

House's functional-pragmatic model of translation assessment and implications for evaluating English-Vietnamese translation quality

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Abstract: Translation quality assessment is not an undisputed issue in translation studies. The main problem seems to reside in how to assess the quality or what measures should be used to evaluate the translation. The measures used will be different, depending on the purpose of the assessment and on the theoretical framework applied to assessing the translation quality. This paper first discusses different models of translation quality assessment (TQA). Secondly, it describes House's functional-pragmatic TQA model in details and applications of House's model combined with quantitative methods in evaluating English- German translations. Thirdly, it draws out some implications for research into assessing English-Vietnamese translations.

Keywords: models of translation quality assessment, functional – pragmatic model, cultural filter, register, genre, qualitative & quantitative analyses.

The assessment of translator performance is an activity which, despite being widespread, is under-researched and under-discussed.

(Hatim and Mason 1997: 199) [1]

1. Introduction

In discussions about translations (as products) and translation (as an activity) the question of quality has always been one of top priority. It has been repeatedly said that the aim of each translation activity is to produce a good translation, a good target text (TT). But what

are the criteria to say that one target text is a 'good' translation, while another one is 'bad' or 'poor'? The criteria used will be different, depending on the purpose of the assessment and on the theoretical framework which are applied to assess translation quality. Or as House (1997, in Schäffner, 1997:1)[2] writes: 'Evaluating the quality of a translation presupposes a theory of translation. Thus, different views of translation lead to different concepts of translational

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quality, and hence different ways of assessing it’.

In this paper, firstly, I will briefly discuss some different translation quality assessment (TQA) models; secondly, I will describe House’s functional-pragmatic model of translation evaluation and applications of House’s model combined with quantitative methods in assessing English – German translations; and thirdly, I will suggest some implications for research into quality assessment of English – Vietnamese translations.

2. Different TQA models

As mentioned earlier, criteria for the evaluation of translation depend on one’s view of or approach to translation, and on one’s theory of translation. There is discussion about whether translation evaluation should take into account the source text. Following are non-comparative and comparative TQA models.

2.1. Non-comparative models

The representative non-comparative model is that by Toury. His work (1978, in Maier C, 2009)[3] with translational norms suggests that evaluative criteria be centered on the target system alone, and he considers that translations are facts of the target culture, their characteristics being conditioned by target culture forces. Although Toury argues that comparative study might have some role in translation criticism, he notes that comparisons between translations and originals often lead to “an enumeration of errors and a reverence for the original” (Toury, 1978, in Maier C, 2009: 239).

Noncomparative models, however, do not represent the only approach to translation criticism; there is an insistence on the part of some scholars that translation criticism must take the original into account.

2.2. Comparative models

In what follows, I will present four comparative models, namely Newmark’s model, Nord’s model, Steiner’s model, and House’s model.

(i) Newmark’s TQA model

Newmark’s model of criticism (Newmark, 1988: 186-8)[4] includes the analysis of the source language text, a comparison of it and the translation, and comments about the translation’s potential role as a translation.

The comparative study is the ‘heart’ of this model (Newmark, *ibid*: 188). His five-part model is as follows:

- (1) A brief analysis of the SL text stressing its intention and its functional aspects;
- (2) The translator’s interpretation of the SL text’s purpose, his translation method and the translation’s likely readership;
- (3) A selective but representative detailed comparison of the translation with the original;
- (4) An evaluation of the translation: a) in the translator’s terms, b) in the critic’s terms; and
- (5) Where appropriate, and assessment of the likely place of the translation in the target language culture or discipline.

(ii) Nord’s TQA model

In her **Skopstheorie** model, Nord (1991)[5] describes translation as intentional, inter-lingual

communicative action & proposes an analytical model based on the function and intention

(skopos) of the target text in the target culture.

The evaluator must take the TT skopos as the starting point for TQA, assess the TT against the skopos and the translator's explicit strategies and then do an ST/TT comparison for inferred strategies. Nord's model (1991:166-167) consists of the following four steps.

(1) An analysis of the TT: the TT is analysed in terms of intra-textual factors (such as grammatical, lexical, and stylistic normativity & semantic coherence) and in terms of extra-textual factors (such as the pragmatic dimensions of recipient, time, place, etc.)

(2) An analysis of the ST: the ST is analysed according to the model of translation-relevant text analysis. The critic should pay special attention to those factors which have been found out as 'problematic' during TT assessment, such as coherence deficiencies, inconsistent terminology, interferences in lexic or sentence structure, etc.

(3) A comparison of the TT & the ST. This comparison leads to a TT profile.

(4) A comparison of TT profile and the target text: if the TT profile congruent the target text, the translation can be regarded as functionally adequate.

Nord emphasizes that error analysis is insufficient: "[I]t is the text as a whole whose function(s) and effect(s) must be regarded as the crucial criteria for translation criticism" (1991: 166). This is a key qualification, for on the basis of a selection of relevant ST features; the translator may eliminate ST items, rely more heavily on implicatures, or "compensate" for them in a different part of the text.

(iii) E. Steiner's TQA model

E. Steiner's approach is based on the register theory as developed by Halliday (1964, 1978). According to Steiner E (1998, in Hoang Van Van, 2006: 147)[6], a comprehensive evaluation of a text should consider: the meta-functional equivalences (the experiential, logical, interpersonal, textual meanings & the pragmatic meanings), and the situational environment in which the text is embedded. When evaluating a translation, one should compare the target text with the source text in terms of three register components: field, tenor, and mode.

Field: subject matter, goal orientation, social activities (i.e. production, exchange, communication, reproduction, etc.)

Tenor: agentive roles, social role, social distance (i.e. degrees of formality, degrees of politeness), and effect.

Mode: language role, channel of discourse, medium of discourse.

(iv) House's TQA model

House (2001a:156)[7] states that in translation criticism the assessor should always be forced to move from a macro-analytical focus to a micro-analytical one, from considerations of ideology, function, genre, register to the communicative value of individual linguistic terms.

House's functional-pragmatic model consists of the following steps:

(1) The source text is analysed along the dimensions of Field, Tenor and Mode. On the basis of findings on the lexical, the syntactic and the textual level, a text-profile is set up which reflects the individual textual function.

(2) The translated text is analysed along the same dimensions and at the same level of delicacy.

(3) The source and translation texts are compared. An assessment of their relative match is established: how the two texts are similar and/or different, given differing linguistic and cultural constraints.

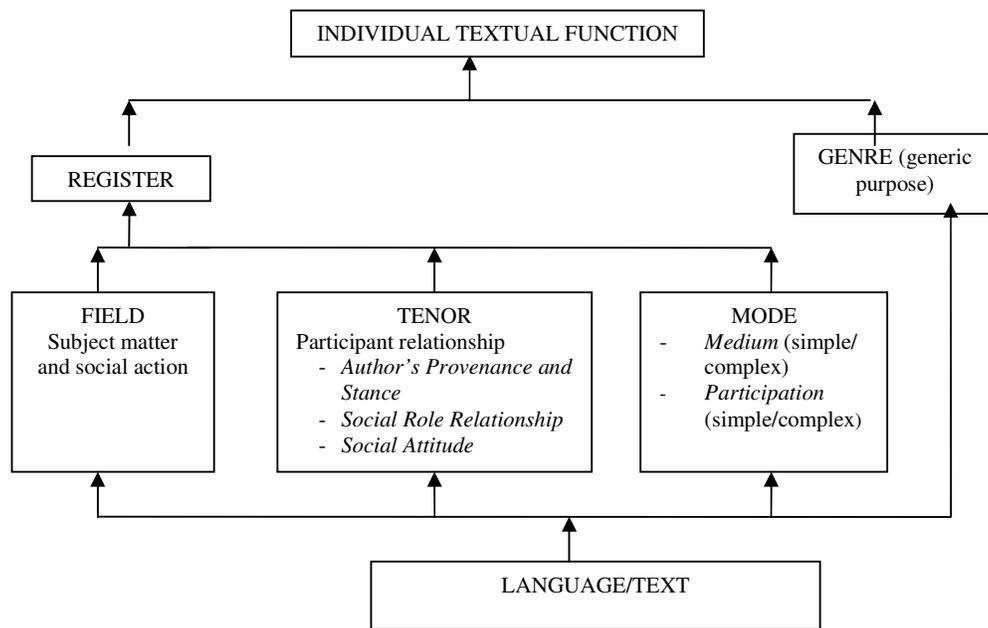
Among the four comparative TQA models, House's model attracts the greatest attention. In the next part, I will describe her model in details.

3. House's TQA model combined with quantitative analyses and its application into assessing English-German translations

3.1. House's TQA model (1977, 1997)

House's TQA model (1977, 1997) is based on Halliday's systemic functional theory as well as on Prague school ideas (functional style, functional sentence perspective, etc), speech act theory, pragmatics, discourse analysis and corpus-based distinctions between spoken and written language, (House, 2001a: 134).

A Scheme for Analysing and Comparing Original and Translation Texts
(Source: House, 2001a: 139)



Following Halliday, but dismissing his textual function as belonging to a different level of analysis, House distinguishes *two* basic functional components which are co-present in every text: the ideational and the interpersonal functional components. These two components

are to be kept equivalent in translation (House, 2006:29)[8]. By means of the different dimensions of the model a text can be analysed in terms of Language/ Text, Register and Genre, as presented in the above scheme. **Register** covers a variety of elements, some of

which are additional to those expressly stated by Halliday (Munday, 2001: 93) [9]. **Field** refers to the subject matter and social action and covers the specificity of lexical items. **Tenor** includes 'the addresser's temporal, geographical and social provenance as well as his/ her intellectual, emotional or affective stance, i.e. his/ her 'personal viewpoint'. 'Social attitude' refers to formal, neutral or informal style. Finally, **mode** relates to 'channel' (spoken/ written, etc.) and the degree of participation between writer and reader (monologue, dialogue, etc.). The channel can be 'simple', i.e. 'written to be read' or 'complex', e. g. "written to be spoken as if not written". Participation can be "simple", i.e. a monologue with no addressee participation built into the text, or "complex" with various addressee-involving linguistic mechanisms characterizing the text.

In addition, House's model (2001a: 145) focuses on register analysis of both ST and TT. On each of the dimensions FIELD, TENOR, MODE, she differentiates lexical, syntactic and textual means.

- Lexical means refer to choice and patterns of lexical items, collocations, co-occurrence, use of onomatopoeic elements, etc. Lexical cohesion is divided into two main categories: reiteration and collocations

- Syntactic means include nature of the verb phrase; mood; tenses; sentence structures: simple, compound, or complex; repetition; coordination or subordination; structure of noun phrases: simple or complex with pre-modification or post-modification, etc.

- Textual means refer to textual cohesion, which is achieved through a number of different procedures, namely theme dynamics (or

thematic structure); clausal linkage: additive (*and, in addition*), adversative (*but, however*), etc.; iconic linkage, i.e. parallelism of structures; repetition of redundancy words, reference, substitution, ellipsis, etc.

House (2001a: 139-141) also distinguishes two types of translation: overt translation and covert translation. *Overt translations* are source text (ST) focused. The source text is tied in a specific manner to the source language community and its culture. *Covert translations* are target text (TT) focused. A covert translation is a translation which enjoys the status of an original source text in the target culture. A covert translation is possible by inserting a "cultural filter" between original and translation with which culture-specific source language norms are adapted to the norms holding in the target language community.

In evaluating a translation, it is essential that the fundamental differences between overt and covert translations be taken into account. These two types of translation clearly make different demands on translation criticism. The difficulty of evaluating an overt translation is generally reduced in that considerations of cultural filtering can be omitted. Overt translations are "more straightforward", as the originals can be taken over "unfiltered". A "cultural filter" is a means of capturing socio-cultural differences in expectation norms and stylistic conventions between source and target linguistic-cultural communities. These differences should be based on empirical cross-cultural research. In other words, cultural filtering requires reliable information about language – that is, culture-specific textual communicative preferences within the respective language community.

3.2. House's recent research: qualitative & quantitative analyses and the assessment of English-German translations

In her recent comparative analyses of texts in English and German (House, 2001b [10]; 2006), she focuses only on covert translations. House bases her research on contrastive discourse analyses for the language pair German-English, which have pointed to different communicative preferences:

-English speakers were found to give preference to an interpersonal orientation, to implicitness, indirectness, and the use of verbal routines,

-German speakers show a tendency towards a more pronounced content-orientation, explicitness, directness, and the use of ad-hoc formulations

The methods used in House's research (2001b, 2006) are as follows:

(1) Qualitative analyses: by means of House's translation model (1977; 1997)

(2) Quantitative analyses:

The two purposes of using quantitative analyses provided by House are as follows: (i) firstly, quantitative analyses serve to verify the results of the qualitative analyses with regard to the development of the frequency of occurrence of certain linguistic means; and (ii) secondly, they are designed to reveal preferred usage of each individual form with respect to collocations and co-occurrence as well as their syntactic and textual position compared with the organisation of information.

The corpus in House's research (2006) consists of three parts: the *Primary Corpus*, the *Parallel Corpus*, and the *Validation Corpus*. The number of texts totals approximately 550 comprising about 800,000 words. The grouping

parameters are as follows: original text or translation, synchronic or diachronic, language of the text, language of the original text, etc. The corpus covers the genres such as computer instructions, popular science texts, and external business communication.

The corpus is used to identify language specific, typologically-based text norms and conventions for the genres that may be idiosyncratic for the different cultures involved. Furthermore, the analyses of parallel texts will help answer the question of whether Anglo-American text norms and conventions are found in texts that are not translated.

The linguistic forms and phenomena which were found in the qualitative analysis to express subjectivity and addressee orientation in English and German are: modal verbs, semi-modals, modal words, particles, mental processes, demonstrative reference (deixis), connective particles, sentence adverbials, *ing*-adverbials, progressive aspect, sentential mood, complement constructions, frame-constructions, commenting parentheses, and evaluative lexis (House, 2006:39).

According to House (2006:40), the quantitative analyses conducted have confirmed the qualitative analyses. In both the German translations and the comparable German texts they found a change in the frequency of those linguistic means that contribute to the realization of subjectivity and addressee orientation that was occasioned by the presence of contact with Anglophone text- and discourse norms, i.e., they found an increased frequency of speaker-hearer deixis, elements expressing modality, particles, and mental processes all of which express speaker attitude, interpret interaction between author and addressee which

were found to be typical of English texts in this genre.

3.3. Advantages and shortcomings of House's TQA model (1977, 1997) & her recent work (2006)

House's TQA model has the following advantages. Firstly, House's TQA model can be applied to assessing a variety of text types: scientific texts, commercial texts, journalistic articles, tourist information booklets, and fictional and non-fictional texts (House, 1977: 67)[11]. Secondly, House's TQA model is "a particularly good example of how the consideration of macro- and micro-level phenomena can be integrated, rather than separated and opposed to each other, in analysis," Steiner E, (2003:17)[12]. In House's TQA model, ST and TT are judged on "micro level", i.e. lexico-grammatical features, but the factors which allow the investigation of how these "micro-level" features fall into relevant configurations have to be "macro-level", i.e. notions such as "register" and "genre". Besides, macro-level categories, such as genre or register, are not neglected, but serve an important function both in the generation of hypotheses, and in the interpretation of results. On the other hand, the entire investigation is made empirical by operationalising the hypotheses in terms of lexico-grammatical features, in terms of which hypotheses can be evaluated, further developed and changed. Thirdly, as Schäffner (1997:1) points out, House convincingly demonstrates that her linguistic approach to TQA includes not only textual, situational, but also cultural aspects. House introduces the concern towards a scientific treatment of quality in translation. She also revises empirical studies directed to the reception of the translated text by the target-

culture reader, and brings to the field the used and still very useful concept of "communicative competence". The pragmatic background of her model opened a way to further studies that incorporated cultural aspects to the understanding of translation, Rui Rothe-Neves, (n.d.: 114-115)[13]. Finally, other TQA models seem less appropriate for research purposes. In Newmark's model the TT is compared to the ST in order to see whether the TT is an accurate, correct, precise, faithful, or true reproduction of the ST. Although the comparison involves both quantitative (i.e. completeness of message transfer) and qualitative aspects, (i.e. accurate 'in denotation and in connotation, referentially and pragmatically') (Newmark, 1991: 111)[14], it is the 'predominant assessment model in translation teaching' (Schäffner, 1997:1). Also Nord's model is criticized for basing the judgment on the nature of errors, not their number, (Williams M, 2001: 333)[15], and Steiner E. (in Hoang Van Van, 2006) does not indicate the specific procedures for the assessor to follow.

Despite the above advantages, House's model has been criticized for being complicated in its categorization of grammar and for its inflexible one-to-one matching of structure and meaning, (Munday, 2001:101).

4. Conclusion and implications for research into assessing English-Vietnamese translations

In this paper I have presented different models of translation assessment: non-comparative and comparative. Among the four comparative TQA models discussed, House's functional-pragmatic model proves itself useful

for research purposes because i) it takes into account both macro- and micro-level phenomena; ii) it includes not only textual, situational, but also cultural aspects; and iii) it combines qualitative with quantitative analyses.

On the bases of the above concluding remarks, the following implications can be drawn out for the assessment of English-Vietnamese translations. Firstly, applying House's TQA model, researchers can confirm the hypotheses not only by qualitative but also by quantitative means. Using corpora in assessment can serve as the grounds for more valid and reliable judgment of the translation quality and avoid ambiguity. Secondly, employing House's model, translation assessors can uncover and even prove the Vietnamese communicative preferences expressed in linguistic forms, i.e. culturally specific linguistic features, as compared to those of the Anglophone. Thirdly, House's TQA model can be applied to assess the translations of different genres: from popular science texts, computer instructions, external business communication, to literary works.

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Mô hình đánh giá dịch thuật theo dụng học-chức năng của House và đề xuất cho phê bình bản dịch Anh – Việt

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Tóm tắt: Đánh giá chất lượng dịch thuật luôn là vấn đề gây tranh cãi. Câu hỏi đặt ra là đánh giá chất lượng dịch thế nào hay các tiêu chí đánh giá là gì. Các tiêu chí đánh giá được sử dụng sẽ khác nhau tùy thuộc vào mục đích đánh giá và vào khung lý luận được áp dụng cho việc đánh giá. Phần đầu của bài viết này sẽ dành cho việc bàn thảo một số mô hình đánh giá dịch thuật khác nhau. Trong phần hai, bài viết sẽ mô tả chi tiết mô hình đánh giá dịch thuật theo dụng học-chức năng của House và việc áp dụng mô hình này kết hợp với phương pháp định tính để đánh giá bản dịch Anh-Đức. Trong phần ba, bài viết sẽ đưa ra một số đề xuất cho nghiên cứu đánh giá phê bình bản dịch Anh – Việt.

Từ khóa: mô hình đánh giá chất lượng bản dịch, mô hình dụng học- chức năng, bộ lọc văn hóa, ngữ vực, kiểu loại diễn ngôn, phân tích định lượng & định tính.