

Article

Implicit and Explicit Information in Translation

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Abstract

Different languages allow different kinds of information to be left implicit and require different kinds of information to be made explicit. So when translating from one language to another, the way we handle implicit and explicit information is a major issue. This article illustrates the treatment of such information in translating directionals, pronouns, verbal tense, word meanings, chains of reference, and passives.

Keywords

implicit and explicit information, directionals, pronouns, verbal tense, word meanings, chains of reference, passives

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I. Implicit and explicit information

Suppose I were to write a report of a recent trip, to be read by people in Northeast India. I might say something like this:

Report #1

In the morning we left Meghalaya for Tezpur. On the way we were surprised to see how low the Brahmaputra was. In Tezpur we met a delegation from Bhutan.

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People from Northeast India will have no trouble understanding the various actions and places described in this paragraph. However, if I were writing the same report for a group in England, I might need to relate the information quite differently, perhaps like this:

Report #2

In the morning we left the hill state of Meghalaya, heading for the city of Tezpur. When we crossed the mighty Brahmaputra River on the way, we were surprised to see how low the river was at that time. In Tezpur we met a delegation from the neighboring kingdom of Bhutan, located in the mountains to the north.

People in England will appreciate the extra information that has been added to Report #2, because it will help them to understand more clearly what is happening. Instead of being baffled and confused, they may even find the report interesting. But if I were to write those same words in a report intended for people in Northeast India, they might wonder what my motive was. Why did I include so much unnecessary detail? They might be baffled and confused, whereas the simpler report presented first would be immediately clear to them.

What is the reason for the difference between the two reports and the different reactions between the two groups of readers? The reason is based on a basic principle of the way people use language:

A person speaks or writes to communicate information or ideas. Ordinarily we do not tell people something they already know. We tell them only as much as they need to know in order to understand what we want to say.

This principle shows us that Report #1 is short, leaving out a lot of information contained in Report #2, precisely because the people who will read Report #1 already know all of that information. They do not need to be told and they do not expect to be told.

On the other hand, for people who know nothing of the geography of Northeast India, the simple statement of the facts given in Report #1 will be hard to follow. But once the extra information is provided, as in Report #2, all of these places begin to come to life for them. With the extra information, people in England reading Report #2 begin to understand our travel somewhat in the same way that readers in Northeast India will understand it, based on Report #1.

Notice one very important fact. The extra information provided in Report #2 does not give any information that would not already be known by a person from Northeast India. When the two reports are

compared, Report #2 seems to include a lot of information that is missing from Report #1. However, communication through language takes place in a certain context, between a producer and a receiver. It is the total communication event that needs to be compared, not just the words used. If we take the whole situation into account, considering especially the intended readers of the two reports, we will discover that there is nothing added to Report #2 that would not be clearly understood by every reader of Report #1.

This shows us that in every communication event, there are some things that need to be clearly stated and there are some things that do not need to be stated, because they are already understood by the speaker and hearers. There are special terms for these two parts of meaning:

Things which are clearly stated in the words of a communication are *explicit*.

Things which are understood by the speaker and hearers (or writer and readers), and are part of the meaning of the text, but which are not actually stated in words in the communication are *implicit*.

The total communication is made up of a combination of explicit and implicit meaning.

It is important not to misunderstand the point here. We are not saying that we can add anything we like to a text and say that it is “implicit meaning.” Look at this third version of the report about the trip:

Report #3

It was still early on the rainy morning when our ancient jeep left the hill state of Meghalaya, heading for our planned five-day visit to the city of Tezpur. When we crossed the mighty Brahmaputra River on the way, we were surprised to see how low the river was at that time, with many boats moored in the mud on both sides of the river. In Tezpur the following afternoon we were honored to meet with a delegation impressively dressed in their traditional finery. They had come from the neighboring kingdom of Bhutan, located in the mountains to the north, and they had been waiting for us for several days.

There are many new bits of information added to this third version of the report, but none of this new information is in any way *implicit* in the first or second version of the report. Readers from Northeast India would need to be given this information just as much as readers from any other part of the world, because it is all information which they cannot know unless we tell them. Report #1 and Report #2 are basically the same report. The difference is that certain information is left implicit in Report #1 and it is made

explicit in Report #2. However, report #3 is a completely different report, adding a lot of new information which is completely missing from the first two reports.

2. Application to translation

All of the reports we looked at in the previous section are in English. The difference between them is caused by the difference in the knowledge that the intended readers share with the writer, because when knowledge is shared it can be left implicit. These examples show us that even when we are using the same language, the need to make information implicit or explicit will depend on the situation we are writing or speaking for.

However, once we begin to compare two different languages, we discover that the use of implicit and explicit information becomes extremely important. There are many reasons for this, but some of them should be very clear. We have already seen that even people using the same language need different amounts of implicit and explicit information, depending on their background and situation. So we can expect this to be even more pronounced in the case of people from two different cultures and geographical regions, speaking different languages. As we will see, different languages allow different kinds of information to be left implicit and require different kinds of information to be made explicit. So when translating from one language to another, the way we handle implicit and explicit information will naturally be a major issue.

All of this becomes even more true when we talk about Bible translation. This is because the cultures of the Bible are different from the cultures of today, not only because of the language and the geography and culture and worldview (all of these things are important when translating between two modern languages), but also because of the enormous difference in time between the period of the Bible and the period we live in today.

Let us look one more time at the three different reports of the trip in Northeast India. Like the writer of our Report #1, most biblical writers were writing for people who already knew the geography of their area. They did not need to tell their readers about the places they mentioned, because when those readers saw a name, they already knew whether it referred to a town, a river, a mountain, a province or region, or a country. The meaning is already implicitly there, in the shared information between the writer and the first readers. There was no need for the writer to make this information explicit for them.

However, most of our modern Bible readers will not know what these places are. The information that was implicit for the original readers is missing for our modern readers. In order for our modern readers to understand

what the original readers understood, we will often need to make this information explicit. Instead of “Shiloh,” we may need to say, “the town Shiloh.” Instead of “Tigris,” we may need to say, “the River Tigris,” and so on. Only then will our readers have the full understanding that the writer expected readers to have.

3. Language differences

Each language has its own rules of grammar. As people grow up speaking a language, they learn the correct way to speak. They naturally follow the rules of their own language, rules that allow speakers of that language to understand clearly what they mean when they speak to each other.

One of the significant ways that the rules of one language differ from the rules of another language is in what can be left explicit and what must be made implicit. For example, you might be wondering what happened to the food you left with me to take to your mother in the hospital. In English I might say, “I’ve already taken it to her.” However, in Thai I might say, “aw paj hâj léew.” The Thai is literally, “take go give already.”

There are very great differences in these two sentences between what is explicit and what is implicit. In English the various objects being talked about are all explicitly mentioned:

me	“I”
the food	“it”
your mother	“her”

In Thai, every one of these items has been left implicit. None of them has to be mentioned, but the hearer will know exactly who did the taking, what was taken, and to whom it was given, because the context in which the sentence is spoken makes all of this implicit.

On the other hand, in Thai the various actions involved are described quite explicitly. There are separate words for the action of “taking,” the action of “going,” and the action of “giving.” In English, the single word “taken” is used, but all of the separate actions are nevertheless implicitly understood from what is said.

Someone translating from Thai to English would have to be careful to make all of the objects (none of which is explicitly mentioned in Thai) explicit in English. But someone translating from English to Thai would need to think about the different steps involved in the action, and make each of them explicit. And if they want the sentence to sound natural in Thai, they would also have to leave many of the elements of the English sentence implicit. A good translator will understand that the correct Thai translation

has to leave those items implicit, and not think that they must be left in the Thai sentence just because they are explicitly there in the original English.

As this example shows very clearly, each language tends to make certain things explicit and allows other things to be left implicit. Let us look now at how this important principle works for different aspects of meaning.

3.1 Directionals

Jonah 1.3 says that Jonah went *down* to Joppa. But many directionals are left implicit in the original languages of the Bible, because the people knew the geography well. So we are not told that Jonah went west to Tarshish and north or east to Nineveh. Most Hebrew readers knew these directions, so the writers did not need to mention them. But when we translate into modern languages, we may need to make the directions explicit.

English is a language that makes regular use of directionals. Words like “up,” “down,” and “over” are common in spoken English. If I am in Singapore, I might talk about going up to Bangkok, over to Manila, or down to Jakarta. But these terms are not used only for geographical directions. It is common to hear sentences like, “Please get down the box from up over the washing machine.”

The meaning and use of words like “come” and “go” are also specific to each language. Speakers of a language use these without thinking about it, and when we do think about it, it may be very difficult to explain the rules we are unconsciously following. But when we as translators see words meaning “come” and “go” in a language, we should not assume that we should use the same words in our own language. We need to understand clearly the situation that is being described and then use the words in our own language that will give the correct meaning.

Acts 8.27 mentions an Ethiopian official who was on his way home after a trip to Jerusalem to worship God. The Greek uses the word *erchomai*, which is usually translated by “come” in English, and NRSV translates that the man “had come to Jerusalem to worship God.” In English it is acceptable to use “come” here, because the man had come from his own country a long way away and was still in the land of Israel. However, in other languages it would not make sense to say “come” here, because the man has already left Jerusalem and traveled some distance away. Some Indonesian translations of this verse use the Indonesian word *pergi* “to go,” and say that the man had gone to Jerusalem to worship.

In order to use directionals naturally in translation, we may have to find information that is implicit in the original languages. The Hebrew or Greek text itself does not always make the information we need explicit, but there is often a way to find what we need in order to translate accurately

into our own language. We may need to study a map of the Holy Land. We may need to think carefully about the situation to be really clear what is happening in the text. Only then can we reproduce it in a meaningful way in our own language.

3.2 Pronouns

One important way that languages differ from one another is in the way they refer to the people who act as participants in discourses in that language. It is usual for participants to be referred to by *pronouns*. After a participant or group of participants has been identified in some way in a discourse, pronouns can then be used to refer to that participant or group.

Pronouns are distinguished in almost all languages by *person* and *number*. *Person* is usually divided into *first*, *second*, and *third person*. “First person” refers to the speaker or to a group that includes the speaker (“I,” “we”). “Second person” refers to the person or persons spoken to (“you”). “Third person” refers to others (“he,” “she,” “it,” “they”). *Number* refers to the number of people being referred to. The most common types of number are *singular*, referring to just one person, and *plural*, referring to more than one.

The things that have been said so far are true of most languages, and it might therefore seem that languages are very similar in their pronoun systems. However, there are actually many variations possible.

For example, some languages have a distinction between “first-person inclusive” (me and you and maybe others) and “first-person exclusive” (me [and others], but not you). Other languages have a “fourth person” as well as a third person, which means that they have ways of referring easily to two different participants in the discourse. In other languages again, there are distinctions in number, so that in addition to singular and plural there may also be “dual,” referring to two participants, or “trial,” referring to three participants. Some languages also distinguish in plural between large groups and small groups.

In many languages, pronouns also indicate *gender*. Words are classified according to whether they are masculine, feminine, and sometimes neuter. Languages may also divide the world in other ways, with different classes of nouns, each class represented by appropriate pronouns. In English, gender is limited to third-person singular (“he,” “she,” “it”), but in Biblical Hebrew, masculine and feminine is distinguished in all persons and numbers except first person. So Hebrew has different words for “you,” and “they” depending on whether the pronoun refers to males (and mixed groups) or females.

This issue becomes very important for translators working in languages that *require* distinctions that the source languages do not make. If a pronoun system has a distinction, for example, between dual and plural, or a distinction between inclusive and exclusive first person, that means that the translator must make a decision every time such a distinction is possible. Sometimes it is possible to be quite sure of the right meaning, because the information is clearly implicit, or even explicit, in the Bible text.

In Gen 22.3, for example, Abraham took his son Isaac and two men with him and set out. In v. 5, Abraham speaks to the men. He says first, “Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” Let us say that we are translating this into a language which distinguishes between inclusive and exclusive first person, and also between dual and plural. When Abraham says, “we will worship,” it will be necessary to use the exclusive dual form for “we,” because “we” refers to two people (Abraham and Isaac) and the two men that Abraham is speaking to are not included in the worship. Dual will also be used for “you” at the end, since it refers only to the two men. Although Hebrew does not make these distinctions, the context still makes clear which forms are called for.

In 1 Sam 2.22-25, the text says that Eli heard bad reports about his sons and then spoke to them. There is nothing in these verses to tell us how many sons Eli had, but this information has already been given in 1 Sam 1.3. There were two sons. Therefore, if a language has a dual form, it should be used in all references to Eli’s sons.

It is often easy for translators to find the information they need to make the distinctions that their languages require. At other times it can be hard for translators to make a clear decision. But whether the information is explicit or clearly implicit, or whether it is very hard to work it out, translators in these languages must still make a decision in every single case.

To do this effectively, translators must try to understand the situation being discussed as carefully as possible and then make a decision. In many cases it may not really matter which way the idea is expressed. In other places, however, it may involve significant distinctions. For example, Phlm 1.2 mentions “our sister Apphia” and “our fellow-soldier Archippus.” Do these “our”s include Philemon or not? An inclusive pronoun is used in Indonesian, but an exclusive pronoun is used in Tok Pisin (from Papua New Guinea). Different translators have made different decisions, but they had no choice but to decide one way or the other.

3.3 Grammatical distinctions in the verbs

Another type of grammatical system which makes languages very different from each other is the tense system. For example, in English almost every

time we use a verb it must be marked as “past,” “present,” or “future.” “Past” in English begins just before this moment and extends back to the creation of the world. Other languages, however, may divide up the past in different ways. A distinction between “recent past” and “remote past” is quite common. Some languages (such as Gogodala of Papua New Guinea) add another form for events that took place earlier today. Tabo, another Papua New Guinea language, has different forms depending on whether events being talked about took place during the day or night!

As with the pronoun systems, translators have no choice but to make use of the distinctions which their language requires. As with the pronouns, the necessary information is often implicit in the text. But there will also be many cases where the source text does not give clear guidance about the correct decision to make. Translators must make a decision based on as full an understanding of the text as they can get.

3.4 Word meanings

Translators are often forced to choose from a set of words in their language that carry somewhat different meanings from the similar set of words in the source language. For example, different cultures have quite different ways of referring to brothers and sisters. In Hebrew, Greek, and English, it is the gender of the person that is important. The word “brother” or “sister” tells us nothing about which of the two is older or younger. In other languages, the relative age may be important, with no distinction based on gender. In many languages, there may be a set of four terms, divided both by gender and by relative age.

In Gen 27.30 we read that “as soon as Jacob left, his brother Esau came in from hunting.” Neither the Hebrew nor the English of this verse tells us explicitly which of the two is the older. However, we have plenty of other information about these two brothers and it is clearly implicit (and very important) in the context that Esau is the older brother. Translators in many languages will have to make this information explicit by the word they use for “brother” in this verse.

In other situations, the context may not be clear. The information was not needed in the biblical language and it has not been made clear in the text, even implicitly. We read about “Simon and his brother Andrew” in Mark 1.16 or “two other brothers, James and John” in Mark 1.19. In languages that require a choice of term based on relative age, each translator has to decide which is the older and which is the younger brother. Perhaps the one named first is likely to be the older one. If translators have no other information, this is a good rule to follow.

3.5 Chains of reference

We have already mentioned the different ways in which languages use pronouns to refer to participants in a discourse. There is another aspect of this question which we also need to look at. Once a particular participant has been introduced into a discourse, that participant can be referred to any number of times. Participants come and go in discourses like characters in a drama. But whenever particular participants are “on stage,” different languages have different ways of keeping track of them. The different ways of referring to a particular character can be thought of as a line going through the discourse. Each character has its own line, and each line can be called a *chain of reference*.

Let us look at Acts 3.1-8, using the GNB translation as an example. In v. 1 we are introduced to Peter and John. In v. 2 there are three new participants or groups. First, we meet the lame man. Then we are told that this man “was carried” to the gate to beg. The people who carried him are not mentioned explicitly, but they are definitely implicit participants in the story, and in some languages they would have to be mentioned explicitly. Finally, there are “the people going into the Temple.”

At this point, the lame man is clearly the main character in the story. Therefore, we know exactly who is referred to at the beginning of v. 3 when the text says “when he saw.” However, since Peter and John have not been mentioned since v. 1, their names are given in full again in v. 3. In the second part of the verse, the lame man is called “he,” but this time Peter and John can be referred to with a pronoun: “he begged them.” What does he want them to do? “To give him something.” The lame man is again referred to with a pronoun, “him.”

It may be useful to go through these verses carefully, noting how each character is referred to. These verses mainly talk about three people: the lame man, Peter, and John. The lame man is mentioned most often, sometimes with a noun, often with a pronoun, and sometimes with nothing at all. In this last group of references, we can say that he is “understood” from the context, or implicit. Peter is sometimes mentioned together with John and sometimes mentioned alone. John is mentioned only together with Peter. Sometimes they are called by their names and sometimes pronouns are used. We could make a diagram showing the way the different characters participate in the action of the story. Each time one of the characters is a participant we could put a circle. If we join all of the circles for one character, we have a “chain of reference” for that character.

The important thing for us to recognize is that every time there is a circle for a particular character, that character is a participant in the discourse.

However, the way a character is referred to in the text at each point will depend partly on the rules of the language and partly on the style of the writer. Translators must be very careful not to simply follow the pattern of their source languages. They must understand the discourse clearly enough that they can recognize each point where a character is a participant. But whether they mention that character with a name, or a noun, or a pronoun, or whether they leave that character implicit, all of this should be determined completely by what is good style and makes sense in their own language.

Even within one language, such as English, the pattern of when a character is implicit and explicit can be different from one translation to another:

Acts 3.8:

GNB he jumped up, stood on his feet, and started walking around

NRSV jumping up, he stood and began to walk

Greek grammar is quite different from English, and in the Greek of this verse the man is never referred to by either a noun or a pronoun, but only by the endings of the verbs.

3.6 Passives

A passive refers to a sentence where the character doing the action is not necessarily mentioned, but only the character or things that experience the action. For example, I might see an action that I could describe as “the man beat the dog.” However, if my interest is in what happened to the dog, or if I do not want to mention the man, I can use a passive sentence and say “the dog was beaten.” This clearly implies that someone did this action, but it does not tell us who it was.

Languages differ a great deal from each other in the way that they use passive sentences. In fact, even within one language there can be a significant difference in the way the same basic ideas can be expressed, sometimes using passive sentences and sometimes not. Daniel 1.5 provides an interesting example. In GNB, this verse reads:

The king also gave orders that every day they were to be given the same food as the members of the royal court. After three years of this training, they were to appear before the king.

As this verse is translated here, “they were to be given the same food” is put into a passive form. “They” here refers to the young Israelite men who were selected for training. The king’s orders mention the kind of food these men

are supposed to eat, but exactly who gives them this food is left implicit. Presumably it refers to some of the palace servants.

Compare this translation with NRSV's rendering of the same verse:

The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court.

NRSV is able to mention the young men's food without raising the question of who will give it to them. But NRSV uses a passive in the second sentence, "They were to be educated," where GNB did not use a passive. The people who provide the education are left implicit. REB manages to translate the verse without any passive at all.

Indonesian is a language that makes extensive use of passive forms. In this verse, Today's Indonesian (BIS) uses two passive forms. It mentions "food that is prepared for the king's family" and "after they are trained for three years." The people who prepare the food and do the training are left implicit.

The Gospel of Matthew followed the Jewish custom of using passives in order to avoid referring to God. In many cases in the Greek text, when an actor is not mentioned, the implied actor is God himself. These are sometimes known as "divine passives." Some of the best-known "divine passives" are found in the Beatitudes in Matt 5. "They will be comforted" (Matt 5.4) is translated as an active in GNB: "God will comfort them." "They shall be satisfied" (Matt 5.6) is "God will satisfy them fully." And "they will be called children of God" (Matt 5.9) is "God will call them his children."

There are many other examples of divine passives in the Bible. The original readers presumably knew that God was implicitly the actor in these passages. If the readers of a translation will not understand this, it is usually best to make God the explicit subject of these sentences.

Conclusion

There is much more interesting material to present on the subject of explicit and implicit information. Unfortunately, however, I have used up the space that is available for the present article, and I must stop here. Perhaps there will be an opportunity to present the remaining material at some point in the future.

Appreciation

There is one important point that has been left implicit throughout this article, but which I need to make explicit now. This article is presented

in appreciation of David Clark, who for many years has been my close friend, my respected colleague, my source of expert information, and often enough my sparring partner. We have both worked in several of the countries mentioned: India, Papua New Guinea, and Thailand, and over the years I have had the pleasure of visiting David and Glenys and their family in some of these places, as well as in England, their home country. May God continue to grant David and his family good health, and may we have many more opportunities for contact, whether via the internet or in person.

Abbreviations

BIS	<i>Bahasa Indonesia Sehari-hari</i> (common language version; 1985)
GNB	Good News Bible (1976)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)
REB	Revised English Bible (1989)