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Volume 1, Number 2, 2e semestre 1988

La traduction et son public

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037027ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/037027ar>

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### Publisher(s)

Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières

### ISSN

0835-8443 (print)

1708-2188 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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### Cite this article

Newmark, P. (1988). Pragmatic translation and literalism. *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, 1(2), 133–145. <https://doi.org/10.7202/037027ar>

# Pragmatic translation and literalism

Peter Newmark

## Defining pragmatism

I make the basic assumption that provided a source language text contains no misstatements of fact, is competently written and has to be fully translated rather than summarized or functionally reorientated, one's purpose in translating it is to be referentially and pragmatically accurate.

In this paper, I shall not deal with referential accuracy but concentrate instead on the pragmatic aspects of translation. As the term «pragmatic translation» may be used in a variety of ways\*, I should like to state my own definition of «pragmatic», which derives from Charles Morris and ultimately from Charles S. Peirce.

I am using «pragmatic» as one of the *two* factors in translation: «pragmatic» denotes the reader's or readership's reception of the translation, as opposed to «referential», which denotes the relationship between the translation and the extra-linguistic reality it describes.

## Aspects of the pragmatic factor

**Characteristics of the readership.** The pragmatic factor has two elements. The first is relatively extra-contextual and relates to the reader's characteristics, some of which (subject knowledge, linguistic level, SL cultural familiarity) may be considered to be more relevant or important than others (such as social class, age, sex and the time elapsed since the writing of the SL text). Pragmatic translation is largely tentative and presumptive, as opposed to referential translation where the only assumption is that the readers are literate. In the case of the illustrative text, only some of the SL or TL readers are likely to be emotionally involved, those who feel strongly about some leading statement, eg. how Europe reacts to Gorbachev. But in cases where the whole readership is affected (pragmatic text types such as publicity or public notices, for example), the translator must take into account all aspects involving readership sensitivity in order

to stimulate the appropriate frame of mind in the reader. The success of such a translation can only be assessed by the readership's subsequent behavior.

**Syntax, word order and stress.** The second element to be considered hinges on the language of the text itself and the readership's sensitivity to it. Normally the syntax sets the tone of any pragmatic relationship: action is pointed by verbs; description by nouns and adjectives or adverbs of quality; dialogue by forms of address and tags; injunctions by imperatives or rhetorical questions; urgency and speed by brief sentences; leisureliness or meditation by long ones.

Stress, which is intimately connected both with syntax and word order, is an essential element in pragmatic effect. Unusual word order indicates stress, emphasis or liveliness. In the specimen text, for example, the argumentative and strident tone is set by the negative-positive sequences: *ni... ni... ni; non, celui qui était, c'est...* (ll. 2-5). There is opening stress in the word order shifts in the *c'est* sentences notably, but also in *Non, celui qui était...* (l. 5); *Finis les heureux temps* (l. 9); and *Subtil, certes* (l. 15), all admirably reproduced in *No, the one who was...* (l. 5); *Gone are those balmy days* (ll. 9-10); and *Wily he may well be* (l. 15). The sentences are bold statements, self-contained but clearly interrelated. They are uncluttered by clauses with the exception of the adjectival clause, the specially privileged subordinate clause of French syntax, so often related to the even more privileged emphatic *c'est* or *ce sont*. The two rhetorical questions in paragraph 3 and the inversions help to force a view on the readership.

Note that I am here positing a «universal» word order. I assume:

- (a) that the natural sequence of a proposition is from given (or old) to new information, from theme to rheme, which is also the natural sequence of explanation or teaching; but if rheme precedes theme, the degree of pragmatic expectation imposed on the SL sentence should be reflected in the TL equivalent;
- (b) that grammatically the natural word order of a sentence is Subject-Verb-Complement, which follows the natural order of thought;
- (c) that the main stress in this word order will be on the lexical part or head-word of the complement, provided it contains the new information or rheme (for example: in the sentence *No, the one who was on everybody's mind was Mikhail Gorbachev* (ll. 5-6), stress is on *Gorbachev* as it is in the French);

- (d) that every language has its own lexical, grammatical, word-ordering resources for putting stress on a non-final group of the sentence, which will normally entail a change or an interruption in the natural word order;
- (e) that the reason why many languages (e.g. Latin or German) do not follow the S-V-C natural word order is that its scribes, (the clerks, the priests, the ideological hegemony) have imposed an unnatural grammar on the illiterate masses.

Many of the above are intuitive statements, but I do not think there is anything in the classical essays by Firbas (1979) and Greenberg (1963) that contradicts them.

Given a natural sequence, we can state that in «referential» translation the word order is normal; in «pragmatic» translation, on the other hand, it is often upset by particular stresses.

### Metaphor as a pragmatic factor

After the interplay of syntax, word order and stress, metaphor is normally the most powerful pragmatic factor in translation. Metaphor is language's main resource for conveying strong feeling. In many European languages, sexual and scatological metaphors have replaced religious ones to express the most vehement feelings. Original and standard metaphors are strongest in taboo and colloquial language; in scientific and descriptive language metaphor is equally important, but it is likely to be spatial or temporal as an aid to reference. Lastly, metaphor is a means of conveying the world of the mind and demonstrating the wealth of the life of the senses. The pragmatic effect of metaphor in the most emotive types of texts (poetry, advertising, propaganda, metaphysical or religious writing) needs no illustration. And yet, in much translation, in the translation of poetry, for example, metaphor is needlessly evaded or diluted. This goes hand in hand with the fear of literalism.

The strongest metaphor in the specimen text, in my view, is: *enfoncer un coin* (l. 12). To translate it using the verb 'to nick' is rather neat but feeble, since a literal translation ('drive a wedge into') would produce a perfect equivalence. Another strong metaphor *mettre au pied de ce mur-là* (ll. 39-40) is successfully and literally rendered as *push... up against this particular wall* (l. 37). A third, *gommer ses... déclarations* (l. 49-50), an eraser image that appears with much use to be moving from 'delete' to 'moderate', is cleverly given as *back off from* (l. 47). The more informal English journalese lends itself to phrasal verbs, which are usually metaphorical. The remaining metaphors are unremarkable, but incline to a more 'popular' pragmatic effect. The English standard metaphors that are used are

warm, familiar, simple, homely, and on the whole more physical and concrete than the French ones.

In this piece, syntax, word order and metaphor adequately take care of pragmatic effect; here there is no need for SL and TL readerships to identify. But when dealing with persuasive and more universal texts, the translator requires other pragmatic resources relating to words as meaning and/or sound. On the one hand, unusual words, unusual metaphors, unusual collocations, or neologisms may be used to produce an arresting effect. On the other, alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance, rhyme, rhythm, and metre not only convey meaning but may also appeal to the readership's senses.

### **The readership and the situation**

Readership is like context: it can never be completely ignored, but it is more important on some occasions than on others. If the readership consists of one client, it is all-important, and you can normally elicit his/her requirements in detail, establishing, for example, whether technical or institutional terms have to be simplified. If your client is a middle person, and you are translating for his/her customers who are your readers, you should ask for all possible information about the readership, but you may have to make certain assumptions about their knowledge. At the other extreme, you may have a subtle or dense expressive text, such as a poem where the putative reception of the readership is irrelevant, and where you can only attempt to assess your personal reception of the text. Between these extremes, there are many variations and many compromises.

### **Literalism as a yardstick of translation**

If one is discussing the full translation of a worthwhile text of some importance, there can be no *primary* aim but accuracy, which may itself be some kind of compromise between the referential (the content, the matter) and the pragmatic factor (the style, the manner), and if one looks for a yardstick, a general basis to judge a translation, there is nothing concrete but literal translation. When you ask how close, how faithful, how true a version is in relation to the original, you can have nothing else in mind except the «spirit» of the original, which is the reverse of concrete. Vinay and Darbelnet saw this thirty years ago, when they wrote, at the conclusion of their great book:

On doit arriver à ne s'écarter de la littéralité que pour satisfaire aux exigences de la langue d'arrivée... On ne doit pratiquer la traduction oblique qu'à bon escient, dans des limites nettement définies. On doit rester littéral tant qu'on ne fait pas violence à la langue d'arrivée. On ne s'écarte de la littéralité que pour

des raisons de structure ou de méta-linguistique et on s'assure alors que le sens est sauvegardé. (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958, p. 268)

As I see it, the scientific principle in translation could not be better expressed than it is here, though I think there is a corollary: in an authoritative and/or a serious literary text, any violence done to the norms of the source language has to be reflected in translation by violence done to the norms of the target language.

Further, Vinay and Darbelnet rightly point out that whilst the word is rarely the unit of accurate translation, it is wrong to suggest, as did Gide, that one should translate sentences rather than words; normally the sentence as a unit is much too wide. If that is so, it is absurd to talk about translating texts rather than words.

If one accepts literalism in the above sense as the scientific principle of a full translation, one has to make many qualifications, of which the first is that translation is not a science but rather a craft and an art, and is at the last revision, within certain narrow limits, often just a question of taste. Secondly, the more concentrated, the more authoritative, the more studied, the more «important» the language of a text, the more meaningful become the individual words of the text and *pari passu* their translation. In such a text, each word is charged with meaning. The translator, like the writer beforehand, is wrestling with words; words are so strong that the context falls temporarily into the background. Words become like notes in chamber-music, expressively important vertically (paradigmatically) in their associations and etymology, as well as horizontally (syntagmatically). In a run-of-the-mill text, on the other hand, the message is direct, unadorned, but the language, like Benjamin's memorable cloak, is looser, more otiose, more dispensable. One comes to a stage where, as in the case of my deliberately chosen specimen text, one feels one might as well translate literally but it is not a matter of importance, since one wants to be accurate, but a paraphrase would do as well.

So, if one applies the literalism yardstick to the specimen text, one notes how in most cases, not only the facts and the main syntax but also the quality words that state the feeling of the text, have been retained precisely to maintain the pragmatic quality: thus terms such as *pugnacious*, *particularly discreet*, *vulnerable*, *crucial*, and *dangerous* shine through from the original. While *nicking Atlantic solidarity* (l. 13) is a neat but feeble version of the more literal 'driving a wedge into Atlantic solidarity', the translation of *contradictoires* (l. 45) as *mutually exclusive* (l. 43) is markedly an improvement on the original. Here then, literalism is a form of control on the «style». The message is secure, accuracy in every verbal detail is

not important, but inaccuracy in detail is unnecessary rather than elegant. The translator usually shows commendable restraint in resisting the all-too-common temptation to convert straightforward literal language into clichés, with the possible exception of the following: *héros* (l. 1) translated as *star*; *heureux* (l. 9) as *balmy* and *accepter l'argumentation* (l. 54-55) as *take at his word*.

Certainly there are informative texts where one is faithful not out of loyalty to the author (his/her precise style is hardly worth it), but simply out of loyalty to one's client and the readership (who presumably want to know exactly what the author wrote).

### **Approaches to translating**

Vinay and Darbelnet advocated direct translation where this could be done without violence to the norms of the target language, and only revert to indirect translation when necessary.

There are, in fact, two approaches to translation and to translating. The first one may be called bottom to top. In practice, this is where the translator starts translating immediately. It is a literalist approach, where we plough ahead, usually sentence by sentence, stopping only at places where literal translation won't do. My definition of a translation problem is where literal translation fails and we have to consider a number of choices, or procedures, guided by a reasoned perception of a number of contextual factors, which can finally only be confirmed by a reading of the whole text. More often than not, the grammatical problems can be solved instinctively, or without reflection, through readily available transpositions or shifts; lexical problems (one word into one word won't go) require more deliberation because of a larger number of choices; 'encyclopaedia' problems depend on one's provisional assessment of the readership; problems of cohesion derive from sentence and paragraph sequencing.

The second approach to translating and translation is top to bottom. It is recommended by many a translation teacher, but practised by few instinctive translators (except perhaps in cases where the text is a technical maze). This approach consists in reading the text two or three times before beginning to translate, and in assessing the general before the particular problems of the text: first the topic, then the language, readership, register, tone, down to a dwindling number of other factors, figurative or denotative.

Both approaches are valid. The top-to-bottom approach, based as it is on the rather absurd premise of the text as the translation unit, is at present overblown. The bottom-to-top approach, which starts as literal translation and soon gives up, is more objective, more specific, more scientific. It is the *contrôle* of a translation,

the back translation test (BTT), which can easily be abused, which can degenerate into translationese, but which is at present neglected in the literature. But against the potential licence of pragmatics, hermeneutics, the *vouloir dire*, the sub-text, the spirit, the *génie de la langue*, it is the only buffer, the only sense and common sense.

What I see as the most urgent objective in translation studies, translation theory and, more pertinently, translation teaching is to bring these two approaches and methods a little closer together. The task is important, as it has a bearing not only on standards of translation, but also on the way in which we understand the various stages of translating and hence on translation teaching. I see this as more profitable than «objectively recording and scientifically analysing what translators do» (Harris, 1988).

### Practical applications

The following steps may be helpful in at least bringing the two approaches (and methods) closer together:

- 1) relating them to text-types, readerships and other contextual factors;
- 2) bearing in mind that stretches of text of whatever length have meaning, and that the translator is concerned only with meaning transfer;
- 3) in the critical third stage of revising, reading the translation as an independent, autonomous, spontaneous text, as well as reading it sentence by sentence, side by side, with the original, and thereby not forgoing, as the interpreter has to, the advantage of all the information that rereadings of the original can continue to offer;
- 4) exploiting the contrasted insights of text linguistics as well as of literal translation;
- 5) aiming for the «closest possible» translation, as Nida would have it, which normally indicates some degree of intersection between the two methods.

If a closer agreement can be reached on the approach, choices will remain, but they will be a little narrower, and eventually translations may become more accurate.

### Conclusion

I have attempted to review some of the pragmatic factors in translation, which are closely bound to the readership. These are factors that influence the passage of the text into the target language literature and contribute to its absorption into another convention and often another tradition. This is not limited to the canonical or even alter-



native literature, but may extend to the media, computer language and other forms of communication that are rapidly becoming internationalized. Thus excessive pragmatics tend to rob the target language text of its translational character. Literal translation is one way in which we may continue to preserve the genius or particular character of the foreign language despite this process of assimilation.

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\* The term was used in fact as the title of one of the sessions at the 1988 CATS Conference in Windsor, at which this paper was presented.

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## L'OTAN face à M. Gorbatchev

1 Le vrai héros du sommet de l'alliance atlantique, qui s'est  
2 terminé le jeudi 3 mars à Bruxelles, n'a été ni Mme Thatcher,  
3 pugnace comme à son habitude, ni le président Reagan,  
4 particulièrement discret, ni le «couple infernal» Mitterand-  
5 Chirac. Non, celui qui était présent, dans tous les esprits,  
6 c'est M. Gorbatchev.

7 En effet, le secrétaire général du Parti communiste  
8 soviétique et sa nouvelle politique de désarmement posent  
9 problème à l'alliance. Finis les heureux temps où il était  
10 aisé d'anticiper les mouvements diplomatiques et stratégiques  
11 de Moscou. L'adversaire est devenu infiniment plus subtil  
12 dans l'art d'innover, de surprendre, d'enfoncer un coin  
13 dans une solidarité atlantique toujours vulnérable aux égo-  
14 ismes nationaux.

15 Subtil, certes, mais M. Gorbatchev n'est-il pas sincère  
16 lorsqu'il affirme vouloir soulager son pays d'une surcharge  
17 militaire paralysante pour se consacrer à la remise en ordre  
18 d'une économie chaotique? M. Mitterand a raison, lorsqu'on  
19 lui pose la question, de refuser d'y répondre. Qui peut  
20 savoir ce qui est réellement dans la tête d'un homme qui  
21 n'est, de toute façon, pas arrivé au pouvoir par inadvertance?  
22 Force est donc de le juger sur ses actes.

23 Deux tests seront cruciaux de ce point de vue pour  
24 l'avenir des relations Est-Ouest. Le premier ne concerne  
25 pas directement l'Occident, mais il devrait permettre de  
26 se faire une idée de la volonté de M. Gorbatchev de corriger  
27 les «erreurs du passé». C'est de l'Afghanistan qu'il s'agit,  
28 dont l'évacuation par les troupes soviétiques ferait beaucoup  
29 pour convaincre l'opinion mondiale que de nouvelles analyses  
30 ont enfin cours à Moscou.

31 La seconde matière de l'examen de passage auquel  
32 il faut soumettre M. Gorbatchev, ce sont les négociations  
33 sur le désarmement conventionnel. Ce sont les armes  
34 classiques qui, en effet rendent la guerre possible, et il  
35 serait dangereux d'encourager les rêves de dénucléarisation  
36 de l'Europe occidentale tant que ne sera pas effacée la  
37 supériorité du pacte de Varsovie dans le domaine de  
38 l'armement conventionnel. C'est l'idée-force du sommet  
39 de Bruxelles, et les Seize se doivent de mettre M. Gorbatchev  
40 au pied de ce mur-là.

41 Ils n'y parviendront que s'ils réussissent à conjuguer  
42 ouverture d'esprit et fermeté. Les deux postures, illustrées  
43 ici par MM. Mitterand et Chirac, au niveau européen par

44 le chancelier Kohl et Mme Thatcher, ne sont pas forcément  
45 contradictoires. Elles devraient même être complémentaires,  
46 l'une ou l'autre prévalant en fonction du comportement  
47 de Moscou.

48 Au-delà d'arrière-pensées électorales, M. Mitterand  
49 l'a compris qui a passablement gommé ses précédentes  
50 déclarations hostiles à la modernisation des forces nucléaires  
51 de l'OTAN pour insister sur la nécessité de définir une  
52 «stratégie pour le désarmement». M. Chirac aussi, qui affirme  
53 aujourd'hui n'avoir plus aucune réserve à l'égard des positions  
54 du chef de l'Etat, qu'il soupçonnait d'accepter un peu vite  
55 l'argumentation de M. Gorbatchev.

Le Monde, le 20 mars 1988

### **How to be open-minded and still firm**

1 The real star at the Atlantic Alliance summit which ended  
2 on March 3 in Brussels was neither Margaret Thatcher,  
3 who was as pugnacious as ever, nor Ronald Reagan, who  
4 was particularly discreet, nor even that "infernal couple"  
5 of Mitterand and Chirac. No, the one who was on  
6 everybody's mind was Mikhail Gorbachev.

7 The Secretary-General of the Communist Party of  
8 the Soviet Union and his new disarmament policy have  
9 in fact presented the Alliance with a problem. Gone are  
10 those balmy days when it was so easy to anticipate Moscow's  
11 diplomatic and strategic moves. The adversary has become  
12 infinitely more wily in devising new things, springing surprises  
13 and nicking Atlantic solidarity which is still vulnerable  
14 to considerations of selfish national interest.

15 Wily he may well be, but isn't Gorbachev being sincere  
16 when he says he wants to relieve his country of crippling  
17 military over-expenditure and get down to sorting out  
18 its economic mess? François Mitterand is right to refuse  
19 to answer the question. Who can know what is really  
20 going on in the mind of a man who, in any case, did not  
21 gain power by inadvertence? We must then necessarily  
22 judge him on his deeds.

23 Here, two tests will be crucial for East-West relations.  
24 The first does not directly concern the West, but it should  
25 permit us to get some idea of Gorbachev's determination  
26 to correct the "mistakes of the past". This is Afghanistan,  
27 where the withdrawal of Soviet troops will go a long way  
28 towards convincing world opinion that new analyses are

29 at last being made in Moscow.

30 The second test to which Gorbachev will have to  
31 be put is the negotiations on conventional disarmament.  
32 These are conventional weapons which in fact make war  
33 possible, and it would be dangerous to encourage dreams  
34 of a denuclearised Europe so long as the Warsaw powers  
35 maintain their superiority in conventional weapons. That  
36 was the key idea at the Brussels summit and the 16 will  
37 have to push Gorbachev up against this particular wall.

38 They will succeed here only if they successfully join  
39 together in being open-minded and firm. The two attitudes,  
40 illustrated in France by Mitterand and Chirac, and at the  
41 European level by West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl  
42 and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, are not  
43 necessarily mutually exclusive. They should even be  
44 complementary, with one or the other prevailing, depending  
45 on the line Moscow is taking.

46 Electoral considerations aside, Mitterand has realised  
47 this and has somewhat backed off from his previous  
48 declarations objecting to modernising NATO's nuclear forces.  
49 He is now insisting on the need for laying down a "strategy  
50 for disarmament". Jacques Chirac has also shifted his  
51 position and is saying today that he has no reservations  
52 about the attitude of Mitterand, whom he previously suspected  
53 of being too ready to take Gorbachev at his word.

Guardian Weekly, March 1988