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# THE ANATOMY OF MESSAGES IN SOURCE AND RECEPTOR LANGUAGES

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Abstract: The theory and practice of translation can be enhanced by a functional view of language in which different systems, interrelated but independently variable, perform their work simultaneously within the message.

It is my claim (Ref. 1) that the basic unit of discourse organization is the message, and that it is informed by the interaction of the theme system, which sets the stage (Halliday, Ref. 2; Grimes, Ref. 3), and the information system, which delivers the writer's "point" through universally understood protocols (Clark & Haviland, Ref. 4; Givon, Ref. 5). An appreciation of this "anatomy" can guide the translator in examining the discourse structure of the source message and in replicating this structure so that a cohesive text is produced in the receptor language.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly it is recognized that language has several systems--phonological, syntactic, semantic, logical, discorsal, and possibly others--which function simultaneously, and that the effects of each of these systems are very much part of the meaning of a text. The systemic view of language, with function defining the system and meaning flowing from the function, was pioneered and has been promoted most consistently by the London School--originally by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, later by linguist J.R. Firth, and currently by M.A.K. Halliday and his group.

The systemic perspective is comforting to translators, who have long observed that no one system can account for all the aspects of meaning that need to be extracted and then replicated in the receptor language. If the translator's task is to do just this--to capture all the meaning of a text and to reflect that meaning as faithfully as possible in the receptor language--then the basis for performing the task efficiently is to have an appreciation for the way in which meaning is tied to function in each of the different systems.

The systems associated with phonology, syntax, semantics, and logic are by now rather well described. This is not true, however, of the systems that account for the organization of discourse. Discourse organization in particular, when regarded as a separate system of language, has had attracted the interest of a number of linguists in America who have specialized in translation--e.g. Callow (Ref. 6), Grimes (Ref.3), Nida (Ref. 7). The translator's interest in discourse stems not so much from the challenge of the unknown as from the pressing daily need to identify and express the relationships that obtain within text.

## 2. THE DISCOURSE COMPONENT AND ITS GRAMMAR

Halliday's model of the discourse component (Ref. 2) has been the inspiration for the present proposal. He calls this component the "grammar of messages"--the grammar which specifies the choices that speakers and writers make when they introduce structures into discourse (p. 50). Without these structures, a text would be meaningless string of unrelated pieces.

In the first of the discourse structures, generated by the theme system, a point of departure is established for the organization of each message. The point of departure, or theme, may be related to previous context in the discourse, to situational context, or directly to a thought in the author's mind, including an intention to subordinate, question, command, etc. It is the means by which a given unit of discourse is tied to other units in the text or context. In the second type of discourse structure, which is the product of the information system, salience is assigned to the new information that the message delivers. Each peak of new information, or focus of the message, is built progressively upon previous context, either immediate or distant, and each infers knowledge both of the current message and of preceding peaks of new information.

### 2.1 Theme System

The theme system specifies the distribution of elements that "stage" the message. It emplaces a theme, which is always the first element of the message, and which serves as a link between the message and the thought that gave rise to it in the speaker or writer's mind.

In the simplest case, the theme is a single word or phrase corresponding to the first slot in the pattern for the simple declarative clause. In English, it would be the subject:

- (1) John saw the play.

In more complex cases, the theme can be something besides the subject (to continue with examples from English). It can be an object:

- (2) Your satisfaction I guarantee.
- (3) The play was what John saw, not the movie.

or even a verb:

- (4) See the play before it closes.

Inevitably, such verbs have a special relationship to their subject, since the subject must be either postposed (rare in English) or else not specified at all. This "marked" relationship is what their thematicity is about.

All the above are cases of what I have chosen to call major themes. The major theme may be defined by a set of characteristics that clearly distinguish it from other theme-types. It is essential to the message: it must be present, and at the same time there is never more than one. Furthermore, it always has to do with the cognitive content of the message.

The major theme can be preceded by minor themes, which help to set the stage for the message in terms of either its subject-matter content or the establishment of its place in the discourse. Unlike the major theme, they are "stackable," within certain limitations, and there appears to be a fixed, language-independent order in which they can occur.

Minor themes precede the major theme. All are optional. They are of two types, distinguished by the fact that the first type, adjuncts, can be

stacked, more than one in succession, and the second type, the conjunction, is limited to one. The adjunct, which typically takes the form of an adverbial phrase, can be either cognitive (i.e. having to do with the content of the message) or noncognitive (establishing a relationship with the rest of the discourse). When both are combined in a single message, the non-cognitive adjunct(s) are the most thematic--the most related to the rest of the discourse, and they come first. They cognitive adjuncts lie closer to the major theme and therefore to the content of the message:

- (5) Last week John saw the play; next week he will see the movie.

Last week and next week are cognitive adjuncts. If they were not being used in a thematic sense, they would probably fall at the end of the message.

- (6) Actually, last week John saw the play; next week he will see the movie.

Actually is a noncognitive adjunct, and it cannot, without marked pausing (which creates a new message), be inserted after the cognitive last week.

Conjunctions differ from adjuncts in that they can only be cognitive, and there can only be one to a message. Thus:

- (7) But actually, last week John saw the play; next week he will see the movie.

The formal model, then, is:

$$(\text{conjunction}_n > (\text{adjunct}_{n,c})^x > \text{major theme}_c / \text{rheme}$$

with the rheme being everything to the right of the major theme.

Enter the translator. My study of 32 published translations (Portuguese to English--Ref. 1) showed that the transfer of themes to the receptor language was not as consistent and stable as might have been hoped. At the same time, a further analysis also showed that failure to maintain the theme in the receptor language often resulted in loss of cohesion. An example:

- (7-P) ... Martim ficara de pé na sacada procurando, com inútil obediência, não perder nada do que se passava. Mas o que se passava não era muito (Lispector 1961)

The translator rendered this sequence in English as:

- (7-T) ... Martim had been standing on the balcony watching, with useless obedience, so as not to miss anything that was going on. But not very much was going on.

The cohesive play on words, referring back to the previous message, is lost (Ref. 8). It would have been captured if the theme had been kept in its original position:

- (7-T) ... Martim had been standing on the balcony watching, with useless obedience, so as not to miss anything that was going on. But what was going on was not much.

Themes are always very closely tied to the thoughts of the speaker or writer. Their function is to get the message started; together, they form

a bridge between the author's thought and its expression in communicable form. As such they are initiator-oriented as opposed to receiver-oriented. A given message may include embedded clauses, and the onset of each of these is an embedded theme. Intense embedding, a characteristic of the written mode (see Chafe, Ref. 9), involves the recursive introduction of potential themes. It follows, then, that writing is more heavily thematic, and more initiator-oriented, than speaking. This difference, I believe, is one of the primary distinctions between the two modes of expression.

## 2.2 Information System

The information system is concerned with the overall distribution of information content within the message. It is the mechanism by which the message builds up, sometimes recursively, to a culmination of "newestness" or most informativeness, which normally constitutes both the focus of the message and its closure. The delivery of this information is the purpose of the message, and once its purpose has been accomplished the message ends. The focus and the end of the message are conterminus. The way is then open for the creation of another message and for the delivery of another wave of information.

Newness, of course, can only exist in contrast to what is familiar. Our very survival, according to Givon (Ref. 5), is a function of our ability to perceive the difference between new experiences, which are salient for us, and old, perceptually less salient experiences in our more familiar environment. And so it is with communication. In order for new information to be received, it must be contrasted against what we already know. It is delivered in waves: the communication of a thought departs from the given, including what is shared by the interlocutors from their common pool of knowledge, and moves ahead until it reaches a peak, at what is newest or most unknown. Successful speakers and writers build up their messages based on knowledge that is presumed to be shared with their listeners or readers--and the latter expect them to do so. They are bound by what is known as the given-new contract (Ref. 4).

In writing, the message unit corresponds normally to the sentence, including its embeddings. An incomplete sentence is a marked instantiation of the unit. The focus of newest information falls at the end of the unit unless it is marked for contrast:

(8) John saw the play, not the movie.

My contrastive study of 3,826 message units in the published translations revealed that the same information was in final, or focus, position in the receptor texts 88.7 percent of the time. In other words, translators were more sensitive to the focus than to the theme. Sometimes syntactic parallelism was dropped early in the sentence in order to retain the focus in the same position. In the following example the translator preserved the focus by changing a fronted verb to an nominal identification structure:

(9-P) A falta de objetivo me sofocava. Implorei a Deus com fê um caminho, uma causa. Vieram-me os botões (Resende 1963)

(9-T) A lack of objective was suffocating me. I prayed to God for an aim in life. And what I got was buttons. [Rather than 'buttons came to me']

In a number of cases postposed adjectives were translated as prepositional phrases in order to leave the new information in final position:

(10-P) ... ameaçados pelas contestações racionalistas.

(9-T) ... threatened by the challenge of rationalism [Rather than 'the rationalist challenge']

Since the information system is geared to couching information in a form that will be received by the listener or reader, it is receiver-oriented as opposed to initiator-oriented. Its most intricate realization is in speech; in writing, the resource of intonation is lost and the system is not expressed as richly. Nevertheless, it continues to provide the mechanism by which messages are developed and brought to a close.

### 3. THE MESSAGE

While there is general agreement that both the theme system and the information system must necessarily be realized in every message, my proposal goes a step further and asserts that together they inform the message; they are essential to its creation, and both are involved in the process. The message itself is defined by the effect of these two systems. It is through them that we are able to understand the message as a unit.

What, in fact, is the "anatomy" of the message? All messages have an onset--the effect of thematization. They also have closure--the effect of the information system. Together, the onset and the closure create the frame. What is interesting is that the theme, forming the onset, is just as important to the framing of the message as is the focus and its consequent closure. Within a text, with the exception of the final unit, there is no informational closure without a counterpart of thematic onset. Conversely, the onset calls for closure.

### 4. IMPORTANCE FOR TRANSLATORS

The significance of all this for translators is that the anatomy of messages has meaning in and of itself. The fact of an element having been chosen for the theme position means that its functional equivalent should be in the same position in the receptor language. Even if syntactic equivalence is abandoned. And the same holds true for the focus; information that is in the final, focal position is there for a reason, and the final position should contain the same information, whenever possible, in the translation.

Syntax is language-specific, whereas discourse organization is universal; in a contest between the two, as long as an appropriate solution can be found in the receptor language, the universal should be overriding.

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