Trumpsaltion: A Relevance Theoretic Approach to the Challenges Posed by Arabic simultaneous interpreters of President Donald Trump's *First Presidential Debate*

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Abstract:

The present paper aims at shedding light on the challenges which simultaneous interpreters encounter when rendering President Donald Trump's speeches into Arabic (Trumpslations). The study also attempts to identify the strategies employed by the interpreters when rendering Trump's awkward statements into Arabic. The data is collected from *Clinton, Trumps Clash in the first Debate*; several challenging cases, within their context, were selected randomly from his speeches. The Arabic interpretations of these cases by one of the leading news agencies, *Sky News Arabia*, were compared to the original texts and were analyzed to check accuracy, acceptability and comprehensibility. Gutt's (1990, 1991 & 1998) relevance approach has been used as a framework for this study. The hypothesis is that the selected ambiguous statements of Trump do perplex the interpreters who exert lots of efforts to decipher them, but the inevitable result is erroneously interpreting these statements by both the interpreters and the receivers due to lack of understanding on the part of the interpreters. The study reveals that Trump's speeches are characterized with *confusing lexical items, language-mingling form, fast talking pace, and yell-talks*. The study concludes that *omission* and *elaboration* have been the most recurrent translation strategies employed by interpreters when dealing with the awkward statements.

Keywords: Arabic; Interpreting; Relevance theory; Strategies; Trumpslation.

Introduction

Relevance theory is an approach to communication that is based on making relevant inferences drawing on the principle of cognition and communication; it views human communication as an

intentional act where by the speaker communicates intentionally and the receiver in turn makes relevant inference with the aim of forming better comprehension. So, the speaker has an informative intention and s/he uses verbal expressions full of semantic representations (Malmkjær, 1992).

Relevance theory focuses on how the receiver tries to decipher what is meant by the speaker. (Horn, 2005) points out that the main objective for relevance theory is to study the process of understanding an utterance. Based on the strong link between relevance theory and cognitive background of the speaker, we tune ourselves towards certain relevant scopes of meaning and detach ourselves from other scopes.

This process of tuning is synchronized between effects and cost where by the goal is to arrive at a better comprehension with the lowest processing cost possible (Sperber and Wilson, 1987, 2002). Linguistic utterances are usually thought to be easily communicated through relevance, i.e. the scope of the cognitive features they exhibit can be easily shared among interlocutors with a low processing cost.

But this is subject to how manifest and clear the information is which conveyed by the speaker hence the cognitive system of the receiver uses these as guidelines to help infer the adequate implied meaning.

In relevance theory, Sperber & Deirdre (2002) and Wilson and Sperber (2004) propound that there is a 'modular' system or 'mind-reading' system which specializes in analyzing and processing the communicative act to refine the pragmatic associations of an utterance in order to arrive at a better comprehension.

Thus, when the speaker produces an utterance, he provokes the receivers own cognitive mind reading system with the aim of mapping the receiver's cognitive knowledge relevant to the utterance against those of the speaker's with the aim of sharing with the speaker an understanding of the utterance exhibiting the implied meanings and messages.

Therefore, this system includes a filter that only allows in the most adequate interpretations and filters away the inadequate ones till the state of optimal relevance is reached; all of this ought to be done at the lowest processing cost to be successful. Basically, Sperber and Wilson's Theory of Relevance (1985, 1987) focusses on the mental mechanisms which allow speaker and the receiver to process in the most effective way and with the smallest effort the information that flows from speakers to hearers. They explain relevance as:

> A property of inputs to cognitive processes. The processing of an input (e.g. an utterance) may yield some cognitive effects (e.g. revisions of beliefs). Everything else being equal, the greater the effects, the greater the relevance of the input. The processing of the input (and the derivation of these effects) involves some cognitive effort. Everything else being equal, the greater the effort, the lower the relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1997, p. 115).

Relevance theory (Wilson & Sperber 1985) represents a psycholinguistic analysis background whereby the translator is required to infer the message implied by the SL and communicate it to the intended audience with maximum effect and minimal effort hence the TL exhibits the 'communicative clues' residing in the SL (Gutt, 2000, p. 170). Thus, based on the abovementioned, the translated text ought to maintain the communicative nature existing in the original.

Sometimes, though through literal translation, a translator strives to be faithful to the SL text, meaning may not be adequately communicated to the TL audience who in turn may produce irrelevant interpretations which do not match with the ones intended by the SL (see Gutt, 2000 and Sarcevic, 2000).

This theory includes two major concepts: *maximum* relevance and *optimal* relevance. Maximum relevance refers to capturing the concentrated effect from the context with the lowest processing effort; optimal relevance implies receiving sufficient contextual effect with efficient processing cost. Failing to realize the maximum or the minimum effects would lead to breaking down in communication. Thus, translators ought to capture the cognitive environment of the receivers and the assumptions they might make so as to avoid making

mistakes which in turn lead to misunderstanding (Zhao & Jiang, 2013). Therefore, when translating literature, the target audience may not share the same cognitive background with the source language. Hence, forming understanding based on inadequate assumptions. To this end, some theorists suggested using words of common use and/or alternative culture.

1.1   Questions of the study

The present study has set out with the aim of answering the following questions:

1. What are the main challenging features of Trump's speeches?
2. What are the interpreting strategies employed to handle these challenges?
3. To what extent do both the challenges and the interpreting strategies play a role in accurately and relevantly conveying the messages into the TL?

2. Methodology

2.1 Data collection and analysis

The data were collected from President Donald Trump's speech in the *First Presidential Debate* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7gDXtRS0jo) at Hofstra University on Monday, Sept. 26.Several challenging cases, within their context, were selected randomly from his speeches. These sentences were varied in their difficulties. The Arabic interpretations of these cases by one of the leading news agencies, Sky News Arabia (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0X2Idb3LKcI), were compared to the original texts and were analyzed to check accuracy, acceptability and comprehensibility.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the Gutt's application of relevance theory upon translation studies. However, in order to have a better understanding of relevance theory, it is worth noting to consider Grice's (1975, and 2001) inferential approach to communication, upon which Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory is based. Consequently, Sperber and Wilson's (1985, 1987, and 1998) relevance theory is discussed in general as it can be applied to all

communication. Finally, we will discuss Gutt's (1990, 1991, and 1998) application of the relevance theory upon translation studies based on the assumption: if relevance theory applies on all communication and translation is communication, then relevance theory applies on translation.

Grice (1975) introduces the two concepts of natural meaning and non-natural meaning and distinguishes between the two by giving different examples on both. He argues that there is a difference between what people say (the actual words uttered), and what they really mean (their intentions). Thus, he calls the former "natural meaning" and the latter "non-natural meaning." Throughout his later works, Grice (2001) expands his inferential approach to communication and manages to correlate his understanding of meaning with reasoning; the individuals' ability to understand what the speaker's intention is. For instance, Grice (2001) illustrates this process of reasoning in an example where someone stops at an intersection at night and a car flashes its lights at him or her. This person would start thinking about the reason that made the other car flash at him or her and may manage to reason this incident as that the other driver is trying to let him or her know that his or her lights are not on; therefore, this person would think that the other driver has no reason to deceive him or her so his or her lights must be off. Furthermore, Grice (2001) argues that people do not reason this way very often when communicating is illustrated in the reader's understanding of the previous example and his or her reasoning of what might be the true intentions of the other driver. In other words, Grice's (2001) main concern is to discuss the relationship between the reader's initial reasoning and what he or she understood from the explanation provided.

Moreover, Grice's inferential approach to communication has grounded the basis for Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory. In other words, Sperber and Wilson (1985) suggest that relevance theory seems to be based on one of Grice's claims that human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, relies heavily on the process of expressing and recognizing intentions. Since Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory is concerned with human communication, they tend to argue that, "to communicate is to claim an individual's attention: hence to communicate is to imply that the information

communicated is relevant" (Sperber and Wilson, 1987, p. iv) and this is what they call the "Communicative Principle of Relevance" in their Second Edition.

Sperber and Wilson (1987) try to answer two questions they believe are raised through the study of communication: "what is communicated?" and "how is it communicated?" For which they try to seek answers and conclude that there should be a theory of communication. They base their conclusion on the fact that previous theories of communication are based on a single model, which they call the code model, "according to the code model, a communicator encodes her intended message into a signal, which is decoded by the audience using an identical copy of code" (Wilson and Sperber, 1998, p. 607).

Sperber and Wilson (1998), further make an exception for other recent philosophers, i.e. Paul Grice and David Lewis, who have proposed a different model, which Sperber and Wilson call the inferential model, "according to the inferential model, a communicator provides evidence of her intention to convey certain meaning, which is inferred by the audience on the basis of the evidence provided" (ibid). Furthermore, Sperber and Wilson (1987) discuss both models and manage to contrast the two as to come up with an improved inferential model and show "how it can be combined with a code model to provide an explanatory account of verbal communication" (Sperber and Wilson, 1987, p. 3). According to the relevance theory, Grice's inferential approach to communication is called ostensive-inferential communication and includes two types of intentions: first, the informative intention, i.e. to inform the hearer of something and second, the communicative intention, i.e. to inform the hearer of one's informative intention. The second type of intention seems more like an interpretation of the first one and it is described as communicative way of interaction.

Finally, based on Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory, Gutt (1991) argues that since relevance theory applies to all communication and that translation is a type of communication, then relevance theory can be applied on translation studies, "'translation' can be accounted for naturally within the relevance theory of communication developed by Sperber and Wilson" (Gutt, 1990, p. 135). Thus, he suggests that

there is no need for a separate theory of translation. Moreover, Gutt (1990) explains how that relevance theory states that language is either used descriptively or interpretively. In a descriptive usage of the language, the speaker speaks for himself or herself expressing his or her own thoughts. On the other hand, in an interpretive usage of the language, the speaker is expressing someone else's thoughts and aims to accurately represent the original thought. Accordingly, Gutt (1991) argues that translation is an interpretive use of language, for the translator tries to maintain the thoughts expressed by the original speaker. He proposes a relevance theory framework explaining how translation is an "interpretive use of language across language boundaries" (Gutt, 1998, p. 44).

However, this study is more concerned with the twofold presumption presented in the relevance theory, which Gutt (1990, p. 136) explains as:

> Whenever a communicator claims someone's attention indicating that he intends to communicate something, it is assumed by both parties that the communicator is not putting the audience to work gratuitously, but that he believes (a) that what he intends to communicate is adequately relevant to the audience, and (b) that the audience can recover it without unnecessary processing effort.

Therefore, since translation and interpretation are types of communication, then cultural expressions translation is expected to abide by this twofold presumption in terms of the relativity of the expressions rendered. In other words, whenever a translator is tinkering with cultural expressions, both the receiver and the translator expect that the rendered expression is adequately relevant to the receiver and that the receiver can recover it without unnecessary processing effort. Hence, the receiver is entitled to assume that the first translation of the stimulus found to be consistent with the principle of relevance is the once intended by the communicator (Gutt, 1990).

Secondly and most importantly, this paper is also concerned with the presumption of faithfulness "speech reporter creates a presumption that the interpretation he intends to convey resembles the

interpretation of the original closely enough in relevant respects" (Gutt 1990, p. 142). Such faithfulness in conveying the original expression is expected on the part of the receiver who presumes that the rendered expression is adequately relevant under optimal processing. Thus, the receiver's first understanding of the rendered expression using the contextual assumptions is the one intended by the translator (Gutt, 1990).

3. Discussion

Culture includes knowledge of world through personal experience or education as well as beliefs, symbols, values, etc. (Gumperz, 1993). To a large extent, language is culture-specific: what speakers of a given social group say is intimately bound to a set of norms and connotations which ultimately will represent 'the beliefs and values of a community' (Carter, 1995, p. 31), and some of these values will be linguistically translatable but culturally non-transferable. When translating, we do not only communicate meanings across languages, but we also approximate different unrelated cultures together. The English short story *that evening sun* includes different cultural backgrounds, they could cause some challenges at the level of understanding for the target language receivers (Zhao & Jiang, 2013). As such, translators ought to reproduce the text in a way that captures similar meaning to the Arabic audience. One helpful and crucial means that they need to rely on is the concept of 'context' which is fundamental in translation theory since it underlies the precise meaning of words appearing in a given source text in a particular culture. In translation, we shed light on context for pragmatic purposes whereby the linguistic units are linked to the participants or to the action itself. This is the case, relevance theory as translation framework flows to surface to function as a tool that checks the adequacy of translating culture related units of language. This means that the translator needs to be sensitive to the cultural concepts encountered in the literary text and try to convey them smoothly to the receivers in order to make adequate inferences to easily process them for maximum relevance of meaning. One possible strategy is *approximation* whereby the translator could provide a unit of language to the target audience that approximately conveys the intended meaning of the source language cultural unit; this could involve the use of non-standard language in the target text. Another translation

strategy that can be employed by translators is *reformulation* whereby the translator may use a semantically different unit of language that ensures a better comprehension of the source language cultural linguistic unit.

As for the findings, the present study revealed that there are three major challenging features in Trump's speech including utilizing *odd lexical items*; *language-mingling form, yell-talks* and *fast-talking pace*. The interpreters failed to appropriately handle these issues, hencemaking it difficult to arrive at the relevant interpretation and thus miss understanding the messages. A lot of space would be needed to illustrate this in full, but a few quick examples will have to suffice. We will see cases where interpreters failed to capture the relevant information that could create an easily perceived effect on the receivers.

(1) Odd lexical items:

Trump has this stylistic feature which is injecting odd or unfamiliar lexical items in his speeches. For more illustration check the following example:

1.

a. We have people that are political **hacks** negotiating our trade deals. (29: 07)

Arabic video from *Sky News Arabia* (29:11-16)

هناك أشخاص يفاوضون حول هذه الاتفاقات

Trump used the lexical item 'hacks'to criticize the Obama and the democrat's administration and to convey the idea that these politicians are inexperienced and not professional. However, this implied message was not conveyed to the TL audience.

b. I am very **underleveraged**. I have a great company. I have a tremendous income. And the reason I say that is not in a **braggadocios** way. It's because it's about time that this country had somebody running it that has an idea about money. (37:55- 38: 10)

Arabic video from *Sky News Arabia* (34:30-42)

... ولمـاذا أقول هذا؟ ليس لـأبرر شيئاً ما. إنما لأقول أن الأمر يتعلق بالوقت. على أحد أن يدير هذه الدولة ...

In the above example, Trump used two odd lexical items: "underleveraged" and "braggadocios" in the same short paragraph. The Arabic interpretation shows that there is a clear lack of familiarity of the meanings of these two lexical items. First, the interpreter omitted the sentence which includes "underleveraged" which means "*having an excessively low ratio of debt capital to equity capital*" لديها نسبة اقتراض منخفضة جداً مقارنة مع رأس مال الشركة . Second, the interpreter did the same with "braggadocios"which means"a boasting person" متبجح شخص. Now, the idea which Trump humbly tries to emphasize is *being a successful businessman and this is what makes him the most suitable person to lead the country (America)*is left unconveyed to the audience. The Arabic version is meaningless.

2. [deletion: name and affiliation]

> We are in a big, fat, ugly bubble. And we better be awfully careful. And we have **a Fed that's doing political things. This Janet Yellen of the Fed. The Fed is doing political—by keeping the interest rates at this level.** And believe me**:** The day Obama goes off, and he leaves, and goes out to the golf course for the rest of his life to play golf, when they raise interest rates, you're going to see some very bad things happen, because the Fed is not doing their job. The Fed is being more political than Secretary Clinton.

Arabic video from *Sky News Arabia* **(27:19- 27:51)**

إننا قد نكون بصدد أزمة أخرى، هذه الفقاعات يجب أن نكون حذرين بشأنها وعلينا أن نفكر في القرارات السياسية التي نتخذها. هناك سياسيون ينظرون إلى هذا الأمر صدقوني في اليوم الذي يغادر فيه أوباما ويذهب للعب الجولف في بقية حياته.. سنرى الكثير من الأشياء السيئة تحدث. لماذا لأنه لم يفعل ما عليه فعله لأنه كان يفكر بنفس الطريقة التي تفكر فيها كلنتون.

The interpreter has again omitted "**Janet Yellen of the Fed''** who served as the Chair of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. Similarly, Trump goes on to attack criticize the Obama administration; this implied message has not been delivered to the TL audience who may fail to put Trump's ideas together to come up with a complete thought.

(2) Language-mingling form

In the following case, Trump uses figures and repeats uttering them in a confusing manner whereby the interpreter lost concentration and missed out the information.

1.

So the worst of all things has happened. We owe **$20 trillion**, and we're a mess. We haven't even started. And we've spent **$6 trillion** in the Middle East, according to a report that I just saw. Whether it's **6 or 5**, but it looks like it's **6**, **$6 trillion** in the Middle East, we could have rebuilt our country twice. (38: 39- 39:00)

Arabic video from *Sky News Arabia* (35:13-33)

لدينا 20 تريليون دولار، ونحن لم نبدأ بعد. صرفنا 6 تريليونات دولار في الشرق الأوسط من خلال التقارير التي قرأتها. لا أعرف إذا كان الأمر 5 أم 6 تريليونات دولار في الشرق الأوسط ..كان بإمكاننا أن نعيد بناء دولتنا مرتين.

2. [missed up information: namely figures]

But you will learn more about Donald Trump by going down to the federal elections, where I filed a 104-page essentially financial statement of sorts, the forms that they have. It shows income-in fact, the income-I just looked today-the income is filed at $694 million for this past year, $694 million. If you would have told me I was going to make that 15 or 20 years ago, I would have been very surprised.

Arabic video from *Sky News Arabia* (28:17-28:50)

ستعلمون أشياء أكثر عن دونالد ترامب وعندما نتحدث عن انتخابات رئاسية ستجدون أكثر من 400 صفحة عن هذا الأمر وتتحدث عن الإيرادات، أنا فقط اليوم نظرت إلى الإيرادات و..هو حول 600 مليون دولار ستقولون هل ستفعل نفس الإيرادات..(كلام سريع) تحقق نفس الإيرادات في ال 8 سنوات المقبلة؟ أقول إنه عندما يكون هناك دولة تدار بشكل سيء وتكون تستغل من بعض الدول...

3.

Well, I told you, I will release them as soon as the audit. Look, I've been under audit almost for 15 years. I know a lot of

wealthy people that have never been audited. I said, do you get audited? I get audited almost every year.

And in a way, I should be complaining. I'm not even complaining. I don't mind it. It's almost become a way of life. I get audited by the IRS. But other people don't. I will say this. We have a situation in this country that has to be taken care of. I will release my tax returns-against my lawyer's wishes-when she releases her 33,000 e-mails that have been deleted. As soon as she releases them, I will release. (32:54- 33:32)

Arabic video from *Sky News Arabia* **(29:26- 30:08)**

أنا قلت لك سأفصح عنها بمجرد اكتمال التدقيق.. ل 15 سنة وأنا أجري التدقيق، هناك بعض الأشخاص الذين لا يجرون تدقيق..أنا اجري تدقيقاً كل سنة..

وأنا لا أشتكي ولا أهتم، وعندما تكتمل سأفصح عنها، الأشخاص الآخرون لا يفعلون ذلك، وأقول عندما يكون لدينا وضعية في هذه الدولة التي يجب أن يهتم بها، سأتحدث وأقول وأفصح عن إيراداتي الضريبية عندما تفصح عن 30 ألف إيميل التي أجري التحقيق بشأنها .. سأفعل الأمر نفسه فيما يخص الإيرادات الضريبية

The Arabic interpretation does not fully convey the exact meaning of the English text. This does not give the receivers enough clues to quickly and easily process the Arabic expression and still come up with the meanings associated with the source text.

(3) Fast-talking pace:

Fast-talking pace or speaking too quickly will surely give interpreters a hard time to concentrate, memorize and reformulate the message and still make sense. Consider the following illustrative example:

> You land at LaGuardia, you land at Kennedy, you land at LAX, you land at Newark, and you come in from Dubai and Qatar and you see these incredible-you come in from China, you see these incredible airports, and you land-we've become a third world country. (38: 25-39)

Arabic video from *Sky News Arabia* **(35:02-13)**

انظروا إلى قطر ودبي والصين كل هذه الدول والمدن التي لديها مرافق هائلة وتنتمي إلى دول العالم الثالث.

In the original video, Trump was talking in a rather fast mode. As can be clearly noticed, the reference to the American airports when Trump compared them to Dubai, Qatar and China has been deleted. What is more striking is the ironic description by Trump of his own homeland which, compared to those countries, has become a third world country, not the other way around.

(4) Yell-talks:

Trump opts for yell-talks in debates in order to dominate the conversation. This also has its consequences on the interpreters who struggle with such forms of talk by Trump. Thus, challenges continue to confront the interpreters. Though some of the sentences do not consist of difficult words, the way they were rendered into Arabic shows that they were misinterpreted, misanalysed and thus misunderstood. For more illustration, consider the following example:

> **CLINTON:** Lester, we've covered...

> **TRUMP:** No, wait a minute.

> **CLINTON:** We've covered this ground.

> **TRUMP:** When they formed, when they formed, this is something that never should have happened. It should have never happened. Now, you're talking about taking out ISIS. But you were there, and you were secretary of state when it was a little infant. Now it's in over 30 countries. And you're going to stop them? I don't think so.

> **Arabic video from** *Sky News Arabia* **(1:15:45-)**

عليكم أن تواجهوا الحقيقة...
إنتظري دقيقة! (بصوت حاد)
عندما أنشأت داعش.. هذا شيء ما كان ينبغي أن يحصل أبداً، وأنت تتحدثين الان عن هزم داعش، لكنك كنت هناك وكنت وزيرة للخارجية ، وكانت داعش وليداً جنيناً، والان هي موجودة ..داعش موجودة في الكثير من الأماكن.

Finally, it is worthy to point out that culture which underlies the linguistic units ought to be dealt with cautiously employing strategies like approximation and reformulation, for instance, to produce a relevant translation and to avoid falling into the trap of subconsciously producing irrelevant translations.

3. Conclusion

To maintain the gist of the English genre we are after operational translation. The dissimilar cognitive environment of the parties involved in any translated work, namely, the American presidential debates, such as the source language audience, the translator and the target language audience lead to misunderstanding of the original message. The speeches were produced in different cultures, different places at different times hence leading to lack of context which relies on the communicative clues in order to form a good basis for understanding the essence of the message. For this reason, interpreters try to utilize relevance theory in order to maintain the similar contextual effects of the original text; by doing so, relevance between the original contexts and enables the receivers to process information adequately in the same effort exerted by the source language readers. To this end, this paper focuses on the complex nature of Trump's manner of address when applying relevance theory to translation.

Applying relevance theory to interpreting studies from English into Arabic is still very preliminary and requires extensive application of relevance theory as well as extensive research. Other speech's features need to be exhaustively studied from a relevance theoretic perspective, too.

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