

## **Translation units**

In linguistics, a morpheme can be defined as the smallest syntactical and meaningful linguistic unit that contains a word, or an element of the word. In translation, a unit is the smallest segment of the utterance whose signs are linked in such a way that they should not be translated literally or separately.

The translator reads a source language Translation Unit; that is, a text segment which s/he will deal with as a single unit. The Translation Unit can vary in length from a single word (“Yes”) to a whole sentence (“Results were excellent indeed”) or more than one sentence, depending on the source-language text and on the translator. There has been much theoretical discussion in the literature on the definition and size of such Translation Units (see for instance Larose 1989). In this discussion, I define them as processing units (which is also de Beaugrande’s definition as in de Beaugrande 1980). As pointed out by Dancette (1989: 96), this implies subjective variability, but in a didactic context such as this one, such variability should not pose practical problems.

The translator formulates (mentally) a Meaning Hypothesis for the text segment s/he is processing as a Translation Unit, i.e. s/he temporarily assigns a meaning to it. To do this, s/he relies on knowledge of the source language, but also on the relevant part of his/her World Knowledge. Both are contained in his/her Knowledge Base. The Knowledge Base may not provide the translator with all the knowledge required to formulate a Meaning Hypothesis, in which case s/he has to look for additional information in documentary sources, by asking human informants, etc.

Once the translator comes up with a tentative Meaning Hypothesis for the Translation Unit, s/he checks it for plausibility using his/her Knowledge Base, sometimes with further ad hoc Knowledge Acquisition. In other words, the translator looks at the idea or information s/he believes that the Translation Unit expresses and examines it critically in the light of other information available in his/her Knowledge Base, including information just added while reading the text, so as to detect potential contradictions.

Percival (1983: 94) stresses that “It is a mistake to become too committed to one’s first understanding of a passage.” One’s first understanding of a text may well be

erroneous, as demonstrated by countless errors made not only by students, but also by professionals who read source-language segments too fast or misunderstand even simple, relatively well written prose because of various linguistic and psychological mechanisms.

If, in the process of this Plausibility Test, the translator finds that his/her tentative Meaning Hypothesis is not plausible or not plausible enough, s/he tries to construct another Meaning Hypothesis and runs it through the same test. If the second Meaning Hypothesis is still not compatible with the information available in the Knowledge Base, a third Meaning Hypothesis is formulated, and so on.

Only when the translator reaches a Meaning Hypothesis, which passes the Plausibility Test satisfactorily does s/he move on to the next phase, which is the reformulation of this Meaning Hypothesis in the target language.

In the same context, Vinay and Darblenet distinguish between three different categories that arise while looking at the relationship between units of translation and words inside a text:

**1 - Simple units:** Vinay and Darblenet correspond this type to a single word. It's the simplest, as they state, and at the same time the most widely used unit. In this case, number of units equals number of words. Replacement of words will not lead to a change in the sentence structure.

**2 - Diluted units:** These units contain several words, which in turn shape a lexical unit, since they pursue a single idea.

**3 - Fractional units:** "A fraction of a word" is what this type of UTs are consisted of.