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A COMMON SENSE APPROACH TO TRANSLATION – PUBLIC SERVICE TRANSLATION FROM A KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines public service translation, also known as community translation, from a Knowledge Management perspective. Knowledge Management (KM) is a growing discipline in business and management, mainly concerned with how knowledge, which is generally assumed to be in a tacit, inaccessible form, moves across various boundaries or obstacles between units in an organisation. The scope of this paper is limited to knowledge transfer, one of the key processes of Knowledge Management, which aims to identify the best practices to elicit and transfer knowledge from a tacit form into an explicit form so that it is accessible by others in a team or an organisation. The main actor in knowledge transfer is an individual called, in KM literature, a 'knowledge broker', 'knowledge enabler' or 'gatekeeper'. Public service translators also work within an organisational structure and a policy environment in which they translate texts which contain knowledge and information from the public services dominated by the host culture and language into the languages spoken by ethnic community members. They perform a critical role in making knowledge and information available to members of ethnic communities. A quantitative analysis of the data collected through a survey of practising public service translators and unstructured interviews show that they undertake such knowledge brokering or gatekeeping activities as filtering, modifying, simplifying and exemplifying to create shared meaning, negotiating linguistic and cultural boundaries to make knowledge relevant and accessible to the members of ethnic communities. This is what we can call a 'common sense approach' to translation. It is a pilot study, introductory in nature with a limited number of respondents and languages, hence the limitations on its findings.

Key words: public service translation, translation, intercultural communication, knowledge transfer, knowledge broker, gatekeeper.

INTRODUCTION

Public service translators facilitate communication between the public service agencies and ethnic community members who are not proficient in the common or official language of a country. It is an increasingly common communication tool in many migration countries such as Australia. Translators play a fundamental role as the linguistic link in communicative situations in which linguistically and culturally diverse groups coexist in the same place (Garcés & Blasi, 2010). Their work essentially involves conveying information (e.g. school terms, notices, application procedures and fees, instructions for patients and appointment details for various services and groups) and knowledge (e.g. advice on how to deal with your teenager, how to quit gambling, how to prevent fires at home, how to maintain good health) generated by public service agencies to the NESB (Non-English-Speaking Background) ethnic community members within a multilingual and multicultural society.

These translators operate in an environment in which two major forces are in play: equivalence must be achieved not only in relation to the objectives of the public service agencies, which are dominated by the host language and culture, but also with respect to target readers, who are typically from significantly different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The parties in this communicative event live in the same physical environment and are subject to the same societal demands, pressures and expectations. Public service agencies tend to represent the broader, dominant host language and culture. The content in the source text will often have embedded implicatures and cognitive perspectives that are relevant for members of the host language and culture who enjoy a common cognitive background. In relation to the target community, such social understandings or implicatures have often not been part of the past social and conceptual fabric of the migrant community. Added to this, the nature of the interaction between the public services and the members of the ethnic communities is essentially a 'forced encounter', unlike other settings such as literary translation or technical translation, in that parties in this kind of communicative event are not participating out of choice but out of necessity in their everyday life. The public services need to get their work done, e.g. admitting people to a hospital, processing criminal cases, or informing parents on student matters. For the community members who have language barriers, it is about accessing essential services, support, seeking justice or treatment. These features outline the most distinguishing aspects of the public service translation or community

translation and point to significant differences in the cognitive backgrounds of the participants in this communicative event through translation

In this context, translators often find themselves in the position of having to overcome not just linguistic and cultural differences but also of cognitive background to create the shared meaning taken for granted by the public service agencies. For example, privacy legislation will apply to everyone in this country regardless of how some communities treat sharing their information with others. Cluver (1992) says "*not only does PST consist of the provision of information in other languages, but also the transmission of this information in such a way that it is more easily understood by marginalised communities*" (p. 36), drawing attention to the objective that needs to be achieved by translators and the social position of the ethnic communities. However, he does not identify the specific *transfer activities* translators undertake to achieve this objective – transmitting information in such a way that it is more easily understood by communities who come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This is the focus of the investigation in this study.

The challenges in translation are often assumed to result from 'linguistic gaps' and/or 'cultural gaps'. These generally form the basis for equivalence-oriented translation theories and approaches, such as formal and dynamic equivalence (Nida & Taber, 1969), semantic and communicative translation (Newmark, 1981), meaning-based and form-based translation (Larson, 1998), overt and covert translation (House, 1977) and domestication and foreignization (Venuti, 1995). Other scholars concluded that bridging these gaps may require a process that extends beyond the assumptions of the traditional view of translation and proposed a functionalist approach to translation. Such an approach considers translation as a communicative transaction, not just a linguistic conversion, and views translators as intercultural communication experts in a sociocultural communicative event where the *skopos* or *purpose* guides the translation decisions (Holz-Manttari, 1984; Nord, 1997; Vermeer, 2004; Reiss,

1971; as cited in Munday, 2001). Translators are regarded as cultural mediators between different languages and cultures in any interlingual communication. Nord (1997) defines this distinction in the role of a translator using the terms 'translation' and 'translational activity' (p. 17). Translation is considered to be part of the process of translational activity, which also includes other activities carried out by the translators, such as interacting with clients, or giving advice on translatability. Therefore the translator is not limited to applying transfer procedures to convert a Source Text (ST) into a Target Text (TT) according to equivalence strategies proposed by scholars such as Baker (1992). However, the functionalist approaches have their critics as well. Newmark (1990) criticized too much concentration on the target texts and their readers to the detriment of the source texts and their authors, who are the government agencies in the context of public service translation. While the functionalist approaches propose an overall framework for decision making by the translators, they fail to explain or examine how translators manage the inherent difficulties and boundaries during the translation process. Nord (1997), sharing a similar conclusion, offered a highly detailed 'text analysis in translation' (p. 117) to further elaborate on the factors impacting on translation. However, some of the information that Nord considers to be very important in translation commissions or briefs (*ibid.*, p. 127), such as the time and place of text reception, indicate that there is still an assumption that translation takes place between two languages and cultures that are geographically and socially separated. This fails to account for public service translation, which takes place in a setting where ethnic languages and cultures – target readership – are embedded within the host language and culture which dominate the public service agencies. Hence, Nord does not adequately elaborate on the sorts of practices translators undertake to achieve shared meaning under these circumstances.

Knowledge Transfer

The means by which barriers or obstacles can best be negotiated to create shared- meaning is the subject of Knowledge Transfer (KT), one of the two key processes of knowledge management, along with knowledge creation (Ofek & Sarvary, 2001). Authors in KT often distinguish data, information and knowledge from one another as they may present the different challenges in knowledge transfer. As public service translators work within the activities of large public organisations and agencies offering services to the public, a similar distinction between data, information and knowledge, which translation theorists tend to collectively call 'text', is also relevant for the translation process, as they are unlikely to present the same challenges during the transfer process. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary provides the following definitions:

Data - facts or information used usually to calculate, analyze, or plan something

Information - knowledge that you get about someone or something: facts or details about a subject

Knowledge - information, understanding, or skill that you get from experience or education.

KT is primarily occupied with how knowledge can best be transferred. The kind of knowledge KT deals with is defined by Van der Spek and Spijkervet (1997) as "the whole set of insights, experiences and procedures which are considered correct and true and which, therefore, guide the thoughts, behaviours and communication of people" (p.33). The barriers that prevent effective knowledge transfer have been examined in the literature (Nonaka, 1998; Gorgoglione, 2003; Harada, 2003, cited in Cranefield & Yoong, 2007). Effective knowledge transfer is assumed to occur when knowledge in tacit form is converted into explicit form (Polanyi, 1962; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

KT views knowledge as valuable only if it is appropriate, accurate and accessible to its users. This is the guiding principle for the sort of activities that can be undertaken for effective knowledge transfer. It is essentially a 'commonsense approach' in transfer decisions as any KT activity that does not maintain appropriateness, accuracy and accessibility of knowledge would not be considered as an option. Recognising the work of specialised people who facilitate knowledge transfer in an organisation through the KT decisions they make, Wenger (1998) proposed the concept of 'knowledge brokers' (p. 109), whose function is to mediate knowledge between different social groups via an act of translation (in the intralingual sense). A key factor in mediating knowledge transfer, according to Cohen and Levinthal (1990), is the absorptive capacity of the receivers. They defined the concept of absorptive capacity, in an organisational communication setting, as a firm's "ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends" and argued that it primarily depended on prior related knowledge and diversity of background. Rolland, Chauvel, and Despres (2003, in Cranefield & Yoong, 2007) also named absorptive capacity as a key factor in successful knowledge transfer. As organisations are essentially run by people, it is ultimately the absorptive capacity of individuals involved in a communicative event that determines the success of knowledge transfer. Gorgoglione (cited in Cranefield and Yoong 2007) argues that the two essential cognitive processes of 'upstream act of *codification*' and 'downstream act of *interpretation*' rely heavily on the selection and organization of information, which is then affected by cognitive characteristics of individuals, and their background, goals, values and beliefs. This is also relevant for the interlingual translation process in public service translation setting as the transfer takes place between an organization, which undertakes the upstream

act of codification by deciding on, producing, selecting and organizing (e.g. language, image, symbol) the knowledge and information to be transferred to individuals in the community who need to undertake the downstream act of interpretation (of the knowledge and information). As this process takes place via a translator, the translator also undertakes the upstream act of codification and the downstream act of interpretation. Basically, this process, which only occurs once in an intralingual communication setting, takes place twice in an interlingual communication facilitated by a translator. In other words, translators create a *nested loop* - a loop within a loop - by undertaking these cognitive processes in their transfer process. Gorgoglione (cited in Cranefield and Yoong, 2007) highlights the significance of the task of interpretation (of the meaning), stating that 'for knowledge transfer to be effective, the object has primarily to fit the cognitive characteristics of the recipient actors: the better the fitting, the higher its value for knowledge transfer' (p.101).

Holden and von Korfleisch (2004) were the first to draw a link between interlingual translation and knowledge transfer and argue that 'translation... is by far the oldest universal practice of conscientiously converting knowledge from one domain (i.e. a language group) to another' (p. 128-129); translation is then 'a kind of knowledge conversion which seeks to create common cognitive ground among people, among whom differences in language are a barrier to comprehension' (ibid., p. 129). When we apply this approach to the PST setting, this would mean translators considering the cognitive background of the target readership, i.e. the embedded ethnic communities that make up a multicultural society, as a factor in their translation decisions in order to facilitate comprehension.

According to Nonaka (1998), the transfer of tacit knowledge occurs through informal sharing or socialisation amongst individuals with a common language, common interests and a common knowledge base, which is often lacking by default in multicultural and multilingual communities due to diversity in languages and cultures. Tacit knowledge can be made explicit and transferred through externalisation, or expression in a public, codified form. Von Krogh, Ichijo, and Nonaka (2000) point to a significant role played by what they call *knowledge enablers*, in transferring knowledge across cultural divides and thus making it explicit through a process of *externalisation*. This is very similar to the role played by translators. Knowledge in a linguistic code that is not understandable by users will remain tacit unless it is 'externalised' and 'codified' in an accessible language, using Nonaka's terms. Code changing, however, may not alone be sufficient to make knowledge accessible. Additional transfer activities may need to be undertaken in order to achieve this purpose. Decisions about choosing the best transfer activities would need to be made when the knowledge is presented in a language that the users are not familiar with.

In KT literature, another key actor – a gatekeeper - is identified in knowledge transfer activities. The gatekeeper monitors external information and makes decisions about relevance (Allen, 1967; Katz & Tushman, 1981; cited in Cranefield & Yoong,

2007). The gatekeeper establishes information and communication networks and may contribute to bridging terminological cultures and value systems (Hernandez, Liang, Prescott & Kirch, 2004, cited in Cranefield & Yoong, 2007). Pawlowski and Robey (2004, p. 648) outline gatekeepers as boundary-spanning persons who can play multiple roles in the Information Technology (IT) context, serving as both filters and facilitators of information transfer between an organisation and its environment. The authors also draw attention to the lack of research literature on the description of roles and practices that contribute to effective knowledge transfer among organisational units.

Cranefield and Yoong (2007) developed a six-stage model showing the knowledge transfer activities and practices undertaken by gatekeepers. The model included six key stages: (1) Engaging, (2) Defining, (3) Seeking, (4) Articulating, (5) Integrating and (6) Disseminating. They found that translating and interpreting (in the intralingual sense) were highlighted as important knowledge transfer activities performed by the gatekeepers. These activities involve, in a knowledge transfer context, adapting the new context, specific terminology and ideas into new languages and images that the potential audience (e.g. co-workers) would understand and relate to; interpretation may involve illustrating the application of context-specific terminology and ideas using examples. This includes undertaking translating and interpreting activities in an intralingual transfer sense to create meaningful and relevant knowledge and making decisions about convertibility by identifying ambiguous, abstract and irrelevant segments or expressions. The gatekeeper's activities include understanding the underlying meaning of the context-specific language, making sure it is relevant to the target audience and removing confusion between the previously used meaning of a term and the new usage, which often meant the new language had to be interpreted for the audience, explained, exemplified, modified or simplified (Cranefield & Yoong, 2007).

It is these knowledge brokering activities and practices of simplifying, modifying and exemplifying which are the subject of this study. These activities and practices are significant in that they represent the actual things that are done for effective communication, not broad approaches to how it should be done. Dictionary definitions of these three verbs in the *New Oxford American Dictionary* are:

Simplify - to make (something) simpler or easier to do or understand.

Modify - to make partial or minor changes to (something), typically so as to improve it or to make it less extreme.

Exemplify – to give an example of; illustrate by giving an example.

These three activities essentially involve making abstract concepts and ideas concrete enough and removing ambiguities. They can take place in any step of the six-stage model for knowledge transfer proposed by Cranefield and Yoong (2007), with varying levels of effectiveness. They may, however, not appear as standalone activities but embedded in other activities such as filtering, which Cranefield and Yoong (2007) described as simplifying in order to get the knowledge 'on the organisational agenda'. Exemplifying and modifying can include activities such as storytelling or replacing non-transferable examples with practical, relevant examples.

In the absence of a complete theoretical model applicable to the investigation of public service translators' actual practices, the study undertakes a survey to learn about public service translators' practices in trying to achieve both shared meaning and subjective understanding of their roles as knowledge brokers or gatekeepers as defined above. Based on the results of the survey, along with unstructured interviews with translators and observations by the researcher, a 'common sense approach' model is developed for the process of public service translation from a knowledge transfer perspective.

Data collection

The primary data collection for this investigation was through a survey. Yin (1994) proposes the use of surveys in exploratory studies, asking 'what' questions seeking to establish prevalence, with the goal of developing pertinent hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry.

This survey was organised into two main parts: 1) personal demographic information, and 2) various activities and practices typically performed by knowledge brokers or gatekeepers in knowledge transfer.

In the first part, practising community translators were asked questions for basic background information on their gender, age, length of practice as a translator, training background in the profession, length of time spent in Australia and overseas, NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) accreditation (if any), and the language direction they translate into. The languages translated by the participants included Arabic, Assyrian, Chinese, Dari, Dinka, Greek, Japanese, Karen, Khmer, Macedonian, Serbian, Sinhalese, Spanish, Tigrinya, Turkish and Vietnamese, comprising a balanced mix of established community languages that have been in the community for decades in Australia, such as Greek, Spanish and Turkish, and newer community languages such as Dari, Dinka, Karen and Tigrinya.

The second part of the survey focused on some of the activities typically performed by knowledge brokers and gatekeepers and sought to elicit how translators felt about these activities and practices and whether they actually perform any of them. These statements, mostly derived from boundary management activities performed by gatekeepers as identified by Cranefield and Yoong (2007), explored the prevalence of any boundary management activities among translators during a typical public service translation process. The activities specifically related to modifying, simplifying and exemplifying content.

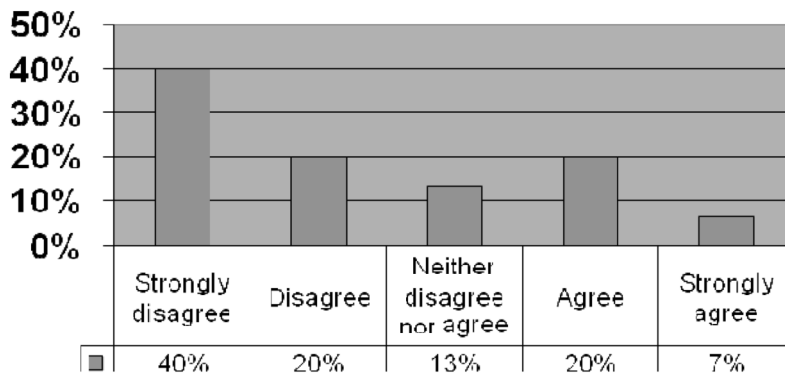
The participants were asked to indicate their answers on a Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The survey was completed by 35 translators who are actively providing translation services of material produced by the public service agencies in Victoria, Australia. A medium to large translation agency in Victoria has about 100-150 translators and checkers on their books (personal correspondence).

Findings

The analysis of the responses showed that 27% indicated they undertook some form of modification of content because this was necessary, based on their view of what may make the ST content incomprehensible for the ethnic community members.

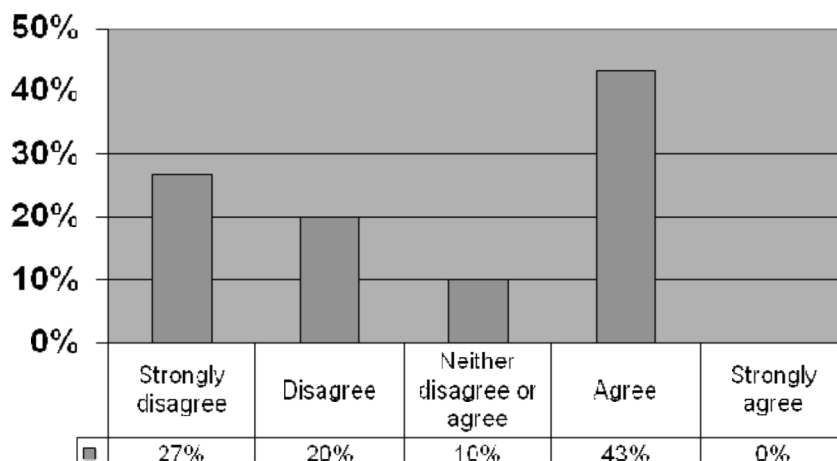
13% neither disagreed nor agreed with the proposition. Those who strongly disagreed or disagreed totaled 60%. In interviews, those who strongly disagreed or disagreed indicated that they believed modifying content was not within the role of translators.

Table 1: modify content where I believe the community members may not understand

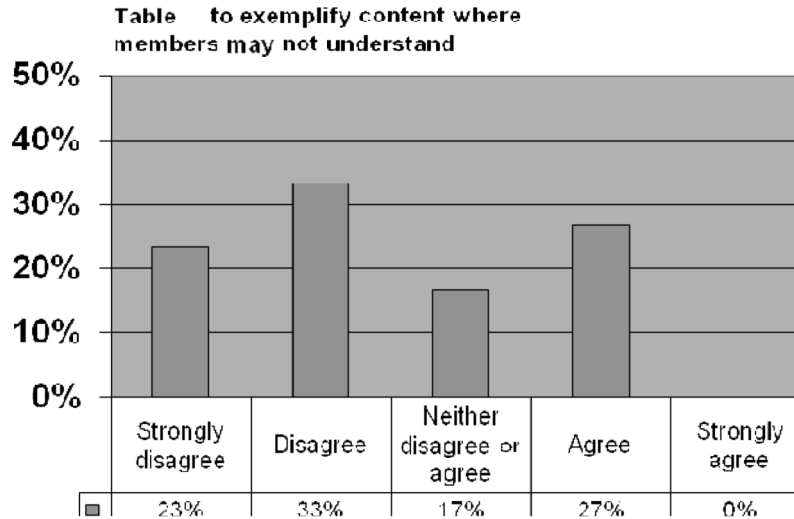


43% of practising public service translators indicated they simplify content, which is almost equal to 47% who strongly disagreed or disagreed with the simplification of content statement, on the basis that this is not within the role of translators. 10% of translators neither disagreed nor agreed with the statement.

Table 2: to simplify content where I believe the not understand



The responses to the statement regarding exemplifying content during the translation process revealed some of the most significant findings in the study, with 27% of the participants agreeing with the statement. In other words, they added content that was not in the original text to illustrate something that they perceived the target text readers may not understand. A strong 56% disagreed with the practice, and 17% did not disagree or agree with exemplifying content. Translation, by definition, is considered to be the recreation of source language content into a target language. It is very significant that one third of the participants said that they would add content that was not in the source text to make it explicit or more relevant, and that a further 17%, even though they were undecided did not flatly reject the practice.



Discussion of findings

The responses to the statements, which were designed to gauge whether public service translators undertake any of the knowledge brokering practices such as modifying, simplifying and exemplifying during the translation process, revealed some significant insights into the translation process. They are significant in that they provide data about the actual practices undertaken by translators, rather than data about broad approaches that they adopt such as free vs. literal, formal equivalence vs. dynamic equivalence, overt translation vs. covert translation, and domestication vs. foreignization. The key finding was that a significant portion of translators have no problems undertaking transfer practices typically associated with knowledge brokering or gatekeeping activities such as modifying, simplifying and exemplifying in order to create shared meaning and bridge gaps in cognitive backgrounds between the parties to the communicative event, to meet the needs of recipients. They use their skills, much like a gatekeeper (Cranefield & Yoong, 2007), to convert what they assess to be abstract and inaccessible tacit knowledge into a more accessible, concrete, explicit form.

The participants' description of their translation activities in survey responses and unstructured interviews fit closely with Holden and von Kortzfleisch's (2004) description of translation as a knowledge conversion activity. These translators appear to strive to create common cognitive ground between parties who are from diverse backgrounds but reside within the same physical environment. They also appear to undertake the core activity of what Nonaka (2000) calls *knowledge enablers* in transferring tacit knowledge across cultural divides.

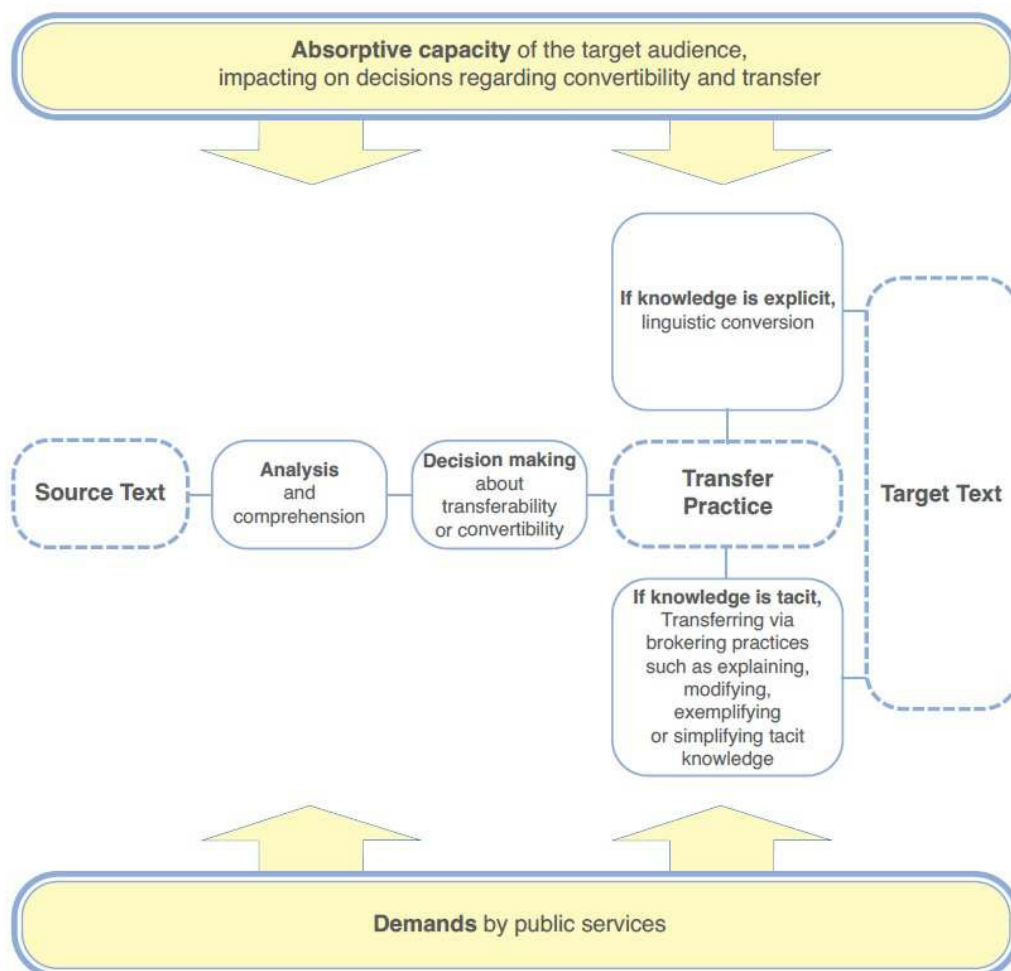
The findings challenge the core concepts of *skopos* or 'purpose'-driven translation decisions as proposed by the functionalist approaches to translation, especially in non-literary translation settings, or by theories and approaches in which decisions are assumed to be influenced by broad differences of language and culture between two distinct, physically separated parties in a communicative event. The perceived absorptive capacity of the target readers, that is, their capacity for comprehending, assimilating and using the new knowledge and information, which can range from ideas on how to handle a difficult teenage child or manage the behavioural problems of an unruly eight-year old at school and home, to advice on maintaining mental health and wellbeing, emerges as a significant factor in the translation decision-making process. The translator's role in enhancing absorptive capacity or boundary spanning as it is called in KT literature, is arguably the least understood step in translation,

and a closer look at this role helps others to see translators in a different light based not on what they are supposed to do but what they actually do.

The Model for Public Service Translation Process

The proposed model (Fig. 1) that has been designed, based on the findings of the study and relevant literature in KT, shows the broad decision-making process involved in a typical public service translation, in which the translator's role is broadened to include making decisions about convertibility based on his/her understanding of the source text objectives, in other words, the objectives of public service agencies representing dominant host language and culture, and his/her understanding of the absorptive capacity of the readership, who not only have significantly different linguistic and cultural backgrounds but also do not necessarily share the cognitive background agencies take for granted. If the translator/interpreter perceives that the knowledge in the source text is explicit enough to be easily accessed by the target readership, the translator undertakes a mostly linguistic conversion from one language into another.

Figure 1: The model of transfer dynamics in public service translation, illustrating the steps and forces involved in decision-making processes.



When the translator perceives that the knowledge or information is in tacit form and is likely to remain tacit even after a linguistic conversion, he/she, in certain cases, appears to undertake other practices beyond their assumed role of linguistic decoders and encoders. Some of these practices, such as exemplifying and modifying, are quite radical in nature when viewed against the assumed role of a translator, where they believe the target audience may not understand or relate to the knowledge, that is, that their absorptive capacity may not be sufficient to relate to the knowledge if based on a simple linguistic conversion. This is what the author calls a 'common sense approach' to translation as translation that is not appropriate, accurate and relevant will not be of much value to the parties in this 'forced encounter' in a public service setting.

The model places the translator as the main actor in the transfer process, while recognising the forces that impact on the decisions a translator makes. The translator, despite being the main actor, is influenced by two major forces – the absorptive capacity of the readership and the demands of the source text creators (i.e., the government agencies) such as political correctness. It is a delicate process of negotiation in which translators aim at making the knowledge and information explicit so that it can be accessed readily by NESB community members, while remaining within the boundaries drawn by the demands of the public service agencies as, essentially, the NESB ethnic community is part of the larger community within the service area of the public service agency. This sets PST apart as a distinct communication process using translation as a tool in a 'forced encounter' between an organisation and an individual in public service provision.

CONCLUSION

Public service translators, having the privileged position of being familiar with the two cultures and languages in which they live, are commissioned with the task of understanding knowledge and information and conveying it to the non-English-speaking community members. This may require practices in translation of knowledge and information that involve undertaking activities beyond the traditional definition of translation or expected role of a translator as outlined in current translation literature. The traditional view of translation proposes that this is done by a process of encoding and decoding within broad approaches such as semantic vs. communicative, dynamic vs. formal, overt vs. covert and domestication vs. foreignization, which may be the case in many settings in which translation is used as a communication tool.

Public service translators appear to make decisions about transferability or convertibility of what they perceive to be tacit knowledge for the target readers, and undertake activities either through straightforward linguistic conversion or through a range of activities, similar to those activities in knowledge brokering, to make the knowledge explicit or accessible. To do so, they appear to rely on their knowledge and views of the absorptive capacity – cognitive characteristics - of the target language community in a sense-making exercise so that knowledge or information is appropriate, accurate and accessible to its users. When viewed through the two essential cognitive processes of ‘upstream act of *codification*’ and ‘downstream act of *interpretation*’ proposed by Gorgoglione (cited in Cranefield and Yoong, 2007), translators create a nested loop - a loop within a loop - by undertaking these cognitive processes in their transfer process. Translators appear to be striking a balance between the absorptive capacity of the target readers and the demands of the public services reflected in the text. They reflect this in their practices. This author identifies this process as a ‘common sense approach’ in translation. This reconceptualises the role of the public service translator as a *knowledge broker* or *gatekeeper* (Cranefield & Yoong 2007) or *knowledge enabler* as described by Nonaka (2000).

The research literature on actual transfer practices undertaken by translators is limited and it is even more limited in the context of public service translation. This pilot study intends, drawing from the work in the discipline of Knowledge Management, and more specifically from Knowledge Transfer, to focus attention on the actual transfer practices in public service translation settings from a different perspective, in an attempt to move away from broad approaches to translation decisions which do not particularly help with every day practice. However, because of the small number of participants and limited range of languages involved, it has limitations and one should exercise caution in generalising the findings.

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