
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Understanding the Reader's Experience: A Psychological Approach to Improving Translation's Readability

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses reading psychology theory to improve translation's readability. Reading psychology theory provides a new lens through which to enhance focus on the reader's mental process. This approach offers solutions to traditional translation issues. This paper presents the following points for consideration: First, the translation should ensure that the information is comprehensive and consistent, to avoid confusing the reader or causing misunderstandings; Second, the translator must consider how the translated content interacts with the reader's existing knowledge and anticipate the target audiences' characteristics; Third, hypertextual information must be kept rich and cohesive in the translation; Fourth, the background knowledge, cognitive abilities, values, emotional motivations, and reading goals of the target audience should be comprehensively considered to facilitate a positive reading experience; Fifth, the author's original details should be fully retained without unauthorized alterations, and it is advisable to consult with the original author when necessary. At the same time, this paper also addresses the current situation of translation works in the context of the Internet environment in the information age.

KEYWORDS

Reading Psychology; Translation Strategy; Readability; Internet

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1. Introduction

As translators, the simplest yet the most essential and important motivation is the desire to translate the author's original work (text) in a faithful and beautiful way. The original text itself is fixed, unchanging, and specific. Since readers are unable to read it in the original language, they rely on the translator to convert it into a language they can understand through the translator's language skills. The way readers enjoy the work, feel its essence, and absorb its value is through reading. This implies that the translator must fully understand the psychological process of readers during their reading experience, paying attention to the elements that influence it. To achieve this, the translator must be familiar with reading psychology. From a reader-centered perspective, a competent translator should consider which elements of the original text to focus on, and which aspects to prioritize. These considerations will guide decisions made during the translation process, optimizing and adjusting the translation. In practice, the translator must comprehensively consider the reader's background knowledge, cognitive capacity, values, emotional motivations, and reading goals while also attending to the reader's overall reading experience. By focusing on these aspects, the translator can target their efforts in a way that enhances the readability of the translation.

2. Overview of Relevant Theories

2.1 Three Models of the Reading Process in Reading Psychology

If we see "translation" as a communication process that spans time and space between the original author, the translator, and the reader, reading is the final and most important part of this process, as well as its ultimate goal. Reading is a reverse action of

writing and translation. Authors and translators use writing and translation to express their ideas, and readers interpret the text to understand their intentions. This touches on the psychological study of text comprehension.

The study of various psychological phenomena and their patterns in reading activities is known as “reading psychology” (Zhang Biyin, 2004, cited in Zhang Yupei, 2020). Western reading psychology began in the late 1880s when psychologists like Cattell initiated perceptual studies of reading materials, with a central focus on understanding the basic processes of reading. Since then, research on areas such as word recognition, text memory, and eye movement has developed rapidly, leading to the creation of numerous theoretical models. The reading process models proposed by psychologists can mainly be categorized into three types: the Bottom-up Model (proposed by Philip B. Gough), the Top-down Model (proposed by Kenneth S. Goodman), and the Interactive Model (proposed by David E. Rumelhart).

When studying reading behavior, Gough used information processing theory to describe the reading process as a “bottom-up” approach, where readers identify language units (such as words and sentences) step by step in order to understand the meaning of the text (Gough, 1972, cited in Chen Jia et al., 2015). This “bottom-up” process is essentially a cognitive progression, starting from the text and moving from lower-level to higher-level units, which is why it is also known as a “data-driven” process. Research on how teachers teach reading comprehension has found that when teaching, teachers often use the bottom-up model to help students tackle language obstacles, such as explaining new vocabulary and grammar, with the goal of deepening their understanding of the text. However, even when students overcome these language challenges, they do not always grasp the author’s true intentions. In other words, students might understand the vocabulary and grammar, but they only understand the surface-level meaning of the sentences and fail to capture the underlying messages embedded in the text. This is largely due to a lack of background knowledge, and in this process, readers remain entirely passive, receiving explanations of words and grammar without becoming active participants in the reading process (Chen Jia et al., 2015). As a result, the “bottom-up” model has its limitations.

Goodman describes the reading process as a “psycholinguistic guessing game”, in which readers use their existing knowledge to guess the author’s intentions, continuously testing and revising these guesses as they read, and gradually refining their understanding until they fully grasp the author’s message (Goodman, 1967, cited in Chen Jia et al., 2015). This view highlights the importance of the reader’s prior knowledge in the reading process. It suggests that readers are not passive recipients of information but active thinkers who use their knowledge to interpret the author’s intent and thus become the true agents of the reading process. This model emphasizes the role of higher-level knowledge, such as semantic, background, and contextual knowledge, in guiding and driving reading, and is often called a “concept-driven” process. Some scholars refer to this as the “top-down” model of reading. According to this theory, a reader’s existing knowledge and understanding of the article’s context are more important than overcoming language barriers. A reader’s background knowledge and personal experiences greatly influence their interpretation of a text. As a result, different readers will interpret the same text differently based on their own experiences. A lack of relevant background knowledge can lead to misinterpretations of the author’s intent. Therefore, having the right knowledge is essential. However, while this model emphasizes background knowledge, it tends to overlook reading skills such as vocabulary and grammar. In reality, the ability to quickly and accurately recognize language in a text is crucial to understanding it, as it forms the foundation of reading. Thus, both the “bottom-up” and “top-down” models have their shortcomings, as they both treat reading as a one-way, simplistic process (Chen Jia et al., 2015).

The Interactive Model addresses the shortcomings of the other two models by emphasizing that reading is not merely a “bottom-up” or “top-down” process, but rather one in which both processes interact. It is a bidirectional, interactive process that explains how various types of information influence one another during reading. According to this model, semantics, syntax, vocabulary, orthography, and visual information all interact, shaping the reader’s understanding of the text. The different levels of the reading process interact with each other. Stanovich’s interactive compensation model introduces an important idea: “Information processing at any level can compensate for deficiencies at other levels” (Stanovich, 1980, cited in Chen Jia et al., 2015). This means that readers of a translation can use their background knowledge to compensate for gaps in their understanding of semantics, syntax, vocabulary, orthography, and visual information, helping them to form a comprehensive understanding of the translation.

The Interactive Model includes a highly organized information center called the “model synthesizer”, which stores a “catalog of continuous hypotheses about the input string’s nature.” As the reader processes the text, knowledge sources such as vocabulary, syntax, and semantics continuously search through this catalog to find hypotheses relevant to the input. Once a hypothesis is generated, it is evaluated and analyzed by the knowledge sources in the information center. If the hypothesis is rejected, it is removed, and a new hypothesis may replace it. This process continues until the most fitting explanation is confirmed (Zhang Biyin, 2004, cited in Zhang Yupei, 2020). When we apply this theory to the reader’s interaction with a translated text, we can see that the reader’s psychological process is ongoing. Throughout this process, the reader continuously receives information from

the translation, evaluates and analyzes it, formulates hypotheses, and constantly reassesses these hypotheses. This cycle is how the reader processes the translation's information. For this reason, it is crucial for the translator to ensure that the translation contains complete information, as only well-developed information can serve as useful material for evaluation and analysis. Furthermore, the information must be consistent, coherent, smooth, and rich; otherwise, readers may be confused or misled and fail to understand the translation correctly, potentially leading to misinterpretation or distortion.

Carrell believes that the Interactive Model can also be referred to as the Schema Theory Model, where schemas are the knowledge structures stored in a person's memory. This theory posits that reading is a process in which the reader's existing schemas interact with the content of the text. When the reader's existing knowledge aligns with the information provided by the author, the reader can better understand the text (Carrell, 1984, cited in Chen Jia et al., 2015). The Schema Theory integrates both "bottom-up" and "top-down" processes, emphasizing the interactive nature of reading. In the "bottom-up" process, the reader's relevant schemas are activated by the text's information, while in the "top-down" process, the activated schemas help the reader predict and understand the author's intent by applying their existing knowledge. These two processes occur simultaneously and interactively, leading to comprehension of the text. Thus, reading is a process of interaction between the knowledge stored in the reader's memory and the information from the text (Chen Jia et al., 2015). Here, "interactivity" refers not to physical interaction with the translated text, but to the interaction between the information from the text and the knowledge structure in the reader's mind, which aids in the reader's understanding of the translation. Schema Theory suggests that translators should consider how the information in the translation interacts with the reader's existing knowledge structures. By anticipating the target audience's characteristics and general knowledge base, translators can tailor their approach during the translation process.

2.2 Hypertextual Components in the Context of the Internet Era

The "information" in a translation does not always refer solely to the literal textual information; it also includes certain hypertextual elements. The concept of "hypertext" currently has two meanings. One refers to information beyond the textual content, including politics, culture, and ideology. The other refers to written or pictorial materials that are interconnected in a complex manner, such as the Internet, which serves as a large-scale hypertext.

The concept of "hypertext" was first introduced by French literary theorist Gérard Genette, who referred to it as "paratext". Genette described paratext as the elements and conventions outside the main text that form part of the complex interaction between the text, the author, the publisher, and the reader. He argued that "paratext connects the text with what lies outside it, expanding the boundaries of the original work" (Genette, 1997, cited in Gao Fei, 2015). This understanding of paratext has broadened the scope of translation studies. According to Genette, paratext includes things like titles, subtitles, pen names, prefaces, dedications, inscriptions, annotations, afterwords, appendices, covers, illustrations, author bios, media reviews, and different language versions---elements shaped by various real-world factors (Genette, 1997, cited in Liu Lisheng & Liao Zhiqin, 2011). Referring to the theory of the "information center" in the interactive reading model, where readers continuously form and revise hypotheses based on the information they encounter, we can see that readers do the same when processing hypertextual information. Therefore, translators must ensure that the hypertextual elements in their translations remain rich, cohesive, and consistent.

The second concept of "hypertext" was coined by Ted Nelson, who defined it as a collection of written or visual materials interconnected in complex ways. It refers to a structured, distributed information resource made up of nodes and links, often characterized by features such as intertextuality, multiple linearity, and intertwining (Nelson, 1965, cited in He Shuqing, 2019). Hypertext can serve as a narrative tool for studying readers' perceptions, understanding, narrative design, and spatial visualization (Nelson, 1965, cited in Gao Fei, 2015). Essentially, hypertext is the fundamental structure of the Internet. Mona Baker believes that "a website itself is a hypertext. This hypertext is made up of various components: site descriptions, annotations, images, layouts, hyperlinks, column titles, pictures, videos, tones, and the titles of different topics" (Baker, 2010, cited in Zhang Meifang, 2011). Christiane Nord suggests that although hypertext translation cannot be considered a research paradigm, it raises many exciting questions for translation studies, such as whether the translated text is a hypertext of the original or vice versa, and the role of the translator within this structure (Nord, 2012, cited in Gao Fei, 2015). Introducing the concepts and perspectives of paratext and hypertext into translation studies undoubtedly expands the theoretical framework. The key difference between the Internet and traditional environments is the extensive use of paratext and hypertext (Gao Fei, 2015). Chinese domestic scholars researching translation ethics from the hypertext perspective have pointed out that in the online environment, the roles of the original author, translator, reader, and translation reviewer are more distinct. Hypertext contains interconnected information points that allow readers to browse freely and exercise their cognitive abilities. Readers can even comment, upload images, or post their own translations beneath the translator's work. Thus, the reading process in the hypertext context provides readers with greater opportunities and power for participation, creating an interactive space between the translator, translation

readers, and the translated text. Furthermore, translation readers can directly link to the original text's website and may even interact with the original author and readers, thus bringing them into the scope of translation studies (Gao Fei, 2015). Through paratext and hypertext, translators, translation readers, and even original authors or their readers can engage in cross-temporal and cross-spatial dialogue, participating equally in the cultural exchange process and influencing both cultures.

Through the internet, translation has largely broken free from the limitations of time and space that traditional translation mediums impose. Translation products are now presented in a dynamic, multidimensional form, with production and consumption almost synchronized (Gao Fei, 2015). In this era, the reading process has become more convenient for readers because the range of available reading materials (translations) has expanded, and the accessibility of these translations has increased, often being available for free online. This shift raises the bar for translation quality as the competition between different translations has become more intense.

3. Addressing Translation Readability with the Reader in Mind

The translator's primary responsibility is to engage with the original text, where they also act as a reader. This allows the translator to experience the psychological state of the reader firsthand. By imagining themselves as the reader of their own translation, the translator can better understand the reader's perspective and needs, as well as the intended impact of the original work. This perspective can lead to a more effective translation. As a reader, what aspects are typically focused on during the reading process? These elements should guide the translator in their translation choices. For instance, they may focus on the author's background, the historical context of the work, the emotions conveyed, the values and worldviews expressed, the knowledge imparted, the social issues addressed, the aesthetic experience offered, and the imaginative space created, etc. In the process of translating, the translator should carefully consider the reader's background knowledge (or knowledge structure), capacity to receive information, value orientation, emotional status, and reading purposes to provide an optimal environment for a meaningful reading experience and ultimately improve the readability of the translation.

In the previous section on relevant theories, the "Schema Theory" of the reading process was introduced. Schemas refer to the knowledge structures stored in the brain based on memory. In the reading schema theory, the "top-down" process emphasizes the role of the reader's existing knowledge in reading. Generally, a reader's existing knowledge structure includes, but is not limited to, general knowledge and common sense. For a specific professional audience, the knowledge structure may include specialized knowledge, whereas, for a general audience, the reader may not have a specialized knowledge structure. These differences in the reader's background are important when translating a work. When introducing a work, for general readers, translators can provide as many details as possible about the knowledge background to help readers better understand it and satisfy their curiosity. For readers who already have a specific knowledge structure, there is no need to over-explain, as this could lead to boredom.

For translations of series works, it is essential to ensure that the text and its associated hypertext information are consistent and complete across volumes----what has been previously stated need not be repeated, while anything new must be included. The translator can cleverly introduce key knowledge points into the text, helping the reader gain a more comprehensive understanding of the information in case they forget.

The reader naturally makes predictions as they read, just as the interactive reading model tells us. These predictions help stimulate the reader's imagination and further thoughts. Therefore, the translator should preserve all the contextually relevant information in their translation, maintaining the author's foreshadowing, groundwork, plot details, additions, explanations, and clarifications. They should also avoid making unnecessary or potentially inappropriate changes based on their own assumptions. When unsure, the translator should consult the original author, as the author understands their work better and knows what they wanted to say and how they said it.

4. Conclusion

The psychological theories proposed by reading psychologists offer a new perspective and practical guidelines for improving the readability of translated works. What's more, in the context of the information age, translated works are faced with challenges that translated works' accessibility increased and interactivity between authors and readers enhanced. Under these circumstances, translators should focus on the reader's experience, and anticipate their reading journey. By putting themselves into the reader's shoes, translators could practice the following aspects to improve their translation strategies: First, keep the information in the translation rich and consistent, to avoid misunderstanding or confusion; Second, pay attention to the existing knowledge that the audience may already have, and avoid over-explaining; Third, try his/her best to keep the hypertext as rich and consistent as the original text; Fourth, comprehensively consider the reader's knowledge structure, acceptance, value,

emotion and reading goals to create a good environment for reading; Fifth, keep the original details intact, better consult the author when tackling.

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