.6%)	1(14.3%)	7(77.8%)	2(22.2%)	0
S ₃ M ₂	3(37.5%)	4(50%)	1(12.5%)	9(90%)	1(10%)	0
S ₃ M ₃	3(37.5%)	3(37.5%)	2(25%)	8(72.7%)	2(18.2%)	1(9.1%)
S ₄ M ₁	4(50%)	2(25%)	2(25%)	10(71.4%)	3(21.4%)	1(7.1%)
S ₄ M ₂	4(40%)	4(40%)	2(20%)	11(78.6%)	3(21.4%)	0
S ₄ M ₃	5(55.6%)	2(22.2%)	2(22.2%)	9(81.8%)	2(18.2%)	0
S ₅ M ₁	2(28.6%)	2(28.6%)	3(42.8%)	5(62.5%)	2(25%)	1(12.5%)
S ₅ M ₂	3(37.5%)	2(25%)	3(37.5%)	6(60%)	3(30%)	1(10%)
S ₅ M ₃	4(44.4%)	3(33.3%)	2(22.2%)	6(60%)	3(30%)	1(10%)
S ₆ M ₁	3(37.5%)	3(37.5%)	2(25%)	5(71.4%)	2(28.6%)	0
S ₆ M ₂	4(40%)	4(40%)	2(20%)	7(63.6%)	3(27.3)	1(9.1%)
S ₆ M ₃	3(37.5%)	2(25%)	3(37.5%)	6(60%)	3(30%)	1(10%)
S ₇ M ₁	2(25%)	4(50%)	2(25%)	5(50%)	3(30%)	2(20%)
S ₇ M ₂	3(27.3%)	5(45.5%)	3(27.3%)	6(50%)	4(33.3%)	2(16.7%)
S ₇ M ₃	2(28.6%)	3(42.8%)	2(28.6%)	5(71.4%)	2(28.6%)	0
S ₈ M ₁	4(44.4%)	3(33.3%)	2(22.2%)	7(63.6%)	3(27.3)	1(9.1%)
S ₈ M ₂	5(45.5%)	3(27.3%)	3(27.3%)	7(63.6%)	2(18.2%)	2(18.2%)
S ₈ M ₃	4(50%)	2(25%)	2(25%)	6(66.7%)	3(33.3%)	0
S ₉ M ₁	3(37.5%)	3(37.5%)	2(25%)	7(70%)	2(20%)	1(10%)
S ₉ M ₂	4(44.4%)	2(22.2%)	3(33.3%)	6(66.7%)	3(33.3%)	0
S ₉ M ₃	2(22.2%)	4(44.4%)	3(33.3%)	6(66.7%)	2(22.2%)	1(11.1%)

S ₁₀ M ₁	3(37.5%)	3(37.5%)	2(25%)	5(62.5%)	3(37.5%)	0
S ₁₀ M ₂	3(37.5%)	2(25%)	3(37.5%)	7(70%)	2(20%)	1(10%)
S ₁₀ M ₃	2(40%)	2(40%)	1(20%)	5(62.5%)	2(25%)	1(12.5%)
S ₁₁ M ₁	3(42.8%)	2(28.6%)	2(28.6%)	4(57.1%)	1(14.3%)	2(28.6%)
S ₁₁ M ₂	4(40%)	3(30%)	3(30%)	2(28.6%)	2(28.6%)	3(42.8%)
S ₁₁ M ₃	2(40%)	1(20%)	2(40%)	4(57.1%)	2(28.6%)	1(14.3%)
S ₁₂ M ₁	2(40%)	1(20%)	2(40%)	3(50%)	1(16.7%)	2(33.3%)
S ₁₂ M ₂	3(37.5%)	2(25%)	3(37.5%)	4(50%)	1(12.5%)	3(37.5%)
S ₁₂ M ₃	2(28.6%)	2(28.6%)	3(42.8%)	4(50%)	2(25%)	2(25%)
S ₁₃ M ₁	3(42.8%)	2(28.6%)	2(28.6%)	4(57.1%)	2(28.6%)	1(14.3%)
S ₁₃ M ₂	4(40%)	3(30%)	3(30%)	5(55.6%)	2(22.2%)	2(22.2%)
S ₁₃ M ₃	3(37.5%)	2(25%)	3(37.5%)	5(71.4%)	1(14.2%)	1(14.2%)
S ₁₄ M ₁	2(28.6%)	2(28.6%)	3(42.8%)	3(42.8%)	2(28.6%)	2(28.6%)
S ₁₄ M ₂	3(33.3%)	3(33.3%)	3(33.3%)	4(44.4%)	2(22.2%)	3(33.3%)
S ₁₄ M ₃	2(40%)	1(20%)	2(40%)	3(42.8%)	2(28.6%)	2(28.6%)
S ₁₅ M ₁	3(42.8%)	2(28.6%)	2(28.6%)	4(66.7%)	1(16.7%)	1(16.7%)
S ₁₅ M ₂	4(40%)	3(30%)	3(30%)	4(44.4%)	2(22.2%)	3(33.3%)
S ₁₅ M ₃	3(37.5%)	2(25%)	3(37.5%)	5(55.6%)	2(22.2%)	2(22.2%)

Table 2: Unit Percentage of Material 4

Subject	Subjective translation units				Objective translation units			
	Unit Number (Words)	(Phrases)	(Clauses)	(Sentences)	(Words)	(Phrases)	(Clauses)	(Sentences)
S ₁ M ₄	25(49%)	20(39%)	5(10%)	1(2%)	30(51%)	25(43%)	3(5%)	0(0%)
S ₂ M ₄	28(48%)	24(41%)	4(7%)	2(3%)	31(52%)	26(43%)	2(3%)	1(2%)
S ₃ M ₄	26(42%)	28(45%)	6(10%)	2(3%)	28(47%)	28(47%)	4(7%)	0(0%)
S ₄ M ₄	29(38%)	30(46%)	5(8%)	1(2%)	32(48%)	31(46%)	3(4%)	1(1%)
S ₅ M ₄	27(42%)	29(45%)	6(9%)	2(3%)	30(49%)	27(44%)	4(7%)	0(0%)
S ₆ M ₄	28(41%)	32(47%)	7(10%)	1(1%)	26(42%)	30(48%)	5(8%)	1(2%)
S ₇ M ₄	26(39%)	34(52%)	5(8%)	1(2%)	29(43%)	32(46%)	4(6%)	1(1%)
S ₈ M ₄	27(40%)	33(49%)	6(13%)	2(3%)	30(49%)	29(45%)	5(8%)	0(0%)
S ₉ M ₄	30(46%)	29(45%)	5(8%)	1(2%)	32(48%)	30(45%)	3(5%)	1(2%)
S ₁₀ M ₄	29(41%)	34(48%)	6(8%)	2(3%)	30(46%)	32(49%)	3(5%)	0(0%)
S ₁₁ M ₄	25(36%)	35(51%)	7(10%)	2(3%)	27(41%)	30(46%)	8(12%)	1(2%)
S ₁₂ M ₄	24(35%)	37(54%)	6(9%)	1(1%)	28(42%)	34(52%)	3(5%)	1(2%)
S ₁₃ M ₄	26(37%)	37(52%)	7(10%)	1(1%)	29(42%)	33(49%)	6(9%)	1(1%)
S ₁₄ M ₄	23(33%)	36(52%)	8(12%)	2(3%)	26(38%)	37(54%)	5(7%)	1(1%)
S ₁₅ M ₄	22(33%)	36(54%)	7(10%)	2(3%)	26(35%)	38(51%)	9(12%)	1(1%)

The table reveals the presence of two categories of translation units: subjective and objective. Subjective translation units refer to the linguistic segments that translators intentionally utilize as translation units, as evident in TAPs. These units represent the focal points of attention during text processing by participants. While participants may be confident in their chosen translation units, translators often resort to smaller units when facing difficulties adhering to their initial selections. This flexibility indicates that the translation unit is not static at any given linguistic level; rather, it evolves throughout the translation process. This adaptability leads to the introduction of another concept: the objective translation unit, defined as the actual language segments employed by a translator during the translation process.

The identification of subjective translation units was achieved through questionnaires and interviews conducted after the think-aloud experiment. Participants were queried about their methods of segmenting source texts, specifically, what constituted their units of analysis. Additionally, they were asked whether they maintained their initial choices or shifted to alternative units. Objective translation units, on the other hand, were identified by examining the linguistic segments translators employed to analyze source texts and how these segments were aligned in the target language. Furthermore, specific

language tokens, such as “接下来” (next), “然后” (and then), and “我认为” (I think), were identified in the protocols, aiding in the determination of the translation units selected by translators.

Initially, the text type plays a significant role in determining the units of analysis during the comprehension phase. In this phase, translators’ hesitation and pauses become noticeable. When translators encounter a linguistic segment suitable as a translation unit, they halt further comprehension. The size of this unit varies depending on the text being translated. If the translator is familiar with the text type or content, they tend to comprehend sentences or paragraphs holistically, striving to convey the entire semantic meaning. In other words, they aim to utilize the largest translation units possible. However, when faced with more challenging texts—such as those laden with terminology or difficult to comprehend—or when the text type is unfamiliar, translators often opt to break down sentences or paragraphs into smaller units for enhanced understanding or to find equivalents.

Additionally, experience is crucial, as even if a translator is familiar with the text type or content and intends to utilize larger translation units, a lack of experience can hinder their execution. Despite having a comprehensive understanding of the sentence, inexperience may prevent the translator from effectively integrating the semantic meaning of the source text into a cohesive entity in the target language. This difficulty arises from a limited ability to achieve semantic coherence.

This assertion is supported by data gathered from interviews. Specifically, 90% of the professional and semi-professional translators (comprising of 5 professionals and 4 semi-professionals among a total of 10 participants) in this study acknowledged that their familiarity with the texts dictates the size of the translation units they intend to use. That is, the more familiar they are with the texts, the larger units they will use in the translation, and vice versa. However, they noted that they may adjust their initial choices when facing difficulties with the texts during the translation process. On the other hand, the five inexperienced translators stated that differences in text types do not significantly impact their selection of translation units. As Tables 3 and 4 illustrate, these translators primarily focus on word and phrase-level units, emphasizing textual cohesion. This approach aligns with Bassnett’s (2002) warning that treating each word or phrase “as a minimum unit and translates it without relating it to the overall work, he runs the risk of ending up with a TL text where the paraphrasable content of the passages has been translated at the cost of everything else” (p. 117).

Conclusion

The concept of translation units has long captivated researchers, leading to numerous studies exploring their existence. It is widely recognized that translators indeed

select specific units during their translation processes. The findings of this study indicate that both text types and translator competence significantly influence the choice of translation units, with the latter proving to be a particularly influential factor. Data analysis reveals that as a text becomes more familiar, translators tend to opt for larger translation units. However, even when translating the same familiar text, translators' unit selections vary due to differences in their abilities. Specifically, more experienced translators favor larger, more manageable units, while less experienced translators gravitate towards smaller ones. Furthermore, the results underscore that translation units are not static at any given linguistic level; instead, they adapt dynamically based on the texts being translated and the translators executing the task.

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