Visiting Noam Chomsky at MIT

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Translation Index or Manual Revisited

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Introduction

On Wednesday July 22nd, we drove from our lodging place (Park View Inn) in the city of Salem, NH (New Hampshire) to Boston at 1 pm. It took about 40 minutes to get to the Cambridge region of Boston. We (I, my wife and my son Ardalan) had our lunch in Kabab Club of an Iranian owner called Hossein and we enjoyed his Persian food. This restaurant was located on the Cambridge Street of the same region not very far from MIT. We directed towards MIT at about 3 pm and my son was successful to find a parking place which was not an easy job. We entered the university from the entrance at 77 Massachusetts Ave. and first of all referred to one of the ladies in the information office on the right to get a map and the route and location of the linguistics department and ultimately, Chomsky's office. She explained the route and the position very vividly and crucially to make sure that we had got the address. Incidentally, we understood that many communities and tourists came to visit MIT from different parts of the country or from other countries and many tour guides were available to take tourists to different areas, departments, research centers and all types of scientific activities which went on there and perhaps to the historical museums or inventions and research places of this world-renowned institute. I regretted that we didn't have the chance and the time to take part in one of those tours.

It took us about 30 minutes to walk slowly and observe the vicinity curiously as we were approaching our destination in the Stata Center of Driphus Buiding, D 808, 6th floor. This building seemed very complicated, rather old and of dark brown color, but not similar to the typical historical New England buildings of brown bricks.

In the ground floor, there seemed to be an art center of many amazing drawings and huge pieces of artistic crafts with a lot of visitors roaming around or relaxing in the cafeteria having coffee or drinking beverages. We got the right lift on G32, entered the 6th floor and found the linguistics and philosophy departments. We met a gentleman there and asked for Chomsky's office. He explained that he was not in his office at that time but his assistant was there and he was responsible for his appointments and timetable. He pointed to an area and we slowly proceeded towards that building section.

Meeting Chomsky

As soon as I opened the door to go to the office of the assistant, all of a sudden my look fell upon an old man, at the end of a long aisle, sitting in the center of his office at a small square table and was busy studying from the monitor of his lap top. "Oh, my God! He is Prof. Chomsky himself." I said astonishingly. He heard me and looked up at me then I said, "Hello." As I was getting nearer to him. I introduced myself, "this is Hossein, I have already e-mailed you for an appointment." – "Vossouki, from Iran." He explicated very solemnly and calmly, as he shacked his head with a very affectionate and mild smile. I asked him if he had time for a short discussion.

Chomsky explained that he had just finished an interview on the Issue of Iranian atomic deal with the 5+1 group with the Aljazeera Voice, and that he had to take part in another interview within the next 30 minutes when they became prepared to invite him down stairs on phone. And he added that we could discuss

until the telephone rang. I asked him if my wife and son might join us. He replied, "of course" while he removed his stuff from the chair beside him to provide enough seats for his guests.

Negotiation/devising the intended issue

As soon as we were settled on the chairs I opened the discussion on the special issue on translating process, by introducing my related book and showing a flow chart I had already prepared. Chomsky simply said that he had not have any theory on translation. I elucidated, "My discussion doesn't have anything to do with theories of translation, but with the **linguistic processing** in the **mind** of the translator, or mental processing of the language by translators."

I Showed him the title of my book (2009) "The Descriptive Translation Study on Shifts, Strategies and Norms of English and Persian"; and explained that, "as it is generally believed and proposed by Catford (1965) and other translation theoreticians, **shifts** are inevitable in forms and/or meanings of the most linguistic units or categories of the source language while translating them into a target language." I continued:

"The key point is that these shifts are applied to the target language unconsciously in the mind of the translator during the process of translating. If we study these shifts based on the shift-analysis method; we will find out that they can be systematized and classified by a few general strategies that we can call them translation strategies."

Chomsky asked, "What do you mean by translation strategy?" – "Generally speaking" I answered, "it is a way through which a translator changes a unit or a category of the TL to establish a textual equivalent for a correspondent ST unit or category." Strategies can be distinguished into different general types based on the different functions or procedures they perform. Some of the most frequent and prevalent of them which have so far been distinguished and defined in the translation literature are labeled as:

1-Adjustment; 2-Adaptation; 3-Amplification; 4-Condensation; 5-Cultural adjustment; 6-Deletion; 7-Diffusion; 8-Domestication; 9-Equation/matching; 10-Expansion; 11-Explicitatin; 12-Foreignization; 13-Gain/over translation; 14-Gramatical adjustment; 15-Implicitation; 16-Infusion; 17-Intrasystem; 18-Lexical adjustment; 19-Loss/under translation; 20-Modulation (changing the semantic viewpoint of the SL unit); 21-Naturalization; 22-Normalization; 23-Reduction/simplification; 24-Reordering; 25-Substitution; 26-Transfer/borrowing; 27-transposition; etc.

On the basis of the already provided flow chart that I showed Chomsky, I could establish a link between (a) source language elements/categories, (b) mental processing or strategies and (c) translation shifts as displayed in the following link:

SL units or categories	→	Undergo mental strategies	→	Result in various shifts	→	Translation norms of high frequency
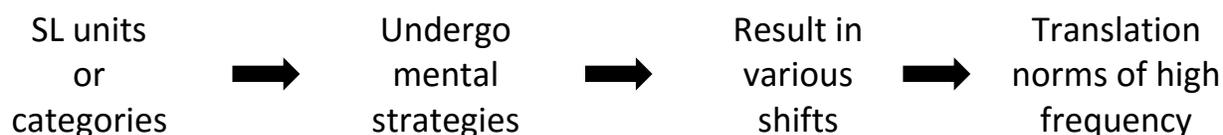
Linguistic units or categories

Linguistic elements can be used as translation units or categories. They are related to the different levels (Catford 1965) or components of language. They can be summarizes here as the following classification:

1- Morphemes such as inflectional, derivational, free, bound, lexical, etc.
2- Words such as N, V, Adj, Adv, preposition, conjunction, aux, article, etc.
3- Phrases/groups such as, NP, VP, Adj P, Adv P, prepositional P. Infinitive P., gerund P., participial P., fixed expressions, etc.
4- Clauses such as main clause, subordinate clauses of temporal, spacial, conditional, reason, purpose, comparison, etc.
5- Sentences such as simple, compound, complex and compound complex.

Translation units and mental processing

If any one of the elements or constructions of each of the above linguistic forms is independently considered and dealt with in translation, it can be taken as **a unit of translation** (Hatim & Munday, 2004: 17 & 136) and can be studied for the translation process as it would undergo one or another translation shift by the translator. Based on the observable shift that we can detect from the product of

translation, we can explain what type of translation strategy has been applied to the TL unit. On the basis of the Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) (Toury 1995, cited in Munday 2012: 170) a textual analysis research can be done on any translation product to comparatively analyze and describe the observable TT shifts and detect and explain the unobservable strategies which go on in the mind of translator in rendering a ST into the TT.

Results of shift analysis and translation norms

Theoretically speaking, any translation unit may undergo (i) 0, (ii) one or (iii) a number of shifts in translating an ST into a TT. These three cases assign the **degree of consistency of translation shift** of one unit in translation process. For instance, the word *epistemology* usually or in most cases (we can experimentally say 90% of times) is translated to Persian as **معرفت شناسی** and in a few occasions as **شناخت شناسی** so its consistency in translation is very high. However, in a case study which has been done on the translation of the English determiner **any** into Persian, we could get eleven variables of Persian counterparts as follows:

(هر:۲۱/۰۵%، هیچ:۱۵/۷۸%، ی:۱۰/۵۲%، ۰ %: ۱۰/۵۲%، همه: ۱۰/۵۲%، بدون:۵/۲۶ %، هرگونه: ۵/۲۶%، هیچگونه: ۵/۲۶%، سراسر: ۵/۲۶%، چای: ۵/۵% و کوچکترین: ۵/۲۵%)

If one SL unit is translated into more than two equivalents in the TL, each equivalent is referred to as a **variable** or **variation**. The variable which characterizes the highest frequency of the distribution in the data (TT), is considered to be the translation **norm** of that SL unit provided that its related ratio Number is not less than 51%. The norms extracted from the shift analysis of the three competent translators and the average percentage of their ratio numbers amount to 51% or more can be taken as a **law** of TT translation equivalent for that specific SL unit. Each **translation law** provided in this way can be used as an entry of a long inventory of laws the collection of which can establish and be kept as a set of laws and be used as guidelines for future translators and translating from the related SL to its corresponding TL.

Index of translation and teaching manual

I explained Chomsky that, "I have conventionally and unprecedentedly assumed and proposed that the collection of these translation norms or laws (if adopted on the basis of the average uses by at least three component translators) can be systematically presented as an index of translation and can be codified in a translator manual." And I added that my key question from him was that, "Can such a manual of translation index be used in teaching and learning translation classes at university levels in the same way that grammar rules and books are used for teaching and learning a foreign language."—He replied, "I believe yes, it can be helpful."

Epilogue

As soon as I got my pleasing answer and his confirmation, I collected my book and flow chart and other stuff and got up to say goodbye to him and leave him alone but in the meanwhile I said I have three very short questions that I wish to have your opinion on them. As we all were standing, he showed his approval by shaking his head down. I ask, "What is the most mysterious aspect of human language?—He promptly gave a twofold answer, "Words and communication." Then I was in the midway of asking my second question which was, "What is the most difficult problem of/in the linguistic studies?" when the telephone rang and he asked the caller to hold the line for one minute to shake goodbye with us and

in this short while we tried to extend our heart string thanks and offering our deepest appreciation regarding his critical time he devoted to spend on the discussion with us. It is worthwhile mentioning that the third question I had in mind was, "What has so far been the most amazing fact or valuable finding of linguistic science about the human language?"

At that night, when we had got back home and I was relaxing and checking my new e-mails, I found an e-mail from Chomsky who had assigned our appointment time at 11 am of the following day and that I had been reluctant to check it the night before, and since then I am always ashamed of my untimely calling at him while he was awfully busy preparing himself for the next interview. Not only did he ever mentioned that, but also he very kindly and patiently conversed with us until the telephone rang.

I always feel that his humanity and humbleness in tolerating us on that afternoon have impressed me more than his linguistic theories and knowledge that had deeply impressed me within the last 58 years in my academic life, i.e. since 1957.