

A Relevance-Theoretic Approach to Mistranslation

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When appreciating or evaluating the quality of translation, people would always find some translation unsatisfactory, which they call improper translation or mistranslation. Previous researches, with faithfulness as the criterion, define mistranslation as derivation from the original, holding that mistranslation is resulted from the discrepancy between languages and cultures. Fruitful as these descriptive-classificatory approaches are, they fail to explain how linguistic and cultural factor resulted in mistranslation in the process of translating. Progress of cognitive-pragmatics provides the possibility to reveal the psychological root of mistranslation. According to relevance theory, the foundation of cognitive-pragmatics, human communication is an ostensive-inferential process, in which the hearer infers the communicator's intention by combing his contextual assumptions with the communicator's ostensive stimulus (utterance). Relevance is the basic principle to abide by. That is, adequate contextual effects are reached at minimal processing effort. Viewing translation as human communication, this paper defines mistranslation as cross-cultural pragmatic failure. In the framework of relevance theory, the process of translation is subdivided into two ostensive-inferential processes: communication between the source text author and the translator and communication between the translator and the target audience. The roles of cognitive context are examined in both processes and mismatches of context are postulated to account for mistranslation.

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