

Cultural-Oriented Translation: Setting Priorities

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Abstract:

Translation seems to be considered as a variable concept in space and time, thus, searching for the very object of inquiry of translation studies may appear as a risky venture. In this sense, scholars have repeatedly pointed out the fundamental weaknesses of any translation theory which fails to take into account the cultural encounters, which may result the possibilities of translating the object of study unlimitedly. Based on the assumption that translators seem to be unaware of the potential influence translations can have in shaping cultures, forming national identities, and chronicling ideological shifts, the present paper maps an intercultural outlook to translation teaching, i.e., it tries to bridge the cultural gap in translation and cross out the possible barriers that may cause mistranslation of information in the target culture, and thus, in the target language.

Key-words: Translation, cultural encounters, crossing barriers, bridging culture gaps.

Introduction

Within the context of globalization, the question of translation seems to be fundamental and has become a more prolific, more visible and more respectable activity

than perhaps ever before. It is to be recognized that problematic aspects of intercultural communication need to be considered in the context of cultural and linguistic barriers encountered in translations. In practice, translators need to know that translation depends on the purpose and how deep the source text is embedded into the culture. The deeper a text is embedded in its culture, the more challenging it is to work on.

It is argued that translating languages, whether in the multiculturalism of society or in the plurilingualism of the individual, does not exist in a vacuum. Thus, within any translation, culture is labelled. What interests me in this paper is not accomplishing only an ideal equivalence relation between the source text ST and its translation, but, among other things, the question of exploring cultural processes, i.e., being aware of culture-bound texts before rendering a text into another language.

The Importance of Culture in Translation

The notion of culture is essential in translating and, despite the differences in opinion as to whether language is part of culture or not, the two notions appear to be inseparable. In this context, Nida (1964:130) confers equal importance to both linguistic and cultural differences between the SL and the TL and concludes that “differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure”. These complications seem to be represented as misunderstandings which are said to derive from incompatibilities between languages. Yet, misunderstandings are not only the products of

linguistic incompatibilities per se but of cultural ones as well. Culture, then, involves the totality of attitudes towards the world, towards events, other cultures and peoples and the manner in which the attitudes are mediated.

Besides, acknowledged from language theories, languages are entire systems of meaning and consciousness that are not easily rendered into another language in a word-for-word equivalence, in other terms, the ways in which different languages convey views of the world are not equivalent. This may be due to the fact that the great cultural shifts from one civilization to another have been made possible thanks to the intercultural contacts and translation as well; this contact has meant a good deal of exchange, naturally through language.

However, while languages are generally prone to change over time whether phonologically, morphologically, syntactically or semantically, cultures do not change fast, and remain by and large prisoners of their very particular pasts. Thus, intercultural translation has the effect of not only breaking down hierarchies between cultures and peoples, but also giving rise to domination and resistance of cultures generating, therefore, the interplay of cross-cultural pride and prejudice.

If one looks at the conception of the close relationship between language and culture in translation studies, one would recognize a great deal of theories and arguments

calling for the treatment of translation as a primarily cultural act, i.e. putting culture at the heart of translation will in all probabilities result success in translation process.

Strangely enough, linguistic notions of transferring meaning seem to be viewed at the core of the translation process, however, when translating, it is important to consider not only the lexical impact on the TL reader, but also the manner in which cultural aspects may be perceived and make translating decisions accordingly, and this is clearly reflected when translating religious texts such as the Holy Qoran.

Therefore, translators are not just dealing with words written in a certain time, space and socio-political situation; most importantly it is the religious and cultural aspect of the text that they should take into account. At another layer, the process of transfer, i.e., re-coding across cultures, should consequently allocate corresponding attributes vis-à-vis the target culture to ensure credibility in the eyes of the target reader.

Culture-Oriented Translation Studies

By 1980, a gradual shift of emphasis began to be perceived in translation studies, attention was directed towards interdisciplinary and culturally-oriented translation. For instance, Hornby (1988:2-3) placed translation into a somewhat different field of disciplines, but she too emphasized the interdisciplinary approach: "translation studies, as a culturally-oriented subject, draws on a number of disciplines including psychology,..., ethnology,...and philosophy without

being a subdivision of any of them". Besides, opinions like these seem to reflect a general move away from separating ideas and concepts and bringing them together.

To further narrow the scope, a leading cross-cultural psychologist, Richard Brislin (1999), has written extensively on guidelines for cross-cultural researchers. He has identified several types of equivalencies that researchers should establish, including translation equivalence and conceptual equivalence. For example, in cross-cultural studies, literal translations are inadequate. To establish translation equivalence, research materials should be translated several times, using different translators. In this line of thought, culture expresses its idiosyncrasies in a way that is 'culture-bound': cultural words, proverbs and of course idiomatic expressions, whose origin and use are intrinsically and uniquely bound to the culture concerned. Thus, translators are called upon to do a cross-cultural translation whose success will depend on our understanding of the culture we are working with.

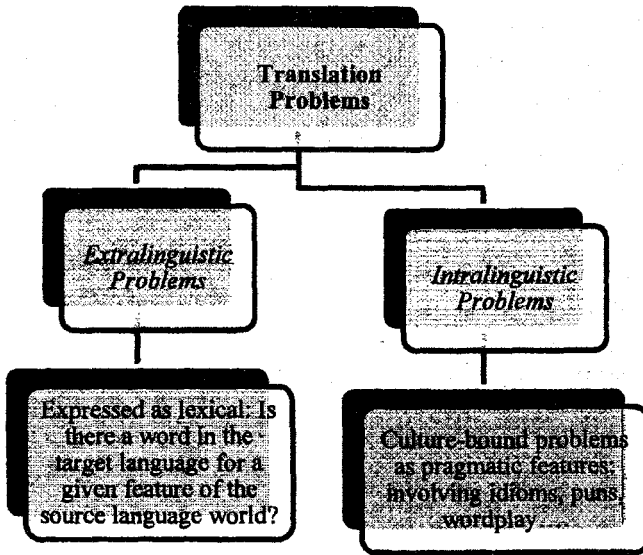
Traditionally, Translation studies have tended to emphasize issues of equivalency and accuracy. That is, the focus, largely from linguistics, has been on comparing the translated meaning with the original meaning. However, for those interested in the intercultural communication process, the emphasis is not so much on equivalence as on the bridges that people construct to cross from one language to another.

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For instance, imagine the following situation: A Canadian importer of Turkish shirts destined for Quebec used a dictionary to help him translate into French the label "Made in Turkey." His final translation was: "Fabriqué en Dinde." True, "dinde" means "turkey." But it refers to the bird, not the country, which in French is 'Turquie'. Thus, translation may create amusing and interesting intercultural barriers. To further exemplify the challenge, when the British say that they have a 'slight' problem, it denotes that it has to be taken seriously. There are numerous examples of misunderstandings between American English and British English, even though they are, at root, the same language. Hence, it is not sufficient to be able to translate, one have to understand the subtleties and connotations of the language.

Culture –Bound Translation Problems

Interest in intercultural translation problems arises from a recognition that culture-bound concepts, even where the two cultures are not too distant, can be more problematic for the translator than the semantic difficulties of a text. For instance, Leppihalme (1997:2-3) divided translation problems into two broad categories, namely extralinguistic and intralinguistic problems, they are explained as follows:



Therefore, culturally Oriented Translation studies do not see the source text ST and the target text TT as samples of linguistic material. The texts occur in a given culture in the world and each has a specific function and an audience of its own, i.e., translating a text needs to be treated from a helicopter; seeing first the cultural context, then the situational context and finally the text itself.

Conclusion

Translation is more than merely switching languages; it also involves negotiating cultures. Culture involves the totality of attitudes towards the world towards events, other cultures and peoples and the manner in which the attitudes are mediated. Debates about translation become volatile, charged and sensitive

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when the notions of culture and ideology – which are always there – are marked and discussed. These two notions remain open to many assessments, one of which is the radical relativism between languages and their respective cultures.

But since translation is one of the oldest occupations and/or practices, there is no escape from cultural loads that represent certain ethnic, linguistic and political groups which cross, violently or otherwise, into other ethnic, linguistic and political groups.

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