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Issues of abstracting

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Abstract

The text deals with the term of “abstract”, its main functions and types. The author defines a logical summarization of a text. Three main types of narration in an abstract are revealed: extracting, paraphrasing and interpretation. Stages of the process of working with the source text are discussed.

Key words: abstract, abstracting, logical summarization, extracting, paraphrasing, interpretation, coherence

The term “abstract” first appeared in Russia in “Dictionary for Reference in All the Subject Areas” by F.G. Toll, published in 1864, where it was defined as “reference, commercial note, brief presentation”.

Abstract is a semantically relevant narration of a main content of a source document, which is characterised by economical usage of signs, constancy of linguistic and structural characteristics and aimed at performing different informative and communicative functions in the system of a scientific communication.

The basis of abstracting is a compression of semantic and linguistic aspects of the source text based on its global understanding and rearranging the material of the study. Being the most economical way of getting acquainted with the source text, an abstract should present all the crucial points of the text and emphasize the author’s main idea.

The main functions of abstracts are the following: informative, search, reference, indicative, address and signal ones. As the abstract is a concise narration of the source document main idea, its main task is to convey the fact-based information. Thus, informative function is the most crucial one and is a distinctive feature of an abstract. As a mean of conveying information, abstract may frequently substitute reading of a source document. This leads to a search function of an abstract along with a reference one, because the information extracted from an abstract is often of a reference value. An abstract should characterise the source text not only in the light of its contents but also descriptively. Some additional characteristics of a source material are usually provided: its type (a book, an article), illustrations etc. Sometimes abstract is only the name of the material and sheer enumeration of certain points of the contents. This is another characteristic of an abstract, which is usually called an indicativity. An accurate reference link to a source document enables an abstract to perform an address function, the lack of which makes the information document search pointless. Signal function is performed when the author of the abstract provides operative information on plans for publishing literature and on existing but unpublished works.

Based on coverage of sources abstracts can be monographic, composed from one source, consolidating, composed from several sources bound with the same topic, and synoptical, composed from many sources on the certain topic. Synoptical abstracts do not enclose the content of every single source, they provide instead a common result of surveying all the sources at once.

The process of identifying the main logical points, bearing the maximum of information and rearranging the material is called a logical summarization of a text.

Logical summarization of a text serves the following aims during foreign language teaching:

- natural control by means of retelling the read material;

- developing foreign speech skills during the reproduction of understood material;
- teaching the methods of better orientation in the text and faster logical points identification, which leads to improved clever reading skills;
- preparing future specialists for abstracting the special literature;
- developing summary translation skills.

There are three main types of narration in an abstract:

1) Extracting is conveying the information from a source text in an abstract. This method is quite simple: abstracter marks the sentences that will be, without any change or slightly changed, transferred into the abstract. From the way this abstract looks it may be difficult to differ it from the abstracts created with the help of other methods. 2) Paraphrasing is the most common way of abstracting. One deals with a partial textual match with an original text here. Paraphrasing implies omitting the large part of the source text information and rebuilding its semantic and syntactical structure. Rebuilding of the text is performed through such operations as substitution (one pieces are substituted with the others), combining (several sentences are combined in one) and generalisation. 3) Interpretation is a method of abstracting through which the content of the source text may be narrated in the same sequence or based on the generalised impression of the text. The examples are: abstracts of theses, notes from scientific conferences and meetings.

Informational capacity of a summary translation is of great importance. The abstract shall never be replaced with an extended reference as it often happens with abstracting of foreign sources. One shall render not only the contents of a work but also the essence of source's main ideas, methods, results, recommendations and proposals. That's why a translator shall be a decent expert in the field of study and shall be able to single out the most informative elements of the text.

The process of working with the source text is divided into several stages:

1. Inspectional (guiding; directing) reading, which results in a decision over a feasibility of abstracting a foreign material. The translator looks through the heading, introduction, table of contents, conclusions, and summary. Then he fluently reads the text and defines a scientific and technical value and information novelty of the source text. Keywords in the heading, introduction, table of contents, and conclusions create a meaningful orientation that later serves to boost a process of understanding a text. 2. Choosing encyclopaedias, special dictionaries, reference and special literature that may help a translator in his further processing of a text.

3. Analysis of a source text type and choosing the narration aspect scheme in a future abstract (the general plan of narration, the plan of narration of the specific technique for abstracting etc.).

4. Reading for details. A translator here doesn't make a full written translation of a text. The mental decoding of a foreign text occurs in a field of abstracting analysis. The need for singling out the aspects denoted in a plan of narration boosts the mental activity of an abstractor and gives it a search-like nature.

5. Dividing a text into aspectual units (marking the text with marks that are convenient for the translator).

6. Construction (synthesis) of new utterances in the mother tongue, which render, in short laconic form, the main semantic content in every aspect.

7. Writing down the fragments of a translation, which are obtained through the abovementioned activities in a sequence predetermined with a plan of narration.

8. Critical comparison of the source text and abstract from the point of view of a reader and applying, if necessary, corrections and additions to the abstract.

9. Arrangement and editing, which requires a translator to stick to a wide-spread structure consisting of three elements:

- the heading part (reference to a source text);
- abstract proper, rendering the main logical content of a source text;

- reference section (index, classification code, list of tables, drawings, schemes, figures etc., translator's footnotes, his/her surname or the name of an institution which did a translation).

Coherence is one of the most important features of a text. It is achieved through correlation, which is a replication of one or more language units. The simplest example of correlation is a logical relation of minimum of two words that make up a correlation pair. The subsequent word refers to the previous one. This may include personal, demonstrative, possessive, and relative pronouns. It is natural for any text that some words or phrases are repeated. Consequent lexical repetition of a word or phrase makes it a thematic basis of a paragraph. Unlike the fiction, which prohibits the use of repetitions, scientific text deals with repetition of thematic terms.