Analysing your Source Text

It is important to get to know your ST well before starting to translate it, so that you don’t make any inappropriate decisions. As a starting point, read Munday (2012, ch.5). The ST analysis, or at least relevant sections of it, will feed into your commentary, if you are being asked to write one.

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Nord’s TOSTA model

Nord’s Translation-Orientated Source Text Analysis or T.O.S.T.A model (1991, 1997), summarized in a diagram below, covers all the questions you need to ask yourself. Nord’s model is based on a functionalist approach to translation, and considers both INTRATEXTUAL (elements within the text) and EXTRA-LINGUISTIC (elements from outside the text) features. Functionalism (sometimes called SKOPOS THEORY) is the theory of translation that argues that the translation process is guided by the extra-linguistic features of a text, more specifically by the function of translation.

IMPORTANT: Remembering that at this point, you are only considering the source text. However, you should always be thinking about how the answers to the questions will change when applied to your target text.
The Extra-Linguistic or Situational Features

Any text is a 'communicative event', embedded in a situation or context, and so determined by its 'situational features'. These are the features external to the text which influence the way a text has been written:

"Texts adopt different linguistic features and forms (vocabulary, syntax, organization, register, etc.) dependent upon extra-linguistic factors such as the characteristics of the audience they address, the textual function, the motive for production, and the time and place of reception". (Colina, 2015: 43-44)

a) Situational Features: time, place and medium of publication

- **Time of reception.** When was your ST published/received by its audience? Are there deictic elements in the text which tie it to its time of production?
- **Place of reception.** Where was the ST received (ranging from the highly local – one person’s letterbox – to the local – a poster in a village shop, or a class handout – to the national – a newspaper – to the international – a website that is available worldwide)?
- **Medium. In what form was it distributed** (printed on a page, displayed on a screen, handwritten)? Has the method by which the ST has been distributed has imposed constraints on its production (eg the convention for shorter paragraphs in a web article; a particular publication’s house-style; the requirements of a text, like a children’s story, which is designed to be both read and heard)? [Links to genre – see section d].

b) Situational Features II: function and motive

- **Function.** What is the text trying to get its reader/receiver to do? Texts have purposes and authors have intentions: to convince someone to do something, like vote labour, or to inform someone about something, like a talk that is taking place, or persuade someone to do something, like eat more healthily, or teach someone how to do something, like put a model together, and so on.
• **Motive.** What was the impulse that prompted the production of this text? Perhaps new health advice has been issued by the government, a talk has been scheduled, a new product has been launched, and so on.

c) **Situational Features III: Audience**

**Who is receiving this text?** It is important to consider the education backgrounds, the age, particular knowledgebase, belief system or political stance which will make the audience react in a certain way to a text.

According to Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory, when a communicator (i.e. a speaker or writer) produces a stimulus, the receptor (i.e. the listener or reader) picks up clues both from the stimulus itself and from the context in which it is produced, and infers what the communicator intends to convey (Sperber and Wilson, 2004). It is assumed that the communicator is not putting the receptor to work unnecessarily, is communicating something relevant (hence Relevance Theory) and that the audience will not have to put in any unnecessary work. Relevance is relative, and depends upon the receptor’s knowledge. Herein lies the problem for the translator: estimating how much background knowledge the SR had and comparing that to the background knowledge of the TR.

Eugène Nida (1964) was the first to consider the role of the reader as a factor in translation. He classified readers into four types, distinguished according to their ability to decode a source text, the Bible in his case (See Venuti (2000, p.155); Mossop (2009)):

- the capacity of children, whose vocabulary and cultural experience are limited;
- the double-standard capacity of new literates, who can decode oral messages with facility but whose ability to decode written messages is limited;
- the capacity of the average literature adult, who can handle both oral and written messages with relative ease; and
- the unusually high capacity of specialists (doctors, theologians, philosophers, scientists, etc.), when they are decoding messages within their own area of specialization.

d) **Situational Features V: Genre**

It is important to know which ‘genre’ your text falls into, because each genre of text has its own **conventions**, and these may differ between Source Culture and Target Culture (for example instruction leaflets will use the infinitive in French and the imperative in English, there are different conventions in the formulation of headlines between French and English).
Broadly speaking, texts fall into two over-arching macro-genres: they are either narrative (involving characters, a protagonist, a sequence of events, and so on) or expository (texts which inform, describe, explain or argue) (Grabe, 2002). Hervey and Higgins (2002: 57ff) refine this rather blunt division into five genres, based upon the writer’s attitude to the subject and the desired effect upon the reader: empirical (‘an objective view of observable phenomena’), philosophical, religious, persuasive, and literary. Within the broader groupings there are plenty of sub-genres, each of which will have their own characteristics or conventions which a translator must take into account: reference books, recipes, blogs, lectures, advertisements, letters, tourist brochures, reports, speeches, plays, poetry, etc.

For Grego (2010: 68, 101), the notion of genre is fuzzier, and involves a lot of overlap: there is no such thing as a ‘pure’ genre. She defines genre as a recognizable communicative event, one which is mutually understandable, having recognisable elements, similar structures and similar stylistic patterns. The features are defined:

- partly by the sender and receiver. Content will be presented in different ways depending on who is talking to whom. For example, a patient’s medical records (specialist communicating to specialist) will have different features to an instruction manual or a textbook (specialist communicating to a non-specialist).
- partly by the setting (an online recipe, letters to the editor in a newspaper)

Some genres are more rigid than others. For example, an ‘invoice’ must always contain certain elements, whereas a ‘report’ is a much more flexible format. There are very few pure or crystallised genres; Grego cites the medical research article as one example, fixed in every respect, from the clarity of the language to the specific “logical-argumentative” structure (2002: 71).

One way of comparing the conventions of genres across languages is to use Model Target Texts (sometimes called ‘parallel texts’, although this term is ambiguous since it is also used to label texts in which the ST and the TT are presented side-by-side or on facing pages). In addition, depending on the genre you have chosen, you might also want to investigate the expectancy norms (Chesterman: 1997: 81-84) for different kinds of English texts. Chesterman cites research into the expected features of certain genres showing for example that the average sentence length in an English detective novel is 13 words, compared to 25 words for government documents; that 20% of all clauses in English scientific texts are relative clauses, compared to
9% in popular texts; that it is typical in English to mention the main point early on in an article, in contrast to some other languages, and so on.

See also: Newmark, 1988: 44 and Nord, 1997: 37

e) Situational Features VI: Text-type
Reiss builds upon Buhler’s and Jakobson’s attempts to classify the functions of language, with a view to applying them to the work of translators. The three principle functions as defined by Reiss (see Nord, 1997: 37; Reiss, 1981; Newmark, 1988: 39-44) are:

- **Expressive** – serious literature, authoritative statements such as political speeches, personal correspondence, autobiographies, etc. Characteristics: creativity; idiolect; neologisms; marked collocations; unusual metaphors; (ie all very ‘personal’ and not to be effaced or normalised). The author is ‘sacred’ (Newmark).
- **Informative/Referential** – textbooks, reports, newspaper articles, scientific papers, minutes of a meeting. Characteristics: plain communication of facts, or external situations; ideas and theories; standard format; formal style. The author is ‘anonymous’ (Newmark).
- **Operative/Vocative/Appellative** – notices, instructions, publicity, propaganda, popular fiction that needs to sell itself. Characteristics: importance of the reader/readership, attempt to induce a behavioural response; call to action, personal address, language of persuasion, clear expression. The author is ‘anonymous’ (Newmark).

Two further functions are rejected by Reiss on the basis that they are not discrete types, rather elements of these functions can be found in all three text types. You might nonetheless find them useful labels in certain circumstances. They are:

- **Aesthetic/Poetic** – poetry and verse, advertisements. Characteristics: pleasing to the senses; prioritizing of sound and rhythm; metaphor to call to the senses.
- **Phatic** – semantically ‘empty’ language, eg conversation openers and fillers. Characteristics: existing to facilitate human contact; sometimes universal, sometimes culture-specific (British references to the weather; closing statements in French formal letters)

There is a further function added by Reiss, which she calls **Hyper-text** (texts incorporating a visual element, or music, or oral material). It is not necessarily the case that there will be one text-type label that applies per text. Often the categories overlap and texts can present different text-type features at different points. Consider for example a report that has been
written by a company for its shareholders. This will certainly have an informative function, since it aims to describe the current state of the company; however, it will also have an operative function, since such reports are also a means of encouraging current shareholders to increase their investment, and future shareholders to take the plunge.

The Intra-Textual Features

The following are elements that you might consider when attempting to characterise your source text, inspired by Nord’s list of intra-textual features (2005: 87-142).

- What is the **subject matter** of the text, in other words its main topic? Does it require any special terminology, or background knowledge (maybe cultural, e.g. use of culture-bound terms, or technical, i.e. assuming particular specialist knowledge)?
- How is the text **organised**? Chapters, long paragraphs, short paragraphs, any special features of presentation like a sidebar, particular layout? Is the information organised coherently? Is there information included that will become redundant for the TR?
- Are there any **non-verbal elements**, such as photos, diagrams or logos, and what is the function of these?
- How would you characterize the **vocabulary** (technical, jargonistic or colloquial, are there collocations, idioms, key words, words chosen for particular effects, lots of acronyms or abbreviations, neologisms, particular lexical fields, examples of regional or social variation)?
- What are the features of the **sentence structure** (mainly long or short sentences, simple or complex ones?
- How would you characterize the **style**? Journalistic, grandiloquent, rambling, punchy, turgid or circuitous (there is a great list of words used to describe writing style [here](#)). Are there particular rhetorical devices that come into play (tropes and schemes)?
- Are there any **suprasegmental features** (particular ways in which the text is formatted, or uses of punctuation and so on)?

Consider too the register. There are three broad levels (soutenu, courant, familier), but Newmark (1988, p.14) makes a number of other distinctions:

**Officialese**: ‘The consumption of any nutriments whatsoever is categorically prohibited in this establishment.’

**Official**: ‘the consumption of nutriments is prohibited.’

**Formal**: ‘You are requested not to consume food in this establishment.’

**Neutral**: ‘Eating is not allowed here.’

**Informal**: ‘Please do not eat here.’
Colloquial: ‘You can’t feed your face here.’
Slang: ‘Lay off the nosh.’
Taboo: ‘Lay off the fucking nosh.’

And Colina uses the following classifications (2015: section 6.4):
- Frozen register: static, as the name suggests, things like prayers and laws, anthems.
- Formal: official tone, formal vocabulary, fixed forms, standard language.
- Consultative: asking for assistance or offering advice or passing on knowledge; between doctor/patient, lawyer/client, employer/employee, teacher/student, etc; one person having more expertise than the other.
- Casual/Informal: between friends, relaxed tone; maybe involves slang, contractions.
- Intimate: where there is a close relationship, slang, terms of endearment.

Bibliography


Christiane Nord (1997) Translating as a Purposeful Activity. Manchester: St Jerome

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