

# What Localization Models Can Learn From Translation Theory

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*Abstract. The localization industry may benefit from enhanced knowledge of translation theory. This particularly concerns industry discourses that position translation as 1) just a minor step in the localization models, 2) the replacement of language strings, 3) an exclusive part of Applied Linguistics, 4) a process of formal equivalence, 5) a concept perceived equally all over the world, and 6) a donkeywork activity. Each of these ideas can be challenged by a series of approaches developed in translation theory since the 1960s, including dynamic equivalence, the theory of purposes, action theory, and Descriptive Translation Studies.*

## Introduction

Translation theory has a lot to learn from localization. Efficiency, teamwork, client-liaison and technology-know-how are just a few examples. So why would localization have nothing to learn from translation theory? We suspect it is a problem of sifting ideas from the jargon. But that complaint works both ways (notice our own multiplying sigla!). If one cares to see through the clouds, there might just be some interesting ideas in translation theory. Those ideas might even have something to say about localization. More to the point, they might undo a few of the myths circulated by localization hype. Here we shall suggest just a few:

## Translation Is Just a Small Part of Localization

Process models of localization list as many as twelve steps, starting from “Analysis of Received Material,” “Scheduling and Budgeting,” through to “Post-mortem With Client.” Those are the phases that project managers have to consider. Translation is usually just one of those steps, so one concludes that translation is just a small part of localization. Seen in terms of the business model, that is entirely correct. However, one could equally argue that since bilingual secretaries translate, translation should only be taught

and studied as part of general secretarial duties. Or better, since people talk on the telephone, phonetics is part of telephony. We are comparing apples with pears here. Translation is one of the fundamental things that people do with language, alongside speaking, listening, writing and reading. The localization models on the other hand, are just business procedures, suited to a certain kind of product at a certain end of a certain century.

Let us map out a few dimensions here. If one thinks localization covers it all, one must consider that translation theory stretches back to Horace and Cicero, at least. If one imagines translation to have disappeared under the growth of the localization industry, one must calculate the number of people that translate in speech or writing every day: within bilingual families, multilingual communities, in social services, the courts, business meetings, news services, as well as in literature, large conferences and our multilingual dreams.

If one wants to argue that all those acts of translation are part localization, we would like to agree. But then one will have to start doing the theory of localization, which so far has not extended beyond calculations of efficiency. And if one thinks money is all that counts, we must ask: do the main problems of our world concern the efficient distribution of information, or the way different cultures perceive each other? Localization models seem dedicated to the former; translation theory has devoted a lot of thought to the latter. A mixture of both could be of interest.

### **Translation Is Just the Replacement of Language Strings**

If translation is not just a part of localization, it must be more than what localization portrays it as: the replacement of natural language strings. Sure, we get all those wonderful notes on the need to adapt to date formats, currencies, time zones, even symbolic color codes and all those other things that localization seems to deal with, in addition to translation. Those lists might impress clients. But please, translators have been dealing with all that for millennia, adapting as well as replacing language strings.

Among the many theories for this, perhaps the best known is Eugene Nida's concept of "dynamic equivalence," which covers all those bits of cultural adaptation. "Dynamic equivalence" is an alternative strategy to the "formal equivalence" that project managers seem to seek when they want the strings to fit into the same dialog boxes. Nida was talking about translating the Bible, but his many creative solutions might also help software enter the jungle.

### **Translation Theory Is Just Part of Applied Linguistics**

For the past twenty years or so, translation theory has been accepting ever-wider forms of text transformation, without having to call it "localization".

From at least 1984, *Skopostheorie* (theory of purposes) and *Handlungstheorie* (action theory) have insisted that translation is not dominated by the source text, but by relations with the client and the overall purpose or function that the translation has to achieve in the target culture. Those have been very strong messages, in tune with the developments of the profession. Those theories have pushed translation beyond the concept of equivalence, which always referred to the source text. In so doing, the theories have taken translation away from the clutches of linguistics as an academic discipline. The question of defining the purpose of a translation requires applied sociology, the ethics of communication and a gamut of considerations that are loosely held under the term “cultural studies”.

Translation theory has been going that way for some twenty years. And now localization enters to tell us that none of that has happened, that translation is “just a language problem,” in fact relaying the insult once applied to localization itself. In the development of translation theory, localization represents several steps backward.

### **Translation Output Is Like Translation Input**

Translation theory now freely admits that translators do more than produce equivalent texts. Another branch of translation theory, called Descriptive Translation Studies, has been showing this for rather more than twenty years. Those empirical studies have looked at all forms of translation in many cultures over long historical periods. They have found the following general tendencies:

- Translations are usually slightly longer than non-translations.
- Translations use a narrower range of words than non-translations (their type/token ratio is lower).
- Semantics are more explicit values in translations than non-translations.
- Optional syntactic connectors are used more in translations.
- The more expert the translator, the larger the text units they work on.

There are many more findings in this vein, many of them without apparent consequence. Localizers might however benefit from this growing body of knowledge. They might understand that translators are working quite normally when they change the length and structures of inputs, and that there are strong psychological and cultural reasons for those changes.

### **Translation Is the Same All Over the World**

The historical branch of Descriptive Translation Studies has also shown that the norms of translation are very different in different cultures and at

different times. When the French translated Russian novels, they usually trimmed them down by at least a third. When Erasmus was first translated into Spanish, his text was expanded by about a third. Some cultures accept the use of foreign terms and place-names; others choose to replace them with home-grown words. Some cultures continue to love performing technical tasks in technical English; others will eternally resent the imposition. Each culture would seem to have its own norms about what is acceptable in translations, and knowledge of those norms is as useful as awareness of any other local paradigms of communication.

The general finding is that, the more prestigious the receiving locale feels itself to be, the less that locale will tolerate the presence of foreign elements in translations. We also find that the bigger the locale, the more this is true, and the smaller the role of translation is in its culture. And then, perhaps paradoxically, the more a culture translates, the more it tolerates the use of foreign languages within it.

Translation is thus operating not just on words, but on the ways cultures perceive their relations. The adoption of one translation strategy or another can have an effect on those perceptions. And that is an ethical question of extreme pertinence to localization. It can influence the future of our cultures in the technical discourses most localized, particularly with respect to languages that are being brought into the electronic media for the first time.

Those things happen over time, and localization projects do not pay people to think over the long-term. At the moment, localization seems focused on developing technologies to bring about regime change, forgetting about the fate of cultures after that change.

### **Translators Love Donkeywork**

Translation is an extremely variable set of operations, even when just a part of localization. It can be used extensively or just in part; it can look entirely like a target-side text or like a foreign text (some cultures prefer it that way); it can create a new cultural domain or just extend international technical culture. Since all those factors are variables, they can have significant effects on localization costs. Unfortunately, since the benefits of high-cost translation strategies tend to appear over time, they tend not to be allowed for. A lot of translating is being done as cheaply and as quickly as possible, with results that are turning our computers and web sites into wonderlands of linguistic error.

At the bottom of this, translators are being employed to repeat terminology as consistently as possible, to control the length but not the content of their output, and to forget about anything else. Localization and translation memory software do their utmost to separate translators from any sense of actually communicating something to someone. This is disastrous for the professional self-image of translators, who frequently enter the more

interesting parts of localization, or move on to non-localization work as soon as they can afford to do so. It may also turn out to be disastrous in the long-term for localization itself, since experienced translators should be the source of much valuable cultural information. They are the ones who can tell you, intuitively, what cultural transformations our products have to undergo in order to be accepted. They also have ideas about the long-term effects of their work. If you don't want to indulge in translation theory, you may still obtain some practical benefits by listening to a few experienced translators.