UNITS OF TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATION SHIFTS: A LINGUISTIC AND FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

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Abstract: *This article explores the central concepts of units of translation and translation shifts, which are fundamental to the theory and practice of translation studies. The study examines how the segmentation of a source text into meaningful units influences the translator's approach and the types of shifts that may occur in the process. Emphasis is placed on linguistic, cultural, and functional factors affecting translation choices. Drawing on key theorists such as Catford, Vinay and Darbelnet, Nida, and Toury, the article outlines a descriptive framework for understanding the relationship between translation units and shifts across various text types and language pairs. Practical examples illustrate how theoretical principles operate in real-world translation contexts.*

Keywords: *translation studies, units of translation, translation shifts, equivalence, linguistic theory, functional approaches, descriptive translation studies*

INTRODUCTION

Translation is both a linguistic and cognitive activity that requires translators to make decisions about how best to represent meaning from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL). Two core concepts that inform these decisions are units of translation—the segments of language that the translator processes as meaningful wholes—and translation shifts, which denote the changes that occur between the SL and TL in the pursuit of equivalence. These shifts can occur at multiple linguistic levels, including morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Understanding how units of translation and translation shifts operate provides valuable insight into the translation process and enhances the translator's ability to produce coherent, accurate, and culturally appropriate translations.

Theoretical Background-the concept of a unit of translation has evolved significantly over time. Originally introduced by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) in their comparative stylistics work, the term referred to segments that must be considered as wholes to convey meaning appropriately. Later, J.C. Catford (1965) defined units of translation based on linguistic ranks: from morphemes, words, and phrases, to clauses, sentences, and beyond. Eugene Nida (1964), focusing on dynamic equivalence, argued that larger contextual units—such as paragraphs or even entire texts—might serve as translation units, particularly in literary or religious translation.

 Classification of Translation Units

 - Lexical Units: Words or fixed expressions, particularly in terminological or technical texts.

- Phrasal Units: Collocations and idioms that resist literal translation.

- Clause and Sentence Level: Most common in journalistic and general texts.

- Discourse and Text Level: In complex texts—especially literature or persuasive writing—the translator must often consider the broader discourse as a cohesive unit.

Dynamic Nature of Translation Units-translation units are not fixed. A unit may shift depending on context, function, or the nature of the target audience. For example, a metaphor in a poem may need to be translated at the sentence level, while a technical manual may focus on consistent word-level units. The unit selected can profoundly influence the type of shift that occurs during translation.

Translation Shifts-the term 'translation shift' was formalized by Catford (1965), who viewed it as a departure from formal correspondence in translation. The concept was later refined by other theorists, including van Leuven-Zwart, Hatim and Mason, and Mona Baker, to reflect not only grammatical but also semantic and pragmatic changes necessary for effective communication in the target culture.

Types of Translation Shifts- Catford distinguished between level shifts and category shifts:

- Level Shifts: Involve changes across linguistic levels.

- Category Shifts are subdivided into:

  - Structure Shifts: Alterations in sentence structure.

  - Class Shifts: Changes in word class.

  - Unit Shifts: Movement across linguistic ranks.

  - Intra-System Shifts: Occur when different grammatical systems do not correspond directly.

Functional and Cultural Shifts-later theorists emphasized that shifts also occur to achieve functional equivalence—conveying the same intended effect rather than the same form. Cultural and pragmatic shifts become necessary when dealing with idioms, humor, proverbs, or culturally bound terms.

Interdependence of Units and Shifts-text type plays a critical role. In highly formal legal or scientific texts, fewer shifts and smaller translation units are preferred to preserve accuracy and standardization. In contrast, literary translation often requires larger units and a greater number of stylistic and semantic shifts to preserve tone, voice, and aesthetic effect. Examples:

- Example 1 (Idiomatic Expression): SL: "He let the cat out of the bag." TL (German): "Er hat das Geheimnis verraten."

- Example 2 (Grammar Shift): SL: "She has been singing." TL (Russian): "Она пела."

- Example 3 (Cultural Shift): SL: "Fourth of July parade" TL (French): "Défilé de la fête nationale."

CONCLUSION

Units of translation and translation shifts are not merely technical constructs—they reflect deeper cognitive and communicative processes at work in translation. Recognizing how translators segment texts and adapt meaning through shifts offers invaluable insight

into the complexity and creativity involved in cross-linguistic communication. These concepts remain central to both theoretical and applied translation studies and will continue to inform research and practice in the field.

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