

Gutt's Introduction of RT to the UBS Community at Victoria Falls, 1991¹

Gutt's Victoria Falls lectures began innocuously enough with a description of the inferential nature of human communication and the suggestion that this will have implications both for how we understand the meaning of the source texts, and the techniques we use to communicate them to new audiences (Gutt, 1992: 7-20). But in filling out these implications, he effectively removed or replaced many of the theoretical foundations of Nida's translation. From the very beginning the inadequacy of the code model of communication, even as developed within semiotics, is highlighted. And the next pillar to go is the postulate of translatability, itself dependent on a Chomskian view of the world of language. Instead, Relevance Theory suggests a "condition of communicability" which is more relevant and fundamental than any postulate of effability or translatability.

...our inferential account of communication entails a *condition of communicability*: An intended interpretation is recoverable not in just any context, but *only in a context where the requirements of optimal processing are fulfilled*, that is, where there are adequate contextual effects without unnecessary processing effort....In fact, successful communication requires that the utterance be processed in the context envisaged by the communicator"

(Gutt, 1992: 28)

This imposes certain *theoretical* limits on translation in ways which are extremely uncomfortable to Bible translators:

In Third world countries, where the knowledge background of many readers is much more restricted, we usually take the line that essentially all that people need is a good translation of the biblical text. This strange state of affairs seems to have arisen from an inadequate understanding of the natural constraints to which communication is subject. This, in turn, leads to quite unrealistic expectations as to what a translation can achieve...

(Gutt, 1992: 32)

...the assumption often made in translation circles that any message can be communicated to any audience regardless of their background knowledge seems untenable.

(Gutt, 1992: 35)

Gutt next examines the idea of equivalence in translation. Equivalence as a criterion of successful translation is at the heart of Nida's "dynamic equivalence" and/or "functional equivalence", however you wish to relate the two terms. Gutt notes the general pessimism in linguistic circles about the possibility of defining a notion of equivalence which can be of use to a general theory of translation. Wilss in particular suggests that only in text-type-related or even single-text-oriented (and we might add, language-pair specific) theories of translation may be it possible to define equivalence, and Gutt demonstrates the logical contradiction this leads to, a denial of the very possibility of theory (p.36). RT, however, by its definition of interpretive use of language, provides the possibility of a notion of faithfulness, which is not specific to translation but can be applied to it: "in interpretive use the principle of relevance does, in effect, come across as a *presumption of faithfulness*". Here is the most radical point of Gutt's proposals, namely that no particular theory of translation is necessary, only an application of more general principles that guide communication to the specific situation of "interlingual interpretive use."

In one way, it seems that this is, in fact, all we need to say about translation; for we have explained how a text in one language can be interpretively represented by a text in another language and we have explained how it will be interpreted...These conditions seem to provide exactly the guidance that translators and translation theorists have been looking for. They determine *in what respects* the translation should resemble the original: only in those respects that can be expected to make it adequately relevant to the receptor-language audience. They determine also that the translation should be clear and natural in the sense that it should not be unnecessarily difficult to understand.

(Gutt, 1992: 42)

Gutt proceeds to demonstrate how successfully RT handles non-literal language, because it presumes that literalness is the exception rather than the rule. RT's success at describing the way in which figurative language works within a language has been well demonstrated in the works of Sperber and Wilson and Pilkington. This provides both good news and bad news for the translator:

¹ From S.Pattemore, "Framing Nida" in Philip A. Noss (ed.) *A History of Bible Translation*, Rome: Edizioni Di Storia E Letteratura, 2007 pp.217-263.

The good news is that it (RT) offers a sharp tool for getting a better understanding of the original text and also for the analysis of translation problems. The bad news is that it shows us that translation is probably even more challenging in some respects than we had previously assumed. The richness of nonliteral meaning and its strong dependence on a shared cognitive environment may bring home to us with new clarity the question, How can the translator get this meaning across to an audience of another culture?

(Gutt, 1992: 60)

But perhaps the single most seminal suggestion in this lecture series is the comparison of the task of translation with that of reporting the speech of another person, which offers the choice of direct or indirect quotation. Translation is in some ways like an interlingual speech quotation. But the option of a true direct quote is no longer available because of the intrinsic limits of interlingual communication, and every act of translation involves interpretation – “meaning based translation is, in fact, the only kind of translation possible” (65). Yet by analogy with direct quotation it is possible to define a direct translation as “*one that presumes to interpretively resemble the original completely (in the context envisaged for the original).*” (66) The alternative, indirect translation, attempts to produce a resemblance of the original when understood in the *new* context. Here, in short, is both a defence of and a challenge to the theory behind “meaning-based” translation. On the one hand, this is the only possible kind of translation. But on the other hand, at least for the direct translation option, the constraints implied by the condition of understanding within the original context, significantly limit the freedom to expand and distort the text. Yet at the same time this also explains clearly why literary translation experts, particularly those that operate within the Indo-European language family and Western cultural context, often fail to understand the problems of translation faced by those working outside this domain. They work entirely in a world in which the target languages allow construction of stimuli which interpretively resemble the original very closely – because of the structure of the language and the cultural context.

Gutt concludes with a series of sixteen “key statements” about successful communication in translation (67-74), setting translation as a phenomenon to be understood within the parameters of a general theory of communication. They reinforce the primary importance of context, and specifically the new audience’s access to the original context. The task of bridging the contextual gaps is one which must be tackled holistically: the ultimate objectives of Scripture translation cannot be achieved by translated texts alone. And note especially the following:

Translators should have a firm grasp of hitherto neglected aspects of meaning. In particular, they should understand that there are important differences between expressing and implicating information, between strong and weak communication. They should understand the importance of open-endedness in communication, especially for figurative language and poetic effects, and the danger of limitation and distortion that can arise from explication.

(Gutt, 1992: 72)