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Measuring Comprehensibility in Specialized Communication: Methodological Considerations

LSP texts have often been criticized for being hard to understand. This criticism, however, is frequently based on individual and subjective impressions only, sometimes by people who do not belong to the audience for which the text criticized had been written originally. In many cases, criticism is not accompanied by suggestions on how the text criticized can be optimized, and if such suggestions are made, empirical evidence which proves that the measures suggested really make the text more comprehensible is missing.

In my paper, I will review the methods used in reading comprehension and comprehensibility research so far. For this review, I will start from the classification provided by Schriver (1989), who distinguishes between "text-focused methods," "expert-judgement-focused methods," and "reader-focused methods".

Since reader-focused methods (or, to more precise, target-group-focused methods) provide the most reliable results, I will concentrate on them, especially on the method of optimizing reverbalization with thinking-aloud, key-logging, and eye-tracking. Special emphasis will be placed on the optimization of the research design and the selection of subjects. Since text optimization using thinking-aloud is an enormously time-consuming and work-intensive method, the question will answered whether there are more efficient methods which provide results of similar validity, such as for example, eye-tracking during reading processes alone.

Finally, the effect of translators' source-text comprehension on the comprehensibility of their translations will be discussed. This question is addressed in a longitudinal study on the development of translation competence, which starts from the hypothesis that, with increasing translation competence, a translator's cognitive efforts shift from target-text production processes to source-text comprehension processes thereby facilitating target-text production and leading to more comprehensible translation results.