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COGNITIVE APPROACHES IN TRANSLATION STUDIES: PROCESSES, MODELS, AND EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS

Sadikova Salima Zoxidovna
EFL teacher, University of Business and Science

ABSTRACT

This article delves into the cognitive dimensions of translation studies, tracing its historical development from process-oriented research in the 1980s to contemporary integrations with neuroscience and technology. It explores key models of bilingual cognition, empirical methodologies like eye-tracking and neuroimaging, and their applications to translation and interpreting processes. Emphasizing cognitive effort, decision-making, and human-machine interactions, the discussion critiques reductionist tendencies while advocating for situated and extended cognition frameworks. The article underscores the field's contributions to understanding mental mechanisms in translation, with implications for training, ethics, and future technological advancements.

KEYWORDS

Cognitive translation studies, bilingual cognition, think-aloud protocols, eye-tracking, Effort Model, Relevance Theory, machine translation post-editing, situated cognition, neuroimaging in translation, translation process research.

Introduction

Cognitive approaches in translation studies represent a paradigm shift from traditional linguistic and cultural frameworks toward an interdisciplinary exploration of the mental mechanisms underlying translation and interpreting activities. Emerging in the late 20th century, these approaches draw heavily from cognitive science, psychology, and neuroscience to dissect how translators and interpreters process, comprehend, and reformulate texts across languages. Unlike earlier theories that emphasized equivalence or cultural mediation, cognitive perspectives prioritize the translator's mind as a dynamic system, where bilingual cognition, decision-making, and problem-solving intersect. This field posits translation not merely as a transfer of meaning but as a complex cognitive task involving memory, attention, perception, and creativity, often influenced by situational and environmental factors. The historical roots of cognitive translation studies can be traced to the 1970s and 1980s, when early process-oriented research began to challenge prescriptive models. Pioneers like Hans Krings, in his 1986 work on think-aloud protocols (TAPs), introduced empirical methods to capture translators' verbalized thoughts during the translation process, revealing stages of orientation, drafting, and revision. This methodological innovation stemmed from cognitive psychology's information-processing paradigm, which views the mind as a computational system handling inputs (source texts) and outputs (target texts) through sequential operations. By the 1990s, the field gained momentum with

the integration of tools from experimental psychology, such as keylogging and eye-tracking, allowing researchers to quantify pauses, revisions, and gaze patterns as indicators of cognitive effort. For instance, studies by Jakobsen and Schou (1999) demonstrated how translators' fixation durations correlate with lexical retrieval challenges, highlighting the role of working memory in managing bilingual activation.

Central to cognitive approaches is the concept of bilingual cognition, which examines how translators navigate the dual-language system. Models like the Revised Hierarchical Model (Kroll and Stewart, 1994) from psycholinguistics have been adapted to explain asymmetrical language access, where conceptual links are stronger in the dominant language, affecting translation directionality. In translation from L2 to L1 (inverse translation), cognitive load increases due to interference from the source language, as evidenced by empirical data showing longer processing times and more errors. Furthermore, the notion of "cognitive effort" quantifies this through metrics like the "pause-to-word ratio" in keylogging studies, where extended pauses indicate problem-solving episodes, such as resolving ambiguities or cultural mismatches. Empirical methodologies form the backbone of this domain, evolving from introspective techniques to multimodal data triangulation. Think-aloud protocols, while criticized for potential reactivity (where verbalization alters natural processes), remain valuable for qualitative insights into metacognition translators' awareness of their strategies. Quantitative advancements include eye-tracking, which measures saccades and regressions to infer comprehension difficulties; for example, research by O'Brien (2006) linked pupil dilation to increased cognitive load during metaphor translation. Neuroimaging techniques, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG), have further deepened understanding by mapping brain activity. Hervais-Adelman et al. (2015) used fMRI to identify heightened activation in the prefrontal cortex during simultaneous interpreting, underscoring executive control functions like inhibition and switching. These methods reveal translation as an embodied process, influenced by the translator's physical and emotional state, aligning with the "4E" cognition framework (embodied, embedded, enacted, extended) that situates mental processes within socio-technical environments.

In interpreting studies, cognitive approaches differentiate between consecutive and simultaneous modes, emphasizing memory models. Gile's Effort Model (1995) conceptualizes interpreting as a balance of listening, memory, production, and coordination efforts, where overload leads to omissions or errors. This has practical implications for training, advocating for exercises that enhance working memory capacity, such as shadowing or dual-task paradigms. Recent developments incorporate ecological validity, studying interpreters in real-world settings via corpus analysis of interpreted speeches, revealing patterns of reformulation under time constraints.

The integration of technology marks a contemporary evolution, with cognitive studies addressing human-machine interaction in post-editing machine translation (MT). Research by Carl and Schaeffer (2017) on the CRITT Translation Process Database (TPR-DB) analyzes how translators interact with MT outputs, showing reduced cognitive effort in post-editing compared to from-scratch translation, yet increased monitoring for errors. This highlights priming effects, where MT suggestions influence lexical choices, potentially leading to "translationese." Moreover, cognitive ergonomics explores workplace factors, such as screen layout or tool interfaces, on translator performance, drawing from human-computer interaction theories. Theoretical models within cognitive translation studies often borrow from broader cognitive science. The Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986), applied by Gutt (2000) to translation, frames it as an inferential process where translators optimize relevance

for the target audience, balancing explicit and implicit meanings. Conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002) elucidates creative translation, such as in poetry, where source and target elements fuse to create emergent meanings. These models underscore the translator's agency, portraying them as active constructors rather than passive conduits.

Critiques of cognitive approaches highlight their occasional reductionism, focusing on individual cognition at the expense of social contexts. To address this, hybrid frameworks emerge, blending cognitive with sociological perspectives, as in Muñoz Martín's (2010) situated cognition model, which views translation as distributed across translators, tools, and networks. This "extended mind" thesis posits that cognition extends beyond the brain, incorporating artifacts like dictionaries or collaborative platforms. Looking ahead, cognitive translation studies are poised to leverage artificial intelligence and big data. Neural machine translation (NMT) systems, informed by cognitive insights, could simulate human-like processing, while virtual reality simulations might train interpreters in immersive environments. Ethical considerations, such as cognitive fatigue and mental health in high-stakes translation, are gaining traction, with calls for longitudinal studies on professional burnout.

In sum, cognitive approaches illuminate translation as a window into the human mind, bridging linguistics, psychology, and technology. By empirically grounding abstract theories, they enhance training, tools, and practices, ultimately fostering more effective cross-linguistic communication in a globalized world. This field's interdisciplinary vigor promises continued innovation, ensuring that translation studies remain attuned to the intricacies of human cognition.

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