

**“Babeş-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca**  
**Faculty of Letters**

**MEANING: TRANSFORMATION OR  
MALFORMATION IN THE TRANSLATION PROCESS**

**- A Summary -**

**Doctoral Supervisor:**

**Prof. Mihai Zdrenghea, Ph.D.**

**Doctoral Candidate:**

**Maria-Teodora Creangă**

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## A SUMMARY

**Key-words:** semantic meaning, pragmatic meaning, meaning transfer, meaning transformation, meaning malformation, semantic translation, pragmatic translation, translation process, teaching translation.

The present thesis is organized as follows: an introduction, four chapters, conclusions, appendix and bibliographical references. The **introduction** presents a few key aspects: first of all, the aim of the thesis is presented in the context of the ever-increasing need of communication among individuals who belong to different linguistic and cultural communities; second, it presents the motivation behind this research; third, it makes a short presentation of the specific aim of each and every chapter as well as of the methods used.

For several decades now, Translation Studies has made its way in the academia as a discipline supported by findings in a variety of more or less related fields ranging from linguistics, in particular some of its subsuming branches, psychology, Cultural Studies, comparative sciences, to anthropology and computer-related sciences. In fact, so varied are the domains which have brought their contribution to the development of Translation Studies as an independent discipline that in the late 1980's it was named an 'interdiscipline.' Of these, linguistics in general and its branches directly concerned with the study of meaning, i.e. semantics and pragmatics, in particular, continue to inspire researchers and practitioners in translation as well as translator trainers.

Such a linguistics-oriented perspective is more than welcome in a shrinking world with an insatiable demand for competent and professional translators, in which universities throughout the world strive to keep the pace with the requirements on the job market. The time has long gone when translation seminars were offered exclusively as part of a foreign languages and literatures programme and with the almost exclusive aim to assess the students' competence in the foreign language. Instead, universities have opted for translation-oriented programmes at undergraduate level, the so-called Foreign Applied Languages programmes, during which students are expected not only to attain a proficiency level in the foreign language(s) that is

acceptable for a competent translator but also to develop a number of basic translation skills proper.

The present paper revisits a number of key concepts operating at the level of the translation process on the one hand, and explains certain phenomena occurring at the borderline between semantic and pragmatic meaning during the translation process, in particular the instances of meaning transformation and malformation, on the other hand. As regards the conceptual framework, there is a set of terms in translation studies which are either not valid in the context described above or too limited in their perspective to serve the purpose of this paper. By contrast, the concepts of ‘meaning transformation’ and ‘meaning malformation’ may be used to reflect the phenomena occurring during the process of translation in a more adequate and accurate manner. However, the paper does not restrict its scope to the conceptual framework of these phenomena, but also attempts to identify and give examples of such instances of meaning malformation which may occasionally occur in translations performed by some students – undergraduate and postgraduate alike – during the translation process. Furthermore, the paper sets out to suggest certain methods to prevent such instances from occurring and help the translator trainer not only become aware of a series of helpful techniques in this respect, but also succeed fostering in the target students a number of translation skills which, should they be mastered and developed appropriately, may ensure an adequate meaning transfer, that is transformation rather than malformation of meaning during the translation process. Last but not least, the paper discusses and suggests a number of elements referring to syllabus design at undergraduate level, as well as certain methods and techniques which are a crucial part in translation teaching and learning.

The first chapter of the paper (**The Translation Process and the Relevance of Linguistics**) is an analysis of the evolution of translation in time which has been marked by shifts of perspective between two major trends, one in the direction of linguistics and the other in that of literature. The reason behind the repeated reactions against linguistics-based translation theories is that, despite the fact that linguistics already had the instruments necessary to explicate the translation process, these were limited to the prescriptive aspects of language and tended to neglect and even ignore most of the issues concerning the use of language in a specific communication context.

By the 1950's, with the development of some linguistic theories - among which the pragmatic ones have changed the entire perspective on communication by means of language as well as on translation - linguistics-based translation theories have become capable of accounting for a large number of phenomena occurring in the translation process. Although the approach used in this paper is essentially linguistic as it focuses on the communicative aspects of translation, it does not ignore other approaches to translation that complete this huge puzzle which is the translation process. Hence, the relevance of linguistics in general and of its branches focusing on the study of meaning in particular reflects in their contribution to translation theory and practice.

The second chapter (**Meaning and Meaning Transfer**) revisits meaning from two points of view - semantic and pragmatic – and attempts to determine how meaning transfer is carried out at these two levels. There is a variety of linguistic theories on meaning describing it as anything and everything from meaning as speaker's stimulus and hearer's response, meaning as an abstract object and meaning as conditions on truth, to meaning as use of language. The analysis of word-focused traditionalist theories – most of which have sprung from Aristotle and Plato's work and developed later on into a rich variety of perspectives (Saussure's theory, the principle of compositionality, the prototype theory, etc.) – has revealed that no semantic analysis at this level, i.e. word level, can cater for the entire range of meaning-related phenomena occurring in linguistic communication including translation from source into target language. The only theory which seems to account for some of these but only to the limit of propositional content is Alfred Tarski's logics-based theory on meaning which measures sentence meaning against a true-false scale of reality. Nevertheless, it soon becomes obvious that no one semantic theory is able to cover the array of communicative phenomena during an 'authentic' instance of communication.

As regards the pragmatic perspective on meaning, this is based on the fact that 'authentic' communication is carried out not only by means of semantically and grammatically well-formed sentences but also by means of isolated words and short-circuited messages which depend to a great extent on a range of pragmatic processes in order for them to be decoded, depending on the contextual peculiarities of a particular act of communication. Hence, a number of contributions in terms of pragmatic theories of meaning are explored, which describe aspects of communication such as deixis, reference, speech acts, implicatures,

presuppositions, all of which are explained in terms of the communicative context in which they occur.

Nevertheless, as much as one would like to draw a clear cut line between what has been called ‘semantic meaning’ and ‘pragmatic meaning’ there are certain aspects, even in the abovementioned aspects of communication, which are virtually inseparable. This has determined a number of linguists to assume that either semantics or pragmatics takes precedence over the other, thereby subordinating one of the abovementioned branches of linguistics to the other, depending on the scope of their research and field of study. Despite the fact that such more or less radical approaches would lead to theoretical inconsistency, the problem became known in the literature as “the boundary issue” and reflected in a number of contrasts such as competence vs. performance (Chomsky), semantic competence vs. pragmatic competence, truth-conditional vs non-truth-conditional meaning, culminating in Grice’s ‘what is said’ vs. ‘what is implicated’. In the literature, there are two perspectives on the issue: one that reflects in Kent Bach’s thesis that semantic meaning must be clearly separated from pragmatic meaning, and another that is more moderate that reveals a much more complex state of affairs and, implicitly, the impossibility to separate the semantic and pragmatic levels which are practically interdependent (Jaszczolt, Recanati and Malmkjaer). The latter group argue that both ‘what is said’ and ‘what is implicated’ are not pure concepts, but they are used to designate an array of processes – both semantic and pragmatic – that are used alternatively and not necessarily in a particular order to determine the truth-conditional content of an utterance on the one hand, and the context-related aspects of meaning, on the other hand. Thus, it may be concluded that, in real communication, semantic and pragmatic processes are in fact interdependent and inseparable processes. So much so, that the terms ‘semantic meaning’ and ‘pragmatic meaning’ become theoretical constructs unjustified by real-life communication.

The last subchapter entitled ‘Meaning Transfer’ takes the boundary issue a step further and analyzes how it reflects in translation. The initial hypothesis expressed here is that since translation is defined as a type of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication, it is quite probable that the transfer of meaning from one language into another is carried out in a similar way as monolingual communication, i.e. via an array of alternative semantic and pragmatic processes. At a conceptual level, the use of ‘meaning transfer’ is introduced as a reaction and in response to a less explicit term – ‘equivalence’- introduced in the mid 60’s by

Nida and Catford and described by the latter as “an empirical phenomenon”. The second reason behind this terminological choice is that the concept of ‘equivalence’ emerged at a time when Saussure’s dichotomies prevailed and ‘langue’ was the measure for ‘parole’. Unlike ‘equivalence,’ the term ‘meaning transfer’ is not bound to any dichotomy-based linguistic theory but relies exclusively on genuine communication which makes it possible for us to focus on the translation process in all its complexity as well as on the linguistic processes which occur on semantic and pragmatic level.

In order to determine to what an extent is the transfer of meaning from source language into target language more or less semantic or pragmatic in nature, the case of conversational implicatures is discussed. The analysis makes it evident that the more an inference relies on the semantic aspects of the respective utterance, the more semantics-oriented the transfer will be. Similarly, the more dependent on pragmatic processes the interpretation of the implicature, the more pragmatics-oriented the transfer. An utterance, of the kind Kent Bach suggests - ‘You are not going to die, Peter’ - may be more semantic or more pragmatic in nature depending on the context of utterance. Thus, assuming that the words are addressed by a mother to her son who has just scratched his knees, the utterance must be decoded by means of pragmatic processes since the propositional content is false. If the words are addressed as an encouragement to an adult who has just suffered a terrible accident and is struggling for his life, it is obviously the semantic content of the utterance that prevails.

Nevertheless, even if the Bach’s utterances discussed in the second chapter of this paper constitute perfect examples of how the two aspects of meaning - ‘what is said’ and ‘what is implicated’ - interact, they are not to be regarded as a rule to be applied to all translation contexts. The main aim of the third chapter (**Transformation and Malformation in the Translation Process**) is to determine to what an extent the meaning transferred into the target language is preserved, altered or lost. Thus, the chapter has two main components: a terminological one introducing the concepts of ‘transformation’ and ‘malformation’ of meaning in the translation process, and a practical one focusing on the transfer of presuppositions as a type of inferential meaning. The need for a conceptual framework has been prompted by two aspects. The first of these is the abundance of often ambiguous and even overlapping terms in the literature used to refer to the meaning changes that occur during the translation process and ranging from ‘error’, ‘deviations’, ‘alterations’, ‘loss’, ‘gain’ , ‘distortion of meaning’, to ‘translation shifts’, etc. The second aspect is the somewhat



troubling thought expressed by Neubert and Shreve that translation as an act of communication is a “paradox” since it inevitably involves certain ‘loss’ or ‘distortion’ of the original meaning of the message, thereby casting doubt on the very translatability of an utterance, text, etc. A more comforting thought is expressed by Hervey and Higgins, and discussed in this chapter, according to which any translation process may be compared to an engine the functioning of which inevitably involves some degree of energy loss.

Thus, transformation and malformation emerge as phenomena occurring during the translation process rather than at the level of the finished product, the former as an inherent aspect of any act of communication by means of translation, the latter as malfunctions occurring during the transfer process which is bound to distort significantly the original meaning of the message. Despite their apparent opposition, both transformation and malformation of meaning may be regarded as different manifestations of the same translation process. In order to confer legitimacy to the newly introduced concepts they have been described in terms of Gideon Toury’s norms which may display certain shifts in translator behaviour that may occur within the limits of a generally accepted range of variability. It is precisely this accepted variability that is often regarded as the source of meaning transformations in the translation process.

The subchapter “Semantic or Pragmatic Translation?” echoes the boundary issue between semantics and pragmatics starting from Newmark’s well-known distinction between ‘semantic translation’ and ‘communicative translation’, which may be regarded as a one-to-one projection of the two branches of linguistics concerned with the study of meaning – semantics and pragmatics- as well as of the dichotomy ‘literal’ versus ‘free’ translation. Since ours is essentially a unifying approach that rejects dichotomies, the distinction between ‘semantic translation’ and ‘communicative’ or ‘pragmatic’ translation does not serve its purpose. As a matter of fact it is Newmark himself who admitted the limitations of this distinction and introduced the concept of ‘correlative’ translation in which semantic and pragmatic norms are virtually inseparable but complementing each other. Such a unifying perspective is far more constructive since it may serve to raise awareness among novices in translation of the entire range of processes that the transfer of meaning from source language into target language involves.

The interaction between semantic and pragmatic aspects in the translation process is revealed in the practical part of this chapter focusing on the translation of presuppositions. The

presupposition has been defined in the second chapter as a type of pragmatic implication deriving from the relation between the speaker and the appropriateness of an utterance in a specific context which reflects upon the hearer's perception of the message in terms of a pragmatic inference. The semantic facet of presupposition, i.e. that particular aspect analyzable in terms of truth and falseness, reflects in English in a number of linguistic structures such as definite expressions, factive predicates, implicative verbs, change-of-state verbs, cleft and pseudo-cleft constructions, etc. The pragmatic facet, on the other hand, becomes evident in the implications that it has on everyday communication in all its subtlety.

In order to determine the degree of meaning transformation occurring during the translation process, ten people have been asked to take part in a translation experiment: one expert and nine students, five of which undergraduate students enrolled in the Foreign Applied Languages programme at the "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, and four graduate students in the Translation Studies programme at the same university. All participants have been asked to translate a number of utterances presented in a more comprehensive context, most of which were presuppositions occurring in various English articles. Several conclusions may be drawn from this experiment. First, some presuppositions transferred from English into Romanian tend to be preserved mainly due to a certain correspondence on a formal and semantic level between the two languages. Second, certain more or less subtle transformations may be observed at the level of presuppositions due to a range of factors which may vary from lack of awareness on the part of some students of the semantic and pragmatic aspects operating in language (malformation), to a sheer matter of choice in the case of the expert and even some students (transformation proper) as in the case of cleft and pseudo-cleft sentences. Third, there is a class of presuppositions, namely what has been defined as 'implicit' presuppositions, which are more culture-bound and do not seem too survive as such the transfer from English into Romanian. Hence, the use of a specific compensation technique, namely explicitation, is observed. While the expert made use of this technique, some students failed to do so resulting in instances of meaning malformation in the target language.

Thus, it becomes evident that training students to become competent translators is a highly complex matter and one that needs all the theoretical (and practical) support from researchers and practitioners in the field. The last chapter (**Teaching Translation at Undergraduate Level**) tackles the issue of teaching translation at undergraduate level and is composed of five subchapters, all of which deal with key matters in translation teaching such as the status of the

discipline, developing translation skills, syllabus design, some methodological and pedagogical concerns, and some aspects concerning the use of translation techniques, in particular of explicitation. The first subchapter “Translation Studies as an Academic Discipline” focuses on the present status of translation in the academia, the most important aspect of which may be the one so well expressed by Sylvia Bernardini when she made the distinction between ‘translator education’ and ‘translator training’. According to Bernardini translator education is carried out at undergraduate level and aims at developing a basic set of translation skills as well as improve foreign language knowledge, and translator training is carried out at postgraduate level, as part of a far more specialized programme. In fact, I argue that a balanced approach to teaching translation as an uncompromising combination between undergraduate education and postgraduate training in one of the translation fields on the one hand, and between theory – linguistic as well as translation-focused – and practice, on the other hand, has the best chances to succeed in meeting the students’ professional expectations.

As regards the competences that students at undergraduate level are expected to develop, Bernardini distinguishes among three basic skills: awareness, reflectiveness and resourcefulness. Although on a theoretical level, this approach seems realistic and well-argued, I argue in favour of a more transparent approach to students who unconsciously associate translation skills with the three stages in the translation process, namely reception, transfer proper and delivery. Hence reading-comprehension, for example, is associated with the reception of the message in the source language, the transfer is realized by means of a series of cognitive processes that are specific to this particular stage, and the delivery of the target language message depends largely on the translator’s competence in the target language as well as the adequate use of a number of translation techniques. Furthermore, such an approach allows the teacher to spot difficulties occurring in the translation process and act towards developing a particular skill or set of skills which the student may need.

The following two subchapters tackle the issue of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ in translation teaching at undergraduate level. The syllabus design process, for example, depends on a number of variable factors which differ from one context to another in terms of the type of the academic framework in which translation is offered, the objectives of the respective course or seminar, the foreign language learning assistance that some undergraduate students may need and the issue of directionality in translation. All of the above are interdependent aspects that influence the contents of any translation course or seminar that may be offered at one moment

or another at undergraduate level. The methodological and pedagogical aspects, on the other hand cannot be neglected since they are meant to maximize the students' chances to acquire and make proper use both of the foreign language(s) in which they specialize and of the translation skills. Therefore, in their quest for the most appropriate sequencing of aims and activities, materials and resources, translator educators are the link between the academic environment and the translation market which is in a constant need of professional translators. Although it would be unrealistic of one to assume that students graduating a three-year translation-oriented programme may be considered professional translators, they are certainly expected to be at least competent translators.

The final subchapter may be regarded as an attempt to integrate the issue of translating presuppositions as a type of meaning at the borderline between semantics and pragmatics with the acquisition of translation techniques in general and of explicitation in particular. As in the case of other terms in translation theory such as 'translation loss' and 'translation gain' for example, this part pinpoints the lack of agreement in terminology. As regards explicitation as a central technique in translating presuppositions, the contrast expressed in terms of 'optional explicitation' and 'obligatory explicitation' turns out to be a theoretical construct. In other words, whereas such a distinction is possible in theory, the translation of some presuppositions from English into Romanian has revealed the fact that this distinction is by no means clear-cut but depend to a large extent on the respective translation context. On a more practical level, the adequate use of various translation techniques is a landmark of professional translator behaviour, which any translation teaching context is expected to encourage.

To conclude, the borderline between what has been referred to as 'meaning transformation' and 'meaning malformation' is often very thin in translation. The decision-making process as such depends on such a wide variety of factors that it is virtually impossible to include them all in a research paper such as this. Nor will it ever be possible for anyone to construct an inventory of such factors. Nevertheless, some of the crucial aspects that often make the difference between 'meaning transformation' and 'malformation' have been successfully identified and may constitute a starting point in improving teaching techniques as well as fostering in students essential translation skills. Instances of 'meaning transformation' or 'malformation' can be corrected by raising awareness in students of the existence of such phenomena and controlled by means of the use of certain techniques meant to prevent

malformation of meaning as well as including in the syllabus certain components that should contribute to fostering reflectiveness in students.

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