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Risk management as a theoretical framework for analyzing news translation strategies

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Abstract

Since the launch of the University of Warwick project on “Translation in Global News” in the mid-2000s, the unique position translation has in the practice of journalism—which is now commonly referred to as news translation—has been attracting increased attention in the field of Translation Studies. A number of case studies have been carried out worldwide over the past decade, but few attempts have been made to establish a theoretical framework that can be used to analyze the decision-making process behind the predominant strategies used in news translation, such as omission. This article discusses the possible application of Anthony Pym’s concept of “risk management” for this analysis. It aims to illustrate how the distinctive settings in which news translations are performed—strictly time-bound and highly pressured both politically and socially—calls for a new analytical approach, which this non-conventional concept in Translation Studies may be able to provide.

1. Introduction

In this era of increased globalization, more and more news stories are being transferred across linguistic and cultural boundaries each day. Whenever media organizations cover news events happening in foreign language settings, news translation inevitably occurs. This includes global news agencies translating local news stories for their international audience; foreign correspondents reporting on events happening overseas for their domestic readers; or messages of global leaders being broadcast or published in multiple languages throughout the world. Until a decade ago, however, news translation had been largely ignored by existing fields of research, including Translation Studies, despite its visible and growing presence (Vuorinen, 1999, pp. 61–62). A number of reasons explaining why have already been pointed out. Bielsa (2007) bases the relatively low interest among Translation Studies scholars on the fact that news translation “usually is in the hands of journalists rather than translators” (p. 135). Others, such as van Doorslaer (2010), point to the complexity of the news translation process in which multiple participants perform a combined act of “information gathering, translating, selecting, reinterpreting, contextualizing and editing” (p. 181). In newsrooms where multiple source texts (STs) are used to produce a new target text (TT), translation is

“hardly ever seen as ‘translation proper’ or ‘translation-as-generally-understood’” (p. 182).

However, this situation has been changing recently because of two main reasons. First, the demand for and the impact of international news in a globalized world has become significantly larger, inviting increased attention from Translation Studies scholars. Triggered by the “Translation in Global News” project (Bielsa 2007; Bielsa & Bassnett, 2009; Conway & Bassnett, 2006), a number of case studies have been carried out regarding various news translation practices, beginning first in Western countries and then expanding to other regions. Second, the field of Translation Studies itself is evolving. As Pym (2014a) illustrates, translation theories took shape in the latter half of the 20th century, during which the focus of research has gradually shifted from equivalence (equal value between the ST and TT) toward theories that concentrates more on the indeterminate, communicative, and complex nature of translation. Growing attention is being paid to the social contexts in which translations are performed, and the changing realities that the translators face today. As Pym (*ibid*) points out, success of a translation nowadays can be measured by “the user pushing the right button or clicking on the right link, rather than by comparison with any anterior text” (p. 87).

These recent movements have contributed to the incorporation of news translation as a field of research within Translation Studies, but to date there has been little discussion of possible theoretical approaches to be applied. While existing research on news translation has focused on describing its unique practices such as the use of omission as a key translation strategy (Bielsa & Bassnett, 2009; Hursti, 2001; Jiménez-Crespo, 2012; Matsushita, 2013), this paper addresses theoretical aspects by examining whether Pym’s concept of “risk management” in translation can be used to explain the various news translation practices.

Following this introduction, an overview of relevant research is provided in Section 2. The concept of risk management as proposed by Pym (2004, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014a, 2014b) is outlined in Section 3. In Section 4, the applicability of this concept as a theoretical framework for analyzing the decision-making processes (i.e. strategy selection) in news translation is examined. Major findings and conclusions, as well as ideas for further research, are summarized in Section 5.

2. Research on news translation in Translation Studies

Given the fact that news translation research is still in its infancy, Translation Studies scholars have not yet settled on a clear definition of the term “news translation.” In this paper, news translation is referred to as the type of translation which contains the following elements: a) occurs when news organizations report on events that happened in a foreign language setting; b) typically performed by journalist-translators with limited or no specific translator training; and c) central focus is on “hard news”¹ reported by the mainstream media.² It includes various forms of translation, including text-to-text, speech-to-text and text-to-oral

reproduction,³ but excludes audiovisual translation (e.g. voiceover, dubbing, and subtitling).⁴

Although case studies have tended to focus on print and online media for mainly practical reasons (i.e. availability of the materials), a wide range of topics have been researched from the mediation of humor by news translators of Taiwanese TV shows (Tsai, 2013) to translation practices of the community news media in South Africa (van Rooyen, 2013). Given the fact that research on news translation is still in its early stage of development, any topic related to both news *and* translation seems to fall under this domain, including mere observations of the news translation phenomena. One piece of key research that involves in-depth analysis is Schäffner (2008) in which she compares reports by various media organizations on the same speech events (e.g. a group media interview with Russian President Putin, an official speech by Iranian President Ahmadinejad, and a joint press conference by US President Bush and German Chancellor Merkel). Schäffner (*ibid*) points out that “institutional policies and ideologies have an impact on the actual textual profiles of the translations” and that news translations “are not straightforward and faithful reproductions of their source texts, as often assumed by lay-people” (p. 22).

Similar comparisons can be seen in Baker (2006), who uses an example of Osama Bin Laden’s video speech in Arabic translated into English by Al-Jazeera and MEMRI5 and highlights how the influence of political agendas can lead to different translations. In Asia, Kang (2007), who focuses on the “subjectivity” of institutional translators by comparing the translated articles on North Korea in the Korean edition of *Newsweek* with the American original, has been widely cited. Chen (2009) highlights “ideological manipulation” in the different ways the Taiwanese press quoted foreign media on news relating to China, and has also been frequently referenced.

Many of these works have been influenced directly or indirectly by Critical Discourse Analysis, a field of research where media has been analyzed repeatedly, and thus concepts and methodologies are well established. As a result, the decision-making process in news translation has often been linked to issues of ideology and power, as seen in the examples above. These arguments do provide certain explanation to how ideologies of news organizations and individual journalist-translators can “play a significant role in determining what is to be retained and what is to be omitted” (Chen, 2006, p. 10). However, there are also news translation practices that cannot be explained by this approach alone, such as the examples which will be presented in Section 4. Therefore, it is worth exploring other possibilities using concepts and frameworks within Translation Studies in order to shed new light on news translation. As an exploratory attempt to seek such alternative framework for the theoretical analysis of news translation, this paper investigates the possibility of using Pym’s concept of risk management (Pym, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014a, 2014b).

3. Pym's concept of risk management

Risk management is a well-known and widely understood concept in the world of politics and business; however, it has not been fully applied to Translation Studies, as Hui (2012) explains:

Although risk management is not a new concept, it is an uncharted area as applied to the translation process and translator training. The idea of risk (analysis and management) has been mentioned from time to time as advice to translators (Gile 1995/2009, Pym 2003/2010, Akbari 2009), but has been defined and developed by only one or two researchers. Very little research regarding risk management in the translation process has been conducted and only a small sample of translated text has been studied. (Hui, 2012, p. 2).

The leading theorist in the application of the concept of risk analysis and risk management to current translation practices is Anthony Pym. In his book, *Exploring Translation Theories* (Pym, 2014a), he outlines major translation theories under paradigms of equivalence, purposes, descriptions, uncertainty, localization and cultural translation. “Risk analysis” is categorized under “non-linear logic,” a subcategory of uncertainty. He describes it as follows:

Risk analysis: Pym (2005) presents a model where translators do not seek equivalence but instead manage the risk of their solutions failing to achieve basic aims (like getting paid). This is based on calculations of the *probability* of failure, rather than any certitude of match. Probabilistic calculations of this kind transgress the excluded middle but still assume an identity of aims and assessments of causation, and thus some degree of linearity. A variant of this is analysis of how translators manage guesses about equivalence (Künzli 2004; Angelone 2010). (Pym, 2014a, p. 103)

Pym (2005) explains the relationship between risk and translation in more detail. Here, Pym defines risk as “the possibility of not fulfilling the translation’s purpose” (p.71). He describes that in a translation, some elements are high risk while others are low risk and “most of the real world lies at various stages in between” (p. 70). In order to determine the risks, the translator must first analyze what the translation is supposed to do and then distribute more effort towards high-risk elements rather than low risk ones. Pym’s summary of this concept, which is based on Levý’s “minimax strategy” (Levý, 1967/2004) of exerting minimal effort to attain maximum effect, is: “Problems are high-risk or low-risk; solutions can be high-risk or

low-risk; strategies are different ways of expending effort to manage risk; and the translator's efforts should ideally correlate with degrees of risk" (Pym, 2005, p. 73).

3.1 The nature of risk

Before looking at specific examples of how Pym's concept of risk management can be applied to news translation, it might be useful to clarify the nature of risk Pym has in mind. As seen, Pym (2005) defines risk as the unfulfillment of the *translation's* purpose and gives the translation of Pakistani birth certificates as an example. Citing Mayoral (2003), he explains that Pakistani birth certificates often have general nouns "*Dai Bibi* (midwife)" and "*Chawkidar* (conciierge)" in places where the actual names of the midwife and reporting officer at the hospital should be written. When these birth certificates are translated; however, these general nouns are treated as proper nouns. Despite the fact that these fictitious individuals appear in many of the translated Pakistani birth certificates, it "puts nothing at risk" (Pym, 2005, p. 70) where as any mistake in the name of the person or date of birth can be detrimental (i.e. high-risk). In the case of translating general nouns as proper nouns for the midwife and the reporting officer, the translation's purpose is nevertheless fulfilled because the mistranslation "would tend not to stop the text from working as a successful target-language text" (p.69).

On the other hand, Pym also gives various examples of risk as the possibility of not fulfilling the *translator's* purpose of carrying out the translation. For instance, when Pym (2014a) mentions risk as failing to achieve the "basic aims" of the translation, he gives "getting paid" as one example. As Pym (2005) explains, "one of the implicit purposes of all translations is to create trust in the figure of the translator" (p. 78). If a translator is mistrusted by the client or the communication participants, he or she is faced with immediate risks, one of which is the possibility of not getting paid. Therefore, it can be understood that when Pym describes risk as failing to achieve the *translation's* purpose, one key aspect would be the unfulfillment of the *translator's* purpose.

Pym (2014b) gives a typical example of such risk—a military encounter in Afghanistan—in which he explains that the interpreter's failure to render significant material can be considered "rational" from a risk management perspective. In this case, a local interpreter hired by the US forces in Afghanistan was told to interpret what a village elder said; however, instead of giving a full version of the elder's speech, which included a parable, the interpreter decided to omit a significant portion of what the elder had said. An eight-minute video of this interaction was posted on *The Guardian's* website as part of a news series by photojournalist and filmmaker, John D McHugh, who was embedded with US troops in Afghanistan between 2008 and 2009. ⁷ Pym's description of the event is given below, in order to avoid misunderstanding of how Pym interpreted what took place in the video:

The US base has been receiving bombs from the area; the patrol has come to the village to find out where the bombs are coming from. When they arrive, no one is there – no one to speak with. Eventually a village elder comes along, and an enraged US sergeant asks him about the Taliban (the ACM – Anti Coalition Militia) and the bombs. The old man replies at length, telling a parable about ants eating some of the village’s wheat, which basically means that the village does not like the Taliban but they have to live with them. The interpreter, however, does not render the parable at all, and instead tells the sergeant that the Taliban are somewhere “behind the mountain.” Later the interpreter gives the sergeant his own account of the interaction: “I hate these people, sir! When I ask him something else, they give me wrong answer.” The report closes with the sergeant accusing the village elder of being “full of shit”, and he, the sergeant, wanting to “clean the town out.” (Pym, 2014b, pp. 3-4)

Despite the fact that it is easy to accuse the interpreter for not being professional or ethical by omitting the parable, of much more interest to Pym is why this was the case, and he attempts to explain it with the concept of risk management. According to Pym (2014b, p. 6), the higher risk for the interpreter was “to lose the trust of the US, to lose his source of income and chances of future mobility” and the lower risk was “the possible loss of trust” from the villagers who seem to belong to a different ethnic group than he.⁸ Pym corroborates his argument by describing that the villagers have a) no alternative interpreter to turn to; b) no way of verifying what the interpreter says in English; and c) very probably no relation with the interpreter after the US troops withdraw. He therefore concludes:

In this situation, the interpreter’s rational course of action is to do everything possible to maintain the trust of the US. Hence, logically, his decision to omit the parable, to invent a piece of ostensibly useful information (the Taliban are “over that hill”), and to stress to his employer that he has nothing at all to do with the people in the village.” (Pym, 2014b, p. 6)

The otherwise unacceptable level of omission in this case surely seems to make sense when risk management is used as a framework for analysis.

3.2 Omission as risk management

The unique characteristics of news translation include its time-bound nature and the need for conciseness, especially in the case of print media. For this reason, omission has been identified as the key translation strategy in news translation (Bielsa & Bassnett, 2009; Hursti, 2001; Jiménez-Crespo, 2012; Matsushita, 2013). It is important to note that the interpreter in

the case above also used “omission” as the translation strategy in order to manage his risk of losing the trust of his client. This correspondence will be looked into in more detail in the following sections.

Pym (2005) explains that translation strategies are ways of risk management unlike the traditional claims that strategies are different ways of achieving equivalence. In his words, translation strategies are “used to reduce or maintain levels of risk” (p. 73) which includes transcription, omission, paraphrase, compensation, footnotes, expansion and recasting. Although strategies do not carry risk values themselves (for example, it cannot be said that the use of omission is always a low-risk or high-risk strategy), they can invite “low-risk or high-risk consequences” (ibid).

The Afghan interpreter opted for omission, which he thought was a low-risk strategy at that particular moment in that particular context. However, he could not foresee the high-risk consequence awaiting him because of his decision. He was not aware of the film crew accompanying the US troops. As a result, the footage of the dialogue in Pashto was later subtitled and posted on *The Guardian*'s website (and others such as YouTube). Obviously, the interpreter did not expect this, but it is not difficult to assume that his risk management might have invited serious consequences (e.g. loss of job, ostracization, or even death). As Pym (2005) explains, if and when translators “misjudge the risks and give real offence, real damage can result” (p. 81). This example demonstrates why risk management can be a decisive factor in the selection of translation strategies, especially when translators (including interpreters) are faced with known and immediate risks.

4. Application of a theoretical framework – a case study

In order to examine the applicability of risk management as a theoretical framework for analyzing news translation, this section focuses on the use of omission, since there seems to be some connection between the use of omission and risk management in news translation. The following case study is based on Matsushita (2013), which examined translations of US President Obama's speeches by Japanese newspapers and identified omission as the dominant strategy. The data set consists of 131 target texts extracted from coverage of the 2012 US presidential campaign by five major newspapers in Japan. ⁹ All of the texts were taken from direct quotes¹⁰ which were bracketed with quotation marks indicating that the quoted content was a faithful reproduction of what the President actually said.¹¹ This makes the relationship between the ST (Obama's speech) and the TT (its direct quote as translated by each newspaper) relatively clear allowing for easier analysis.

Matsushita (2013) analyzed the data set of 131 TTs and discovered that 55 TTs, or 42% of the whole, used omission in a way which led to a “definite loss in meaning” (Barik, 1971, p.201). ¹² An example from Obama's inauguration speech delivered and broadcast on

January 21st, 2013 is shown below. The ST is followed by four different TTs, which represent the various translations by the selected newspapers. The TTs are in Japanese followed in brackets by their literal re-translations.¹³ The underlines in the example were added here for illustrative purposes.

ST1: We will support democracy from Asia to Africa, from the Americas to the Middle East, because our interests and our conscience compel us to act on behalf of those who long for freedom.

TT1: 「アジア、アフリカ、中東にいたるまで、我々は民主主義を支援する」
[We (will) support democracy from Asia to Africa, and to the Middle East.]
(*Asahi Shimbun*, Jan. 22nd, evening edition, front page)

TT2: 「アジア、アフリカ、中東の民主主義を支援する」
[(We will) support democracy in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.]
(*Tokyo Shimbun*, Jan. 22nd, evening edition, front page)

TT3: 「アジアからアフリカまで民主主義を支援する」
[(We will) support democracy from Asia to Africa.]
(*Nikkei Shimbun*, Jan. 23rd, morning edition, page 9)

TT4: 「アジア、アフリカ、中南米、中東で民主主義を支援する」
[(we will) support democracy in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East.]
(*Yomiuri Shimbun*, Jan. 22nd, evening edition, front page)

Four papers quoted this portion of President Obama's inauguration speech. As shown above, TT1–3 omitted “the Americas,” which is the third region of the four he mentioned. The literal translation for “the Americas” would be “*Beishu* (米州)” in Japanese. The word is short enough, meaning space limitation, which is typical of newspapers and other printed media, does not seem to be the reason for this omission in TT1 and TT2 (TT3 omits the last two regions which could be explained this way). Institutional and individual ideologies of the journalist-translators do not seem to provide an obvious reasoning either. Nor does traditional translation theory seem to give a legitimate answer.

However, by using risk management as a theoretical framework to analyze these omissions, a reasonable explanation seems to emerge. As a premise, it can be stated that the word “*Beishu*” is not a common word and could be considered as too formal or literary for the average reader. For newspaper reporters (including journalist-translators), the purpose of writing an article is to enable a wide range of readers to understand what is happening in the world. The failure to do so could bring about negative (i.e. high-risk) consequences such as complaints from readers and the eventual loss of their subscriptions. If there is a risk that a translation will cause readers frustration and dissatisfaction due to their inability to

comprehend the message without a dictionary, that risk must be managed, which may have been the case with this atypical use of omission.

In the case of TT4, “the Americas” is substituted by “*Chunanbei* (中南米),” meaning Latin America, which could have been a simple error. Even in this case, however, it is possible to assume that *Chunanbei*, which is a relatively common word, was chosen instead of the uncommon *Beishu*. By opting for this strategy, TT4 ignores the United States and Canada, but since Obama is discussing his country’s intention to “support” democracy in other parts of the world, and given that Canada is already an established democracy, “it puts nothing at risk” in Pym’s terms. Although this is just one example, it seems to be consistent with the following comment in Pym (2014b, p.1): “Risk analysis can enable us to understand multiple cases of what would otherwise simply be unethical or non-standard practices, just as it can help explain why actual encounters do not coincide with the abstract written formulations of best practices.”

In the case study of the Japanese newspapers above, risk was tentatively identified as the potential for negative reaction from the readers due to incomprehensibility. However, it is easy to imagine that risk also exists in their relationships with the news sources. For example, the same newspapers quoted Japanese Prime Minister Abe’s policy speech delivered just a week after President Obama’s inauguration speech in 2013, almost verbatim. 14 This can be explained as the journalists’ risk management of the potential criticism that could arise from misquoting their political leader (e.g. official complaints from the Prime Minister’s office, public comment from the Prime Minister himself criticizing the paper, and so on). While this is a case of “intralingual translation” (Jakobson, 1959/2004), the same can be said about “interlingual translation” (ibid). When taking this into account, the frequent use of omission in the translations of Obama’s speeches can be explained by the different levels of risk the journalist-translators feels towards a leader of a foreign country (who does not read Japanese himself) as compared to their own. However, this finding needs to be further investigated and tested empirically.

5. Conclusion

This paper looked into the possibility of applying Anthony Pym’s concept of risk management as a theoretical framework for analyzing news translation practices. Regardless of the fact that the concept itself needs greater clarification and refinement, its aim to find a new approach in understanding unique practices in translation seems to carry abundant potential, especially when applied to news translation.

As we have seen in the examples above, omission seems to be a “common enough strategy” (Pym, 2005, p. 72) when managing translator’s risks, and some of the “unethical or non-standard practices” (Pym, 2014b, p.1) of using omission were better explained by applying the concept of risk management. However, it must be clearly noted that this research is still at a

preliminary stage, and more cases must be examined to further explore the possibility of the applicability and validity of risk management as an analytical framework for news translation.

In the process of writing this paper, several topics have been identified as potential areas for further research. First, the different use of translation strategies between high-risk and low-risk elements must be investigated in more detail. For example, simultaneous interpreters frequently tend to omit those elements they consider low-risk (Pym, 2008). Because the demand for rapid distribution of news in the internet era calls for translation to be conducted close to “near-instantaneity” (Bielsa & Bassnett 2009, p. 62), Pym’s finding may also be observed in various cases of news translation. Second, this paper focused mainly on omission as a key translation strategy in news translation, but other translation strategies such as addition, substitution, paraphrasing, reorganization and explicitation, were also evident in the TTs of Obama’s speeches (Matsushita, 2013). Although one example of substitution has been analyzed in this paper, strategies other than omission must also be investigated.

The internet age allows mistranslations in the news (including many false accusations) to spread around the world instantly, and interpreters and translators are now more likely to be faced with high-risk consequences. On the other hand, the increased ability to make corrections and revisions instantly can, in some cases, lower the risk of such consequences. The relationship between risk and news translation is thus highly relevant and worthy of further attention.

Notes

1. “Hard news” has no clear definition. In newsrooms, it is often perceived as important, serious news items that must be reported immediately. Its antonym is “soft news” or “features” which includes profiles of known individuals and human-interest stories with longer deadlines. For more details, see Bell (1991, p. 14).
2. This includes wire services, newspapers, TV/radio broadcasters, news magazines and internet news providers.
3. For example, local newspaper articles picked up and translated by global news agencies (text-to-text), speeches by global leaders reported by local newspapers (speech-to-text) and various types of documents (e.g. written statements, draft legislations) broadcasted by TV or radio in another language (text-to-oral reproduction).
4. This category has been acknowledged as a separate field from news translation. For details, see van Doorslaer (2009, p.84).
5. MEMRI is “a neo-conservative media institute which specializes in translating selected Arabic documents for Western consumption” (Baker, 2006, p. 333).
6. Levý’s aim was to apply game theory to the translator’s decision-making process (Pym, 2014a, p. 102).
7. See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2008/jun/11/afghanistan.johndmchugh>

8. This is indicated by the fact that the interpreter says, “I can only speak Pashto.” (Pym, 2014b, p. 6).
9. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Asahi Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, *Nikkei Shimbun* and *Tokyo Shimbun* were selected based on circulation, place of publication and number of editions per day. For details, see Matsushita (2013, p. 42).
10. In journalism, when referring to literal reproduction of what someone said, the word “direct quote” or “direct quotation” is typically used. For more detail on the features and functions of direct quotes, see Bell (1991, p. 207–209).
11. See *The New York Times* (2008, Quotations, para. 1).
12. This categorization is useful in analyzing TTs in news translation because readers do not usually expect loss of meaning in direct quotes. Although Barik (1971) is based on simultaneous interpreting, it is nevertheless relevant in this case because news translation is, in many respects, more similar to interpreting than to translation, including its time-bound nature (Bielsa & Bassnett, 2009, p. 16).
13. The re-translations were performed by the author.
14. Japanese newspapers published articles of Prime Minister Abe’s speech in their evening editions on Jan 28th, 2013, and their morning editions the following day.

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