Semiotising the Translation of Political Discourse: Micro and Macro-Structures

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Résumé

The argument in this article goes that translation is a socio-ideological determined process of cross-cultural encounter of different languages, therefore different cultures and different social, political and moral systems. The prospect of a culturally determined view of language can be considerably useful to translators. It enables them to relate the mass of knowledge they possess under the heading of cultural studies to the text they are translating. Indeed, "cultures do not just predispose us to divide reality in different ways. They also predispose us to link different parts of reality in different ways." (Williams, 1992: 90). Our choice to study the political discourse and its translation from Arabic into English is made because of two main reasons; first, the role it attributes to language in the reconstruction of facts. News is most importantly a culturally shared language of meanings, values, codes and conventions by which readers assimilate the world (Hartley, 1982). The second reason relates to the politicized framework within which the translation of news discourse from English into Arabic operates.

Introduction

Human beings, Durkheim (1965) believes, often have an interest in policies that enables each one of us to share with others around us a set of social norms that give regularity and direction in their interaction. These 'policies' can be enacted through force at one extreme, which "signals weakness" and through speech at another extreme, which involves "a competitive exchange of signs through which values are shared

and assigned and coexistence attained" (Edelman, 1985:114). This accounts for the fact that the language of power has always been an area of interest and inquiry from the classical times of the Greeks to the present day. But probably one of the most vital characteristics of the language of power is that its social embedding usually passes un-noticed to the speaker himself, let alone the translator whose mother-tongue is often different from the source text.

In this respect, interest in the subject has been growing among academics who believe that "translation does not function only as an action to mediate and resolve conflict but rather as a space where tensions are signalled and power struggles are played out" (House, 2014:5). Most academics place the account of power as a social and ideological phenomenon within the framework of a general semiotic theory, which is the proper intellectual context for the analysis and translation of the discourse of power.

1. Power, Semiotics and Translation

Having a basis in semiotic theory, this research will seek to understand the relation of domination/subordination manipulated by the individual producer of discourse through intentional ideology. It should be emphasised, however, that agents of power are themselves subject to a cluster of myths and rituals such as laws, public image, ethics and tradition that are collectively constructed. Thus, power is not merely an intentional activity of the individual but also a structural property of the collectivity, or to put simply, "a feature of social structure" (Davies and Leijenaar, 1991:8).

The impressions a text produces cannot be considered solely in relation to their apparent makers who may actually constitute just part of these impressions. We are, in this respect, de-

emphasizing the hermeneutic claim that locates meaning primarily with the encoder of the text. The writer is not always responsible for all the effects that their writing might generate on the reader. Even intentional effect to influence others often produce unintended as well as intended ones. Hence the simplistic notion defining power as "a locus of will, a supreme agency to which other wills would bend, as prohibitive" (Mumby, 1993:25) is limited in scope and cannot provide a thorough account of 'what's really going on'. In fact, what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply because it does not only weigh on us as a force that says "No", but it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse (Foucault 1980:119).

From a semiotic perspective, power does not reside solely in structure but also in other discourses such as language. Power is not just a relation between people but a relation between texts and meanings that often passes over unnoticed and is scarcely perceived by the parties involved (Fairclough, Analysing Discourse 2003). Such a relation usually takes the form of 'common sense' assumptions that are actually ideologies seeking to legitimize existing power relations (Fairclough, 2001). Thus, power most often obtains through the ideological workings of language. Consideration of the ideological import is then of paramount importance to the translator of political texts. Translation must be read as "records of cultural contestations and ideological struggles, rather than as simple linguistic transpositions or literary creations" (Tymoczko, 2006:443). Indeed, political texts are often a fertile ground for social struggle embedding; thus, reflecting the ideological force of words/power is an inescapable duty for the translator (Hatim and Mason, 1990:161). As any semiotic sign, power is not a unitary set of

meanings but can only exist through the signifying systems that constitute it; in short, it is an effect of discourse. However, It is crucial to understand that power is one thing while translating it is another.

Translation theorists have held differing views on the possibilities and impossibilities of translation or, to put it in other words, whether untranslatability is intrinsically linguistic or it relates to the competence of the translator. In fact, though failure of political translation may be affected to some extent by the general linguistic boundaries between the two languages, it is in the end, as Newmark (1991: 146) puts it, due to 'political reasons'. In other words, the difficulty of political translation lies in the political code itself. Participants in a political situation, usually more than any other, are most often involved in a struggle of interests (power) which makes the political jargon potent with ideological forms that seek to claim, conceal or gain power. These usually take the form of 'innocent' denotatives which the translator as an investigator has to question and uncover the 'truth'. Evidently, the translator is presupposed to be, first and foremost, a good language analyst in his mother tongue (Cronin, 2013:114).

Nevertheless, the translator's required competencies do not end here. There are scholars who master their subject to a great perfection but fail to transfer the target knowledge to their students. "Effective instruction", Slavin rightly argues, "is not a simple matter of one person with more knowledge transmitting that knowledge to another... Rather, effective instruction demands the use of many strategies" (2006 : 4). The same goes for translation. Translators can interact perfectly with the original text but may not be able to transmit the message adequately to the foreign reader. Hence, not only the mastery of the target-language is equally important, but also

the strategies to do so. As in a teaching situation, there are no one-fit-for all strategy or set of strategies in translation. The translators' strategies will depend on how they contend with questions such as: How can they deal with cultural differences inherent in or by languages? How can they limit the plurality of meaning of political signs, which are usually ideologically motivated ? How can they harmonize intrinsically conflicting ideologies between source and target language? These are some questions that fall within the larger context of political and more precisely 'power' translation, which this paper attempts to answer. However, to develop a reading of this type of discourse, we need to identify the appropriate tool, first, to understand the way power operates in social life and determines social meaning, and, second, to translate into the target language.

Assuming that power is a social meaning and its translation involves the transfer of this meaning; they both, as two aspects of meaning, can be subsumed under semiotics as the study of meaning systems. It follows that translation is not a mere transference of the meaning of linguistic elements from one language into another but involves a complex system of linguistic and extra- linguistic signs. Representation of meanings of one cultural system into another cannot arise entirely from the source text material base but only in and with reference to the general social world. And since semiotics concerns "the study of signs in their natural habitat, which is society (Hatim and Mason, 1990:67), translation can be then considered as a discipline within semiotics.

Within this theoretical framework, the function of signs is to communicate ideas. They are usually marked by the intention to be meaningful, and gain their meaning, according to Saussure (1916/1959), from being a composite of two inter-

related parts: 'signifier' and 'signified'. Once embarked on the context, the signifier becomes a "configuration of roles and functions" (Halliday, 1978:45). Producers of political texts most often aim to establish, maintain or influence social order and select the appropriate lexical items and grammatical structures to serve those goals.

In theory, each signifier should have only one signified and vice versa (monosyllabic meaning). This is may be the case in technical codes. In a political code, on the other hand, a signifier can refer to several ***signifieds*** just as a signified can refer to different signifiers. A political text would involve many poetic associations because of the linguistic and connotative variation that abounds in political codes. To achieve their functions, these variations build on both (i) micro and macro structures of the text. Microstructures represent the way syntactic and semantic devices are manipulated to orient the reader towards a certain interpretation of 'reality'. Macrostructures, on the other hand, are concerned with how these mechanics of text are coded into a coherent network based on the target reader's prior experience and knowledge.

2. Microstructure Level of Discourse

Research into analysis and translation of text over the last decades has produced a conceptualization of text understanding as a complex and dynamic process by which readers make a coherent representation of the meaning. In all cases, however, it has to start with understanding the propositional representation of the information expressed in a text via its words (semantics) and the way they are arranged (syntax), a process we will refer to, following van Dijk, and Kintsch (1983), as the microstructure of discourse. One of the most important aspects of microstructure analysis is that it allows us

to approach a text's individual components without neglecting the broader context (macrostructure). In other words, connections between words and sentences at this structural level become the basis for the understanding of the general meaning of the discourse.

2.1 The Syntactic Level

The structure of a text, by dint of the social conditions of its production and reception, embodies a system of values and beliefs. Each society sets up its own rules according to which statements are appropriated and interpreted. This is to say, each different way of using language has a specific purpose. The choice of one way linguistic structure over another is motivated by the specific purpose it intends to achieve. In other words, the way we arrange the language we use is ideologically motivated. Linguistic forms can convey significance, allow just a particular part of it, or even distort it. The way information is structured, referred to by Fairclough, as classification schemes, represents the author's particular ideological organisation of the reality which serves as an institutional discourse to (de) legitimize a social order. Take for instance, the official motto of the Kingdom of Morocco:

(1) الله الوطن الملك

(1a) Allah, The Nation, The King

Classification schemes of the Motto reflect a certain ideological reality and any alteration in the phrasal order will thoroughly change the pragmatic meaning. The significance of that positioning stems from its being symbolical of a conduct that gives absolute priority to Islamic faith, then to the Nation, then to the King down a scale of priorities. The point here is that the reader, the analyst or the translator should be careful in

dealing with the word or phrase order to preserve the originally intended meaning. Changing the word order in the present example would bring about, for instance, a translation as:

(1b) The King, Allah, The Nation

Islam being the official state religion in Morocco, we can easily note how the meaning has been transformed from one extreme to another. From an Islamic perspective, it has changed from a positive attribute where the realisation of the supremacy of Allah is essential in the Muslim faith, to a negative one where this supremacy is implicitly denied.

Language is not then merely a means of communication. It is an instrument of power for a party with greater potential to influence the behaviour of the other party. On the surface, the positioning of 'Allah' and 'Nation' prior to 'King' in the motto is used indicate the hierarchy in the source of authority. In reality, both terms function as consolidators of power. 'Allah' refers to the spiritual force which, in the context of Morocco, can only be preserved by 'the protector of His faith' and enactor of His Will'. As commander of the faithful, the King assumes this responsibility. The same goes for the term 'Nation'. As head of state, the King undertakes the task of representing the nation. Even more importantly, the structuring of the motto indicates that the King derives his authority from both religion (Allah) and from the people (nation), thus giving his rule legitimacy at both levels. In fact, the King becomes a locus of confluence of the sacral and the secular.

Passivisation is another example of the manipulation of syntactic style to convey underlying meanings in sentence structure. Active sentences place responsibility of the action with the topical syntactic subjects, whereas passive sentences focus more on the circumstances of the event and the other

party involved (Van Dijk, 1997:34). Example (2) below is an article news headline taken from an English Turkish Daily:

(2) US was informed about Turkey's deployment in Iraq

(2a) تركيا أبلغت الولايات المتحدة عن نشر قواتها في العراق

back translation (bt): Turkey informed the US about its deployment in Iraq

Shedding some light on the circumstances of the event will help us understand the underlying meaning of its structure. It took place following the Turkish deployment of troops in Iraq and its denouncement by the Iraqi government and other Western powers including the US. The fronting of the syntactic object in (2) serves to put more stress of the other party involved *viz.* the US and defocus the responsibility of the actor of the event, which is Turkey. It may also serve to avoid an up-front approach accusing the US of knowing in advance about the deployment, and therefore tacitly approving it. On the other hand, the Arabic translation fails to direct focus to the 'legitimacy' of the act symbolised in the US, the superpower in a position to grant permission and assume the blame, if any. Instead, by topicalising 'Turkey', the focus shifted in the translation to it (Turkey) considered in this context by its critics as an aggressor. Since in Arabic, a passive sentence must be agentless, a translation in the form a declarative sentence is more appropriate when the agent of the act is very important. And to preserve the same attitude in the source text vis-à-vis the US, an alternative translation with a better capture of the ideological message of the original text would be:

(2b) الولايات المتحدة تعلم عن نشر تركيا لقواتها في العراق

bt: The US Knew of Turkey's deployment in Iraq

2.2 The Semantic Level

The semantic level obtains between signs and what they refer to in the real world. The term 'propaganda' for instance, conveys something negative in the Western world, whereas its Russian counterpart has a positive function especially in the government departments of information (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 116-7). Thus, semantics rules help to create a socially effective reality. From the early child language development, "Words carry social information by_reflection the intentions and interests of individual speakers" (Koenig and Cole, 2013:492). In political discourse, it is only natural, as Palmer (1981:21) rightly points out, that "The words of a language often reflect not so much the reality of the world, but the interests of the people who speak it". Aabi and Megrab (2003) asked two groups of students to translate the same text (3) below into English. The first group consisted of ten English native-speakers who are students of Arabic at the university of Leeds. The second group consisted of ten Libyan final-year students of Translation at the university of Garyounes, Libya.

(3) استمرار الرفض الليبي تسليم متهميه في حادث تفجير طائرة بانام فوق سكتلندا

Literal translation (lt) : The continuous Libyan refusal to extradite its two suspects

in the Pan Am bombing accident over Scotland

The semantic choice in the original text is ideologically motivated. The combination of the words حادث (accident) تفجير (bombing) indicates the author's subjectivity in the news report in order to play down the seriousness of the bombing. The word تفجير alone would have sufficed to convey the British-American standpoint, which the author was reporting. The addition of the word حادث creates an ideological shift in the

news report. It gives the reader the impression that the event could have been the result of an accident, and that the two Libyan suspects might not have been involved after all.

Comparing both groups' translations, the conflict of ideologies was quite obvious. The British students translated the noun construct حادث تفجير (accident of bombing) into a single word 'bombing'. Likewise, the Libyan group opted for a single word translation but different in meaning- 'explosion'. Obviously, bombing is stigmatizing while explosion is neutral. What this example illustrates is that the meaning of text, as is apprehended in the realm of the individual's experience, embraces that of the ST writer and that of the translator of the TL. Presumably, the encounter of two different types of experience is problematic especially when dealing with such a subject matter towards which participants respond subjectively. Subjective reaction is often expected on the part of either participants (Libyan or English) when their ideological beliefs become challenged or happen to be in crisis with those of SL writer (Aabi and Megrab, 2003).

The choice of deictic pronouns is another example of semantic struggles performed through semantic strategies. In his first address on the start of the second Gulf war, George W Bush (The Guardian, 20/03/2003) used the first person pronoun to declare war:

(4) On my orders, coalition forces have begun striking selected targets of military importance

(4a) وبأمر منا، بدأت قوات التحالف ضرب اهداف محددة من الأهمية العسكرية

bt: On our orders, ….

The singular pronoun in (4) is used not simply to indicate that the subject of enunciation assumes alone the content of his

speech but also to emphasise firmness and authority as the agent of power in this context. The Arabic translation (4a), on the other hand, rightly transformed the number grammatical property of the pronoun from singular to plural. Should we have kept the same singular property in the Arabic translation, it would have rather indicated weakness or humility in a context of war, which requires completely the opposite.

In her study of the Arab Spring presidential speeches, Abu Hatabi explains that "Political leaders in Tunisia, Yemen , Egypt and Libya found themselves on a horn of a dilemma that was ended by sacrificing their social and political identity in their attempts to regain public support" (2013).

This is reflected, for instance, in Mubarak's speech of 28 January 2011, when addressing the Egyptians:

(5) أتحدث اليكم في ظرف دقيق ...

(5a) I speak to you today in a very critical situation …

According to Abu Hatabi (2013), Mubarak establishes his social identity as a simple citizen to gain sympathy by using first singular pronoun instead of delivering his message from a position of authority as he used to do prior to the Arab Spring using the first person plural pronoun 'we' to indicate exclusiveness.

It should be noted, however, that the pronoun 'we' may have different functions each of which is very determinative to the understanding of the text. Take for instance this extract from the same speech of former US president:

(6) We will meet that threat now with our army …

Here, instead of emphasizing his power status as part of his political identity as in (4), George W. Bush used the inclusive

first person plural pronoun. The reason is that (4) concerns a decision-making situation. Strategically, seeking inclusiveness in this case may rather disrupt or delay, to say the least, his already set plan of action. On the other hand, (6) is about preparing Americans for the cost in lives and money of sending boots on the ground. In doing so, Bush confers a sense of collectiveness and legitimacy in assuming the repercussions of his decision to go to war.

What these examples show is that words are often loaded with multiple meanings going far beyond what they actually seem to say. As translators, we should bear in mind that the meanings of words are not only derived from things and intentions, but also from socially coordinated action. Words and structures create and reflect social behaviour. They provide legitimising or stigmatizing vocabularies of motive and they influence or reveal structures of power (Brown, 1993:44).

3. Macrostructure Level of Discourse

In the previous section, we discussed the role played by such grammatical and semantic devices in the expression of ideologically based meaning. This accounts for the necessity to deal with discourse beyond the micro-level, i.e. words and sentences. In effect, it is elementary to concentrate on discourse as a linguistic and ideological entity to make explicit the global coherence of the text, its themes and topics.

In his study of the thematic structure of discourse, van Dijk (1988:31) introduced the concept of semantic macrostructure and its relevance to the understanding of discourse as a whole. He explains that it relates to those aspects of information that every reader considers as important in the text. Macrostructures are essentially derived from the set of propositions offered in the text. They constitute the most concise and highly

informative semantic units that can convey either true or false facts but certainly the ones liable to be the most striking ones. They function to set the topic of the text to enable the reader to get hold of the overall relationships and patterns of organization. But, it is very important that macrostructures are derived from specific views regarding facts in a way that matches the expectations of a group of people. And, this allows the reader to draw or infer automatically additional information. Take for instance a sentence like from the BBC:

(7) Defeating cancer, the 'evil genius'

The reader, from their experience in the world and knowledge of the latest research advances into cancer cures and treatments, knows that cancer is a fatal and intractable disease. They must have certainly heard of leukemia, brain tumors and many other forms of cancer. They also know that treatment takes place in hospitals and is conducted by highly qualified specialists and so on.

In political discourse, macrostructures are not simple lists of propositions. The organization of political discourse is decided by the relevance of topics rather than some kind of logical ordering of events. Thus, the basic motive remains that political discourse should be organized in such a way that grants global and local coherence, i.e. discourse would be coherent on the level of both the text as a whole and the sentences in accordance with the discourse maker objectives and their expectations regarding the reader's prior knowledge. To this effect, the structural feature of the news text is the result of a production strategy which targets a set of ideologically relevant and possible reading strategies. Take for instance Marine Le Pen's speech:

(8) La France n'est éternelle que par la transmission et la glorification de son histoire… Mais aussi par la féérie de nos paysages et la force spirituelle de nos églises aujourd'hui la cible des attentats islamistes…

N'ayant aucune prise sur le présent, faute de vouloir construire l'avenir, nos piètres dirigeants récupèrent l'histoire pour l'instrumentaliser et transformer leur politique en propagande mémorielle antipatriotique. La funeste réforme de Mme Najat Vallaud-

Belkacem en est un symbole effrayant…

la bataille politique sera âpre évidemment, rien ne nous sera épargné, c'est une certitude, ça a déjà commencé. Et je les pense capables des pires extrémités. Mais nous triompherons de tout cela

(8a) France is eternal by the transmission and glorification of her history ... By the magic of our landscapes and the spiritual strength of our churches today target to Islamist attacks ...

Having no grasp on the present, busy wanting to build the future, our mediocre leaders are trying to manipulate history to promote their propaganda. The ominous reform brought about by Mrs. Najat Vallaud-Belkacem is a frightening example…

the political battle will be fierce, of course. None of us will be spared, that's for sure. It has already begun, and they are capable of the worst. But we shall triumph

Marine Le Pen speech has all the elements of a 'good horror' story in which the FNL party is the protagonist. For a good suspense story to work, what is at stake must be stated at the beginning of the story: the glory, the magical landscape and the

spiritual strength of France. Then, Le Pen makes the stakes high and create tension by inserting a dark force threat: 'Islamic attacks'. This intrigue with an ominous threat is projected onto an image of this dark force personified in someone 'among us' but 'not of us': 'Najat Vallaud-Belkacem is a frightening example'. Note that the name of the French minister of education in the PS government is composite of an originally French middle name 'Vallaud' after her French husband, and the first and last names, Naja and Belkacem respectively, which are Arabo-Muslim. Le Pen, when referring to her Belkacem, was criticising her reform programme at the ministry of education. The story is similar to that of US presidential elections when reference was made to Barack Obama by his political opponents. One of US Republican party statement releases said the party is joining a "growing chorus of Americans concerned about the future of the nation of Israel ... if Sen. Barack Hussein Obama is elected president of the United States". The reason for unusually invoking his middle name 'Husein' is because in the "US election: When your name is Barack Hussein Obama, getting elected is difficult", explains Jon Swaine (15/05/2012) from the Daily Telegraph.

Going back to Le Pen's speech, the most important pieces of information, i.e. the macrostructure of her speech, is only clear if we understand the build-up of its microstructures and the way they are connected into a coherent network: <<glorious France>>, <<frightening government policies exemplified by a Muslim-named minister>>, while <<Islam is a threat to France>> . Obviously, this leads us to the gist of her speech, namely that the PS government is a threat to France. It is this gist that directs the attention of the French people and incites them to accept her side of the story, which brings us to the final element of the story where the protagonist, against all odds,

will avert a certain outcome and prevail. And this is indeed the case in the closing of her speech: 'despite all malicious attacks on the FN, it shall triumph'.

Such a political text might be susceptible to arouse much political and cultural sensitivity when read by an Arab reader, therefore, giving way to subjectivity. In attempting to translate such information, the Arab translator is very likely to meet several obstacles the most important of which relate to the ideological perspective from which the event has been reported. Rendering the text using equivalent microstructure organizations that suggest the same interpretation as that of the source text might seriously risk offending the target language readers, i.e. the Arab readership who has developed a negative view of the far right French party anyway.

No wonder, then, if the text is reshaped in a different structure liable to put the translator in a conciliatory territory for fear of being implicated in something they are not certain about especially if the event happened 'over there' in the West which stands in the position of an elite source (Eldridge, 1993:8). A possible translation into Arabic would rather be as follows:

(8b)فرنسا خالدة بتاريخها المجيد الذي تناقلته الأجيال... خالدة بواسطة سحر مناظرها الطبيعية وقوتها الروحية، هي اليوم عرضة لهجمات ارهابيين يدعون الاسلام ... في الوقت الذي لا يوجد عند مسؤولينا فهم للحاضر، مشغولون بالكلام عن الرغبة في بناء المستقبل لتعزيز دعايتهم ...

والإصلاحات المشؤومة التي قدمتها وزيرة التربية والتعليم السيدة نجاة فالو بلقاسم هو خير مثال على ذلك ...

إن المعركة السياسية ستكون شرسة، وهي قد بدأت بالفعل ، ولن يدخر خصومنا جهدا في المس بحزبنا وهم قادرون على الأسوأ ، ولكننا في الاخير سوف تنتصر

It is very likely that different language users will assign different meanings to the texts they read. We should expect

different summaries of a given text depending on what people consider as important and relevant. Cognitively speaking, topics or macrostructures are biased. Interlocutors in general, may pick up some signals to the exclusion of others depending on their individual interests and relevancies. Our concern, as translators, is how to account for the many 'hidden' pragmatic implications in the political text that indirectly express ideological bias. The question here is whether or not translators should work at the same time as analysts to make such subjective and ideologically constrained positions explicit.

Conclusion

Seen from a semiotic perspective, the format or the construction of political discourse is bound to be affected by the societal institutional and economic macro-dimensions of its production as well as consumption. In this context, the usage of a semiotic approach does, by no means, aim at expressing a negative evaluation. It is after all, an interpretative strategy that advocates understanding the structure of the text in the context of its occurrence. Participants in the political discourse production, their actions, beliefs and intentions are crucial figures in the historical role played in the reproduction, the legitimization and maintenance of forms of ideology. And, this becomes even more serious when controversial events and politically significant issues are in focus.

Throughout this research, we came up with a number of concluding remarks concerning the practical import of the ideological aspect of political discourse to the translator. The meaning of the concept of ''objectivity' in translation changes following the purpose the translation serves at the level of the larger socio-cultural context. A sound and exhaustive account for a translation theory in ideological terms cannot fail to

notice the fact that subjectivity and objectivity in translation are extremely relative or rather motive-specific. As a matter of fact, we talk about subjectivity only when viewed antagonistically, that is to say in the presence of a different form of subjectivity.

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