

Paraphrasing

In brief



SPA Paráfrasis POL Parafraza

◀ origins

According to the [Online Etymology Dictionary](#), the noun *paraphrase*, meaning ‘a restatement of a text or passage, giving the sense of the original in other words, often in fuller terms and greater detail’, comes from the ancient Greek *paraphrazein* where *para-* expresses modification and *phrazein* expresses the verb ‘to tell’. The noun *paraphrase* entered the English language via Latin in the mid 16th century and retained its original form over centuries. According to the same dictionary the verb *to paraphrase* means ‘to restate, interpret, express the meaning of in other words’.

◀ other names

Rewording, reformulation, intralingual translation.

 abstract

Paraphrasing, defined as an alternative way to convey the same information, is a broad and vague phenomenon. The reformulation or rewording can involve modifications ranging from shallow surface restructuring to deep manipulation of the original content. This can be done for various reasons—for example, to avoid verbatim repetition and direct citation, to adjust the content for a better effect on the reader/receiver, to simplify or shorten the original text, to adapt or “translate” the meaning for a different purpose and/or to create a completely new text tailor-made for a different reader than the one intended by the original author. Vila, Martí & Rodríguez ([2014](#): 213) conclude that “given the vague and multifaceted nature of paraphrasing [...], paraphrase boundaries are not fixed and depend on the task and objective”. In other words, paraphrasing can range from the reformulation of meaning by using a synonym or an alternative syntactic structure to creating a new text, i.e., intralingual translation. Paraphrasing works on linguistic forms and meaning, so its family resemblance to intralingual and interlingual translation in terms of cognitive processing and communicative function seems justifiable. The multifaceted nature of paraphrasing as a broad cognitive phenomenon makes it an interesting area of study for many language-related disciplines including [communication studies](#), foreign language teaching, [computational linguistics](#) and Translation Studies.

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Entry



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Introduction

According to the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#), paraphrasing and translation are seen as “activities of mediation [which] make communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly” (2001: 14). Vila, Martí & Rodríguez (2014) state that there is no precise and commonly accepted definition of paraphrasing. The authors point out that paraphrasing is a broad and multifaceted phenomenon, vaguely described in linguistics as alternative ways to convey the same information, or approximately the same meaning using different wording. Rinaldi, Dowdall, Kaljur *et al.* (2003) view paraphrases as linguistic units which map onto the same conceptual (i.e., logical) representation. This can be achieved by structural

reorganization or/and by substituting synonyms, involving only surface level changes or deep reformulations. Bhagat & Hovy ([2013](#): 470) enumerate 25 operations which generate approximately equivalent meaning (quasi-paraphrases).

Since paraphrasing means expressing the same or similar meaning in different forms, it bears a family resemblance to the cognitive operations performed when translating, both interlingually and intralingually. The generic ability to reformulate meaning underlies the human ability to translate (Muñoz [2011](#); Whyatt 2012; Harris 2017).

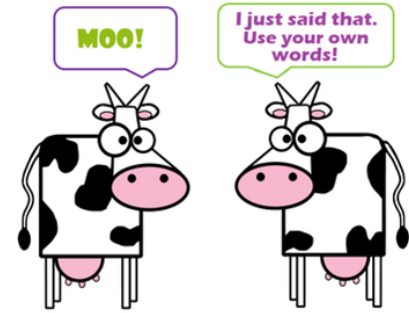
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The ubiquitous nature of paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a fundamental human cognitive ability that we all use to process information and facilitate communication. Rephrasing the same information in different words, using synonyms, etc., is a part of every language user's experience. Possibly motivated by pragmatic factors, including the context of the communicative exchange and the participants, we adjust and reshape the way we want to communicate something many times each day depending on who we address and to what purpose. In this respect, the ability to paraphrase is a language subskill which in many cases can be applied locally, for example to prevent a breakdown of communication. Paraphrasing as a skilful manipulation of linguistic forms can make inaccessible texts reader friendly by making their informative content accessible to the reader. It can be used to increase or soften the effect of what is being communicated on the reader or the listener. Paraphrasing helps to play with style and distance, choosing to be formal, neutral or friendly when communicating the same information.

The ability to reformulate meaning plays an important role in knowledge acquisition. At

school, children are encouraged to express and describe complex concepts and processes in their own words and their knowledge is tested on the basis of how they can paraphrase their understanding of textual material.



Paraphrasing is a universal feature of communication. [Source]

Paraphrasing or rewording has been very highly valued in foreign language teaching and learning. Harmer (2007: 382) noted that rewriting sentences, transformations, lexical substitutions and circumlocutions are tasks which are very beneficial for language learners. Paraphrasing tasks are therefore frequently used in language testing to see whether learners can express the same or similar content using different words and structures. In oral exams the ability to reformulate ideas is valued as a “repair strategy” to help the learner avoid a breakdown of communication and show sensitivity to the situational context. Furthermore, Newfields (2001: 6) observes that the skill of summary writing frequently practiced in a foreign language classroom also relies on the learner’s ability to paraphrase information, which later has to be structured according to the needs of the reader without using the wording of the original text. In advanced writing courses, paraphrasing is used at the stage of revision when the writer tries to improve the communicative quality of the text. In academic writing, the need to interpret scientific texts and comment on their content employs the ability to paraphrase by dynamic manipulations of forms while making sure that the essential sense remains equivalent to the original text. Because paraphrasing operates on forms and meaning, it is of key interest to the cognitive study of communicative mediation via translation, both intralingual and interlingual. Yet, its relevance has rarely been explicitly discussed in Translation Studies (Whyatt 2012: 2017).

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¶ Paraphrasing as intralingual translation

Intralingual translation (or *rewording*) is one of the three kinds of translation distinguished by Roman Jakobson in his 1959 article “On linguistic aspects of translation”. It refers to situations where the meaning of verbal signs is interpreted “by means of other signs of the same language” (Jakobson [1959](#): 114). Intralingual translation involves the same process of meaning interpretation and reformulation as (intralingual) paraphrasing and a similar aim, which is to express the equivalent meaning in different linguistic forms (wording), frequently for a different purpose and a different receiver. Intralingual processing of meaning is operationally similar to *interlingual translation* (translation proper) For obvious reasons, it is interlingual translation as the prototypical kind of linguistic mediation across language barriers that has attracted most attention from translation scholars, but intralingual translation has started to claim its place in translation studies (TS) (Zethsen [2007](#), [2009](#); Schmid 2008) and in the cognitively oriented TS (Whyatt 2017).

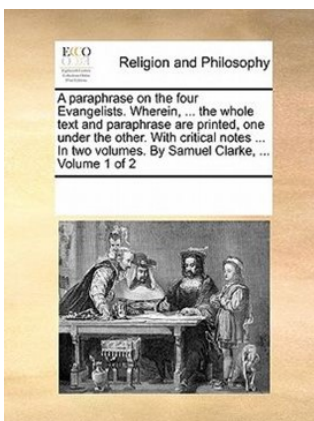
Zethsen ([2007](#), [2009](#)) is one of few scholars who acknowledged the peripheral position of intralingual translation and campaigned for including intralingual translation as a legitimate object of study in TS. It was also Zethsen ([2009](#): 805) who pointed out four factors which justify the need for intralingual translation to render the content accessible to users of the same language. These include: (1) knowledge barriers (lack of expertise to understand specialized discourse, e.g., a scientific paper rewritten to be published in a popular science journal, or a legal document paraphrased into [plain language](#); 2) passage of time, e.g., the need to update canonical texts (Stanton 2002) or aging classics (Delabastita 2009); (3) cultural differences in the frame of reference needed to understand a text

(Whitehead 1997); (4) constraints of space (abridged versions of books). Further examples of intralingual translation that apply the ability to paraphrase, reformulate, condense the meaning and create an equivalent effect on the reader/receiver come from audiovisual translation. To make AVT products accessible to all viewers, intralingual translation is done across modalities. For example, in subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) and in re-speaking, what is spoken must be paraphrased, combined with essential paralinguistic information and sound effects, and converted into text. In Audio Description (AD) the visually inaccessible information must be converted into aural text and blended with the dialogues so that the visually impaired audience can receive information via the aural channel (Díaz, Orero & Remael 2007).

All in all, intralingual translation and the strategy of paraphrasing rely on the principle of unlimited semiosis (Eco & Nergaard 2001: 219) according to which the meaning of linguistic signs is revealed when it is being translated or interpreted by another sign (Peirce's *interpretant*). Cognitively, paraphrasing shares the same processing stages as translation. First the meaning has to be interpreted, processed, and then re-expressed in a different form.

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¶ Paraphrasing as a translation strategy



Dryden as early as in 1680 saw *paraphrase* as a good way of translating sense-for sense in contrast to *metaphrase*—word-for-word literal translation, or *imitation*—which runs the risk of abandoning (or moving away from) the original text altogether (Munday 2005: 25). Since formal equivalence of meaning cannot be attained and dynamic

Paraphrasing is an equivalence assumes the necessary adaptation to *ancient translation* the expectations of a different target reader (Nida *practice*. 1964), successful translation is a kind of interlingual paraphrasing. As pointed out by Baker (1992: 41), “[the] main advantage of the paraphrase strategy is that it achieves a high level of precision in specifying propositional meaning”. Kussmaul (1995: 28) observed that the most creative solutions to translation problems observed in think aloud protocols surfaced when the translation trainees were paraphrasing the source text. He also suggests that “the phase of understanding the source text is linked up with the phase of producing the translation via paraphrasing” (Kussmaul 1995: 31). Paraphrasing as an effective strategy is frequently mentioned when studying interpreters. Seleskovitch (1976:103) noted that, when experiencing difficulty with access to target language equivalents, interpreters resort to paraphrasing the speaker’s words.

Some TS scholars attract attention to the fact that interlingual translation involves a lot of intralingual work. Translation process research using keylogging and eye-tracking has revealed how translators reformulate and self-revise the target text either by performing online revision or at the stage of end revision (Jakobsen 2017) and editing. The skill of paraphrasing the informative content and tailoring the text to the needs and expectations of the new reader is also needed when post-editing Machine Translation output. Pym (2013: 490) predicts that in highly technologised translation practice intralingual work will become prevalent since most of interlingual transfer will be handled by Machine Translation systems. Whyatt & Naranowicz (2020) reported evidence showing that translators transfer their metacognitive skills of planning, self-monitoring and self-revision to intralingual paraphrasing but the transfer is more effective once a certain level of expertise has been attained. Zethsen (2009)

also pointed out that translators are well prepared to adapt texts intralingually.

In the context of Machine Translation, paraphrasing the input text is done to maximize the chances for better matches at the stage of interlingual transfer (Barreiro 2010). Pre-editing texts for translation via paraphrasing content is also part of the workflow when EU translators translate documents.

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Research potential

The question where the scientific inquiry into paraphrasing as a process of reformulation of meaning belongs to is not easy to answer. As expounded in the previous sections, its ubiquitous nature makes it of interest to many disciplines which are related to language and interested in effective communication. Translation Studies have taken for granted that meaning is paraphrased and reformulated in another language to enable communication. It has been only recently acknowledged that a similar reformulation of meaning might be needed to lift communication barriers within the same language. Paraphrasing is of interest in communication studies and has been explored in the context of expert to lay-person communication. Wolfer, Hansen-Morath & Konieczny (2015: 263) investigated the linguistic inaccessibility of jurisdictional texts in German and found that their complex syntax with multiple embeddings, unfamiliar words and numerous discursive elements “stands in contrast to the highly relevant function the jurisdictional system fulfils in modern democracies”. The authors used eye-tracking to test whether splitting complex sentences would reduce the cognitive effort of the reader and concluded that it would be much better if such texts were originally written in a clear reader-friendly manner. Similar criticism of

needless complexity and uncalled for specialized jargon was pointed out by Simonsen ([2014](#): 3), who investigated syntactic ambiguity caused by *dangling modifiers* in technical manuals and patient information leaflets (PILs). Schmid (2008: 71) and Zethsen ([2009](#): 806) pointed out that if publicly available texts are meant for a wider readership, they should be reformulated in plain language because the general public cannot be expected to have the knowledge of an expert in the domain.

Paraphrasing is a valued skill in education and language learning, and, of course, in translator and interpreting training. Whyatt, Stachowiak & Kajzer-Wietrzny (2016) used translation process research (TPR) methodology in a large scale [ParaTrans project](#) and pointed out the processing similarities and differences between cognitive effort in interlingual translation and intralingual paraphrasing. The results showed that interlingual translation is cognitively far more taxing because of the need to switch languages, but it relies on the same ability to reformulate meaning as intralingual paraphrasing (see also Whyatt [2018](#)).

Additionally, computational linguists have shown increasing interest in paraphrasing. For example, Vila, Martí & Rodríguez ([2014](#)) demonstrated that computer systems find it difficult to detect plagiarized content when deep level paraphrasing has been carried out.

Theoretical reflection about the human ability to reformulate meaning raises fundamental issues about the symbolic and flexible nature of human language and the ways meaning is made in the minds of language users. The research potential of paraphrasing as a user-friendly cognitive skill is indeed huge.

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Credits



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