TRANSLATION UNIT By: http://www.kau.edu.sa/SBANJAR Dr. Shadia Y. Banjar http://wwwdrshadiabanjar.blogspot.com

TRANSLATION UNIT

A translation unit is a segment of a text that the translator treats as a single cognitive unit for the purposes of establishing an equivalence. The translation unit may be a single word, a phrase, one or more sentences, or even a larger unit.

When a translator segments a text into translation units, the larger these units are, the better chance there is of obtaining an idiomatic translation. This is true not only of human translation, but also in cases where human translators use computer-assisted translation, and also when translations are performed by machine translation systems.

The notion of Unit of Translation

The notion of Unit of Translation (UT), once defined, is useful for bridging the technical gap between the full text and its components in describing relationships involved in a translation, and looking at a localized passage’s potential accountability to the whole text.

The Unit of Translation is defined functionally as a textual unit instead of a language unit which maintains its textual integrity by performing three functions:

1. syntactic bearer,

2. information carrier

3. stylistic marker.

Text translation thus preserves the textual integrity of each UT not in syntactic form but in function, given the necessary rank-shifts in the process. So, we can say that the key functional UT can be set at the level of **sentence**.

In actual translation practice, analysis and teaching, examination are needed to clarify the relationship between the text and its constituent parts as Units of Translation (UT). Examination makes the units of translation textually significant and thus accountable within translation, a process that reconstructs the structure of the source text in the target language and culture.

The Concept of “ UNIT OF TRANSLATION” UT

Good translating, like good writing, comes from the right choice of words and word order. The only difference is that in translating, this “right choice” is prompted and at the same time restricted by the existing SL text as well as by the resources available in the target language. This appropriateness, has engaged the attention of translation theorists and practitioners for centuries deciding what length of discourse can serve as a unit of practice and analysis. This has been a core issue underlying the concept of UT, “a basis for a scientific approach to translation” (Snell-Hornby 1990: 81).

THE RANGE AND SCOPE OF THE UT

Catford, following Halliday, proposes a systemic hierarchy of five units for consideration in translating. They are, in descending order: 1. the sentence, 2. clause, 3. group, 4. word and 5. morpheme (Catford 1965: 8).

Newmark, states that “**free translation** has always favored the sentence; **literal translation** the word,”. He has observed that with text linguistics, free translation has moved to the whole text, i.e., to regarding the whole text as the UT, and has given rise to a “confusing tendency” (Newmark 1988:54). His schema of hierarchical ranking, in consequence, ranges from the complete text, to the paragraph, sentence, clause, collocation, word group, word, and morpheme(Newmark 1988: 65-66).

Those who have taken exception to the (full) text as the UT, including Newmark, argue that “That would be chaos,” and “Ideally, the UT is one word [...] never the text”(Newmark 1981: 140, 1988: 55).

Those who hold the (full) text as the UT either warn that the translator “must never dwell on the words of his author” (O’Brien 1959/66:84, quoting Dryden), or insist that the translator “must eventually resolve to translate **discourse** equivalents, rather than lexical or even sentential structures” (Givón 1978: 272).

It is worth noting that what underlies these contending arguments is a common (mis)belief that the sentence and the (full) text are mutually exclusive units; or, that textual/discoursal meaning is independent of the structures of the constituent sentences.

Conclusion

A sentence enters the text-building process as a syntactically independent but not textually independent entity, its independence endowed by a cognitively significant structure of combined old-new information (cf. Downing 1995) secured semantically by lower-level textual units such as words. Further down from the level of sentences, units such as **clauses, phrases, words and morphemes** enjoy less and less independence, degrees of which are marked by various types of punctuations (including zero punctuation) or word space.

References:

Newmark, Peter (1988): A Textbook of Translation, New York, London, Prentice Hall.

Zhu, chunshen (2009):"Ut Once More: The Sentence as the Key Functional Unit of Translation”, City University of Hong Kong, China.