Implicit Meaning

Translation, then, is communicating the same meaning in a second language as was communicated in the first. But to do so adequately, one must be aware of the fact that there are various kinds of meaning. Not all of the meaning which is being communicated is stated overtly in the forms of the source language text. Discovering the meaning of the text to be translated includes consideration of both explicit and implicit information. The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the importance of implicit meaning to the translator. The matter of implicit meaning will be mentioned many times throughout this book.

Kinds of meaning

People usually think of meaning as something that a word or sentence refers to. For example, the word *apple* refers to the fruit produced by a certain tree. People know the meaning of *apple* because they have seen an apple and learned to call it *apple*. This kind of meaning is called REFERENTIAL MEANING because the word refers to a certain thing, event, attribution, or relation which a person can perceive or imagine. A sentence has meaning because it refers to something that happened, or may happen, or is imagined as happening. REFERENTIAL MEANING is what the communication is about. It is the information content.

The REFERENTIAL MEANING is organized into a semantic structure. The information bits are “packaged”; that is, they are put together and expressed by a variety of combinations. As they are "packaged" into larger and larger units there is ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING in the discourse which must also be taken into account in the translation. For example, if *apple* has been referred to in the text and then *apple* is referred to again, the fact that it is the same *apple* is part of the ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING of the text. Certain information may be old information, some new; certain information may be the topic (what is being talked about) of the discourse, other information commenting on the topic; and some information may be more central to the message; that is, more important or more prominent. It is the
ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING that puts the referential information together into a coherent text. ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING is signaled by deictics, repetition, groupings, and by many other features in the grammatical structure of a text.

The two propositions *Mary peeled an apple* and *Mary ate an apple* include MARY as the agent and APPLE as the affected in both propositions. MARY and APPLE are both referred to twice (REFERENTIAL MEANING). But in order to form a correct grammatical structure, we must also know if the ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING includes the fact that there is only one MARY and only one APPLE or if there are two MARYS or two APPLES. If they are the same, the surface structure in English would be a form like *Mary peeled an apple, and then she ate it*. After the first proposition is given, MARY and APPLE are both old information and so pronominal forms are used.

If, however, there are two MARYS being referred to and only one APPLE, then the grammatical form would need to indicate this with something like *Mary peeled an apple, and then the other Mary ate it*. All languages have ways of signaling the ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING, but these may be very different from language to language. For example, pronominal forms are not used in the same way in all languages, but all languages will have a formal way to indicate that certain information is old information.

Besides the REFERENTIAL MEANING and the ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING, there is also SITUATIONAL MEANING which is crucial to the understanding of any text. The message is produced in a given communication situation. The relationship between the writer or speaker and the addressee will affect the communication. Where the communication takes place, when it takes place, the age, sex, and social status of the speaker and hearer, the relationship between them, the presuppositions that each brings to the communication, the cultural background of the speaker and the addressee, and many other situational matters result in SITUATIONAL MEANING.

For example, the very same person may be referred to by various lexical items. A man named *John Smith* may be referred to as *John, Mr. Smith, Professor Smith*, etc., depending on the situation. This choice carries SITUATIONAL MEANING. It may indicate whether the situation is formal or informal. A friend who refers to him as *John* as he greets him in the morning may later in the day call him *Professor Smith* when introducing him at a university seminar. Different lexical forms will be chosen to indicate SITUATIONAL MEANING.

A text may be completely unintelligible to someone who does not know the culture in which the language is spoken because there is so much SITUATIONAL MEANING. When translating into another language the original SITUATIONAL MEANING may need to be included in a more overt form if the same total meaning is to be communicated to the readers.
The range of implications for translation which grow out of these three kinds of meaning will be discussed in detail throughout the remaining chapters. However, there is one matter which is very basic to translating and is directly related to these three kinds of meaning; that is, the fact that in every text there is meaning which is expressed explicitly and there is meaning which is left implicit. The translator must be aware of these two kinds of information. There is explicit and implicit information communicating all three kinds of meaning.

Implicit and explicit information

As stated above, the translator must be aware of the implicit and explicit information which is being communicated. When people speak or write, the amount of information included in the text will depend on the amount of shared information that already exists between the speaker (writer) and the addressee. When we talk about something, we leave out some of the information because the addressee already knows these facts and might even be insulted if they were included. It might imply that they were stupid or uninformed. And so in every communication, some information which is being communicated is left implicit in conversation or written text.

For example, news broadcasters in the United States will make statements like, "The Reagan tax bill passed in the Senate today." If the announcer said, "The tax bill proposed by the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, was passed in the Senate of the United States today," people would soon stop listening to this announcer. He is wasting their time telling them things they know. It is shared information.

All communication is based on shared information. It may include shared language structures, culture, previous conversations having read the same material, a common experience, etc. In every text that one may want to translate, there will be information which is implicit; that is, it is not stated in an explicit form in the text itself. Some information, or meaning, is left implicit because of the structure of the source language; some because it has already been included elsewhere in the text, and some because of shared information in the communication situation. However, the implicit information is part of the meaning which is to be communicated by the translation, because it is part of the meaning intended to be understood by the original writer.

Explicit information, then, is the information which is overtly stated by lexical items and grammatical forms. It is a part of the surface structure form. The implicit information is that for which there is no form but the information is part of the total communication intended or assumed by the writer.

There may be implicit information which is REFERENTIAL, ORGANIZATIONAL, and/or SITUATIONAL. That is, all three kinds of meaning may be either explicit or implicit.
Implicit referential meaning

In any text, the reference to certain THINGS, EVENTS, ATTRIBUTES, and RELATIONS will be left **implicit**. The meaning is there but not expressed **explicitly**. For example, if someone asks, "How many people came?" the person asked may answer, "Ten." In this context it is clear that "ten" means "Ten people came." The reference to people and came is left **implicit** in the answer.

All languages have grammatical forms which are obligatory, but languages differ in what is obligatory. For example, in English, it is obligatory to make **explicit** whether a noun is singular or plural. One cannot say, "I saw dog walking down street." One must say, "I saw some dogs walking down the street," or "I saw a dog walking down the street." Number must be made **explicit** in English, but in many languages it can be left **implicit**.

Nouns which refer to EVENTS contain **implicit** information. Since a noun form is used, there is no indication of who the **agent** and **affected** are. The sentence "Help will come," has no subject or object (the **agent** and **affected** are **implicit**), but in a language which uses verbs to describe this EVENT, the subject and object would need to be supplied; that is, a form something like the following: Someone will come and he/they will help us. No new REFERENTIAL MEANING has been added. The information has simply been made **explicit** rather than left **implicit**.

Pidgin (Papua New Guinea) has no difference in grammatical forms for masculine and feminine, but when translating from Pidgin into some languages of Papua New Guinea, it is obligatory to make this information **explicit**. To translate this same material into English, it would be obligatory to distinguish masculine, feminine, and neuter, even though the original text in Pidgin left this **implicit**.

Which referential meaning is **implicit** and which is **explicit** will depend on the individual language. Since languages differ greatly in this matter, many adjustments will need to be made in translation. These will be discussed in more detail later in the book.

The fact that some information is left **implicit** in certain grammatical constructions leads to ambiguities. For example, the shooting of the hunters is ambiguous in English. It has two different semantic structures. If the **implicit** information is made **explicit**, it may mean either someone shot the hunters or the hunters shot something. In one case, the **agent** is left **implicit**; in the other, the **affected**. In translating such ambiguous forms, the ambiguity is often resolved since the receptor language will make **explicit** the **implied** information. However, for translation, it is important to note that **implicit** information and ambiguity are sometimes related.
Implicit information and organizational meaning

A text is a unit. It is organized in some logical way. It is characterized by cohesion, continuity, grouping, and patterns of prominence. There is a flow of old and new information, redundancy which helps signal the unity, and various ways to indicate the topic or theme of the text, but languages differ in how these matters are indicated. One language may use pronominal forms a great deal and another may have an abundance of pro-verbal forms. One may have clear markers of which EVENTS make up the backbone of the story. Another may rely on chronological order.

In many languages, leaving some information implicit is one feature used to signal ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING. Part of the information which occurs in the semantic structure is left implicit in the grammar in order to indicate old information, in order to add cohesion, and, in some cases, even to mark theme or focus.

In the Hebrew, the description of creation in Genesis 1 uses the explicit name of God thirty-two times in this rather short text because God is the agent of the many actions described. But in other languages, God, once introduced at the beginning of the translation, would need to be left implicit throughout the rest of the story. Pronouns would be used in some languages to retain a part of the meaning, but in some languages only verb affixes indicating THIRD PERSON would occur. Some of the information would be left implicit in the sentences of this text in order to add cohesion to the story. No information is lost; it is simply made implicit. In translating from Hebrew into Aguaruna, for example, the equivalent form for God in Aguaruna would be made explicit only at the beginning when the agent is new information, and then, because it is old information, would not be repeated explicitly but would be left implicit throughout the rest of the text. If it were repeated explicitly again and again, the Aguaruna reader would be very confused and think there were many gods involved in creation rather than one.

Some languages use passive constructions to indicate focus. By using a passive construction, some of the meaning is left implicit since the agent need not be indicated. For example, the school was founded in 1902 might be used to put the school in focus, but to do this, the information of who founded the school has to be left implicit. The information left implicit is REFERENTIAL MEANING, but it is left implicit to signal ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING; that is, that school is in focus. The semantic proposition would be (someone) founded the school in 1902. In one language, focus is indicated by a passive grammatical form. In another language, a completely different form may be needed to indicate focus and the passive would not occur. In this case, the agent of the action would need to be made explicit. In Aguaruna, for example, it would need to be translated (the community) founded a school. The
ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING of focus would need to be indicated by a special suffix on the word *school* marking focus.

Less **explicit** forms are often used to signal ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING. For example, pronouns, pro-verbs, and other substitute words are less explicit than the nouns and verbs which they refer to. It is important that the translator be aware of the need to adjust these in translation. Some languages will require that the receptor language translation be **more explicit** than the source language. At other times, the translation may need to be **less explicit**. The translator expects to find differences between languages in the matter of how much information must be stated **explicitly**.

**Implicit situational meaning**

Information which is left implicit when talking to one person might be made **explicit** when talking to another. A woman might say to her husband, "*Peter is sick.*" In reporting the same information to the doctor she would say, "*My son Peter is sick,*" or "*My son is sick.*" The information *my son* was not needed to identify *Peter* when talking to her husband who knew very well who *Peter* was.

Often in normal conversation, there is much which is going on in the situation which makes it possible to understand exactly what is meant without using many words. For example, a mother, seeing her child about to put his hand in the fire, cries out, "*No!*" The child understands the message, "Don't put your hand in the fire!" All of this information is carried by one word, "*No,*" because of the situation. In a different situation "*No!*" might mean something very different, as when used to answer the question, "*Did you go to town today?*" In that case, the implied information is not found in the situation but in the question which had been asked; that is, in the linguistic context.

It is quite possible for a person from one culture to read a story written about a happening in another culture and not understand the story at all because so much information is left **implicit**. For example, Richards (1979), working with speakers of Waura (Brazil), was attempting to translate one of their stories into Portuguese. But she found it very difficult because the text itself did not identify the various participants in the story. The storyteller had not made this information **explicit** because everyone in the culture knew who did what at the festival he was describing. The language structure did not make it necessary to include this information, and since the common culture supplied it to his audience, it was left **implicit**. However, a translation to Portuguese required that the information be made **explicit** if the story was to be understood. In order to adequately determine the meaning of the text, one must know the situational setting of the communication.
One of the challenges facing a translator is knowing when to supply the information which is implicit in the text. The author may have written for people with the _same_ culture and same experiences as his. But the translator or those whom he would like: to read his translation, may not have this background and may not know much of this implied information. They may not be able to understand his translation unless he makes some of this implicit information from the communication situation explicit.

As will be discussed in much more detail later, the translator does not want to add information which is not part of the text he is translating. There is difference between implicit information and information which is simply absent and never intended to be part of the communication. For instance, in the example "My son Peter is sick," the mother did not say, "Peter has brown hair and is ten years old." This is not implied. It is absent. It is not part of the communication and, therefore, should not be added.

If a person wrote, John made the Queen's list, he is assuming that the readers know that the Queen of England is indicated. However, for an audience that did not know this fact and had never heard of the Queen, much less her list, the implied information would need to be added. It is not absent, it is implied, and part of the communication situation. The translation may have to be so explicit as to state, John made the Queen of England's yearly Honors list. Implicit information needs to be added only when it is necessary to communicate correct meaning or to insure naturalness of form in the receptor language translation. It will sometimes need to be made explicit because the source language writer and his audience shared information which is not shared by the receptor language audience.

**EXERCISES-Implicit Meaning**

A. Identify and make explicit any implicit THINGS or EVENTS in the following:

Example: After counting the books, Peter said "There are 57."

*Books* is left implicit in the quotation.

After counting the books, Peter said, "There are 57 books."

1. Forgiveness was difficult for some people.

2. The people of Nigeria are hard workers.
3. It is a country where there are vineyards to give wine and gram for making bread,

4. Testing has been going on at depths of more than 18,000 feet.

5. Women generally get up well before dawn and long before their husbands to relight the fire and begin making breakfast.

B. In the following, a proposition, or part of a proposition, is left implicit. Identify and make explicit the implicit proposition. (See chapter 3 for a definition.)

Example: The next day John decided to go to town. He saw the judge and had the matter taken care of.

Implicit information: *John went to town, he arrived in town.*

The text says that "he decided to" but does not say that he actually did so.

1. The King summoned his wise men and asked them to interpret his dream.

2. But I never did have to chop it with an axe because I had brothers; I only had to use a long knife.

3. Then my mother told me to make myself a little head covering, that she would show me how.

4. No time. Let's handle it with a telephone call.

5. I didn't teach after all because Mr. Jones arrived.

C. The following paragraph is a rather literal translation from Baka (Sudan, data from Wanda Pace). The implicit organizational and situational information makes the paragraph difficult for a non-Baka speaker to understand. First the paragraph is given, then the added information as supplied by a Baka speaker is given. Rewrite the paragraph into English that will be easily understood by someone outside the Baka culture. Then translate this same paragraph into a second language which you speak.

When they have finished bride negotiations, they return home. Then they appoint a clay for them. Then they prepare themselves to go for marriage.

Added information: The negotiations are carried on by the suitor's relatives. This is done at the home of the bride. The bride's relatives are the ones who decide on the date for the marriage. However, it is the suitor's relatives who make the preparations for the marriage ceremonies.
D. The following story is a modified literal translation from Kalinga (Philippines). A person who does not know Kalinga culture would not understand the story. The words and phrases which are in italics contain **implied information**. At the end of the story, an explanation is given for each of these phrases. Study them carefully and then rewrite the story in good idiomatic English (or your mother-tongue).

**Kalinga Headhunting Story**

The people from upriver who came from Malaya, it is said, built their houses at the confluence where the river meets the *pool with no sides*. They were happy because they were free and they did not allow themselves to be conquered by their fellow-man for their men were very big, very strong, and very brave, and they were fearless warriors for whenever they went *headhunting* each one carried a *pot* and they went singing on their way. Whenever they arrived at the *entrance of the village*, when they *shouted*, the *shouts of the women* resounded in answer to the *men's shouts*. So then nothing could be heard for the drums *um-um-um-ed* and there was no *cutting off of it*. But the *changed ones* who lived around them went and had them captured by the *red-eyed ones* for they hindered their work whenever their headhunting instinct came. So then the *whites* arrived firing their guns and the upriver people were terrified, for they just stood there staring and easily captured the *ones with patterned clothes* for they were their fearless warriors.

**Notes**

*the pool with no sides:* the ocean  
*headhunting:* the act of killing one's enemy and then removing the head and preserving it as a trophy.  
*pot:* the pot which they use to shrink heads in, taken along on the raid so they can prepare the heads before returning to the village
entrance of the village: refers to their own village at the entrance of
which there is a split bamboo pole with a cup on it where the
guardian spirit of the village lives. (Notice that the whole raid is left
implicit, the story tells how they left to go on the raid and then what
happened when they came back to their village.)

shouted: indicates victory or they would not have shouted

shouts of the women: who were left in the village when the men went on
the raid, shouting to answer the men's shouts of victory

um-um-um-ed: the sound of the drum which indicates victory

cutting off of it: went on without stopping

changed ones: Kalinga who lived in the lowlands and had taken on
European customs

red-eyed ones: white people

they: warring Kalinga

their: lowlanders who had taken on European customs.

whites: white people

for: this was evident because...

ones with patterned clothes: the warriors who had killed many people.
Each time they killed someone another tattoo was made adding to the
pattern of tattoos on their bodies.