

Teaching Translation from a Pragmatic Perspective

**AMARA HAMERLAIN Souad
(University of Mostaganem)**

In the present article, one intends to consider the possible mistranslations that are likely to occur within a word for word framework, but which may be avoided if Translation students become aware of the contextual and cultural parameters underpinning words, expressions, and in the long run texts.

The starting trigger of this rationale is that just as syntax is open to pragmatic interferences, so can Translation whose social embeddedness allows the meddling of some pragmatic factors, such as the notions of context, coherence, deixis, and Speech Act Theory (J.L. Austin 1962 & J.R. Searle 1969).

Through some examples, one shall try to demonstrate how, sometimes, the conceptual, literal, or dictionary meaning fails to transmit the actual connotations of the Source Language. Since this requires an interpretive ability and an extra-linguistic knowledge that needs to complement the linguistic one; and about which Hellal, Y. (1986) says :

«On peut tout traduire, à condition d'avoir la possibilité d'accéder aux contenus des énoncés, c'est-à-dire de posséder non seulement les

connaissances linguistiques qui en permettent le transcodage mais aussi les connaissances extra-linguistiques qui en permettent l'interprétation. »¹

For that purpose, ten fourth year students from the Arabic-English-French blend, of the academic years 2000-2003 were given some sentences to translate. From such practice, a number of observations could be drawn.

A French sentence such as « un zèbre est un animal blanc avec des traits noirs » has been translated into English by six of our informants as * “ zebra is an animal white with a black lines”. One is likely to notice, here, a kind of word for word rendering irrespective to the English word order, with a misuse of the indefinite article translating French “ des”.

By resolving to their dictionaries, the informants have substituted Source Language words by their equivalent Target Language ones, forgetting that a dictionary can never be able to connect analogous words into coherent units. So, among the features on which teachers may stress, is that of coherence. Along with this aspect, that of ‘ context’ is a key facet in pragmatic Translation. The commonly agreed upon definition of Pragmatics is that it is the study of language in *context*. Utterances do not simply “mean” something in isolation, they also suggest something within a context. There are, however, a variety of contexts in which one speaks, including intra-textual (discourse) contexts,

¹ . Hellal, Y. (1986), *La Théorie de la Traduction. Approche Thématique et Pluridisciplinaire*, Office des publications Universitaires Alger, p. 23. (Fascicule de présentation du Doctorat – ESIT, p. 2)

speech situation contexts, and cultural contexts. One shall bring evidences from each type. Without the context of use in which a verb like “remplacer” occurs, one may misuse the word or be contextually irrelevant. Because, if it is about replacing a document by another, an English translator would use the verb ‘to supersede’. But, if it is about replacing a word within this document, he/she would rather have two options. Namely, ‘to delete’ and ‘to substitute’. Such choice can be possible only when the translator makes of the notion of ‘context’ its allied companion. Knowing about the cognitive meaning of a particular language is a prerequisite for undertaking any translation. Yet, not a sufficient competence to convey meaningful sentences. The famous example presented by Vinay and Darbelnet (1968) can substantiate this statement.

The French sentence “un simple soldat” was translated by the totality of the informants into * “a simple soldier”. Such translation, in fact, is irrelevant since French “simple” stands for English “idiot”, while the adequate rendering would have been “a private”. Another case of mistranslation occurs when words in correspondence do not necessarily belong to the same grammatical category. The sentence “la commission a fait la proposition suivante”, was translated by four of our informants into * “commission made the following proposition”. The six others used the verb ‘put’ for “a fait”. In this second case, and when looking for the reasons of such rendering, one found that students translated this same sentence into Arabic first. Then, they made a kind of transfer into English.

If one agrees upon the Arabic translation *وضعت اللجنة التقارير التالية*, one shall note that the verb “وضعت” has been substituted by its English literal equivalent “put”. However, a more suitable translation would have been “the committee proposed the following”. In which case, the noun “proposition” changes into the verb “proposed”.

This kind of transfer reminds us of the linguistic situation of Algeria as a bilingual country. There is a common belief that bilingualism eases the task of Translation students who master more than one language, and that one of the major aims of teaching Translation is to improve the competence of students bringing them to near bilinguals. Still, the above mentioned example depicts this situation as a hindrance where students would be confused, and where linguistic interferences are likely to happen.

These beliefs, in fact, go against the creeds of a pragmatic teaching that calls rather for a kind of ‘cultural competence’ as it were. This can be seen when one wants to translate ‘مقهى’ into English ‘tea-house’, ‘tea-garden’, ‘coffee-house’, or simply ‘café’ rather than ‘pub’, which is the nearest familiar term in British cultural rendering. Bearing in mind the ban of drinking alcohol in Islamic countries, this last translation would automatically be discarded.²

It would be safe to claim that what sits well with a particular community does not with another. This is mainly why Translation teaching should also include

² . Dickins. J, Hervey. S, Higgins. I. (2002), *Thinking Arabic Translation, A course in translation method : Arabic to English*, Routledge.

those cultural parameters including puns, idiomatic expressions, and metaphors.

To take an example of the impact of culture on the translation of idiomatic expressions, for instance, consider the following. When an English speaker rejects something as being out of his field of interest, he might probably use the expression: "*This is not my cup of tea*". Note that an equal expression is found in French, but this time it is not about a cup of tea, but rather about a cup of coffee. In fact, a French translator will prefer to convey the same apathy by : «*Ceci n'est pas ma tasse de café*» (even if the expression «*Ceci n'est pas ma tasse de thé*» exists). Needless to say that while English people are very keen on drinking tea, French citizens opt for coffee being part of their culture.

Another aspect related to Pragmatics is that of deixis. Besides, linking utterances to the contexts in which they are produced could be achieved through the three fundamental indexical expressions. These are the spatial (here, there); the temporal (now, yesterday); and the personal/ impersonal (I, you / it). Note, in the same prospect, that the identity of the writer and that of the addressee may have an effect on the translation of deictics such as the personal *you*; given that some languages make a distinction between *you* (singular) and *you* (plural). Similarly, in languages where an adjective agrees in gender with its noun (as in French), it will be necessary to know not only about the number of addressers and addressees, but also about their gender. In addition, the degree of formality between them will automatically affect the choice of either *vous* (formal) or *tu* (informal). This may happen in translating a

question like : Are you busy ? (es *tu* occupé (e) ?/ êtes *vous* occupé (e)s ?).

Another feature on which teachers may emphasize is the performative intention embedded in every communicative act. This is usually categorized under the label of ‘ illocutionary force’ (Searle, 1969); whose most salient pragmatic purpose is the performative intention that the utterance serves.

To assert that “Have you been to New York?” has the illocutionary function of a question, is to attribute to such an utterance the aim or purpose of eliciting information from an interlocutor. However, taken in a specific occasion (context), the same utterance may have the purpose of belittling or even embarrassing the interlocutor who has perhaps never ‘ put his feet there’ (the fact that the person who asked the question is probably aware of). When referring to the illocutionary meaning, however, one should know that its rendering differs from one language to another. Arabic and English, for instance, make a predominant sentential use of intonation for conveying illocutionary function, (the raising tone of ‘ go there !’) with a great use of illocutionary particles in texts involving casual oral conversations (‘ you know’, ‘ right?’, ‘wow !’, ‘what ?’, ‘ طبعاً!’, ‘ جيد!’, ‘ أتعلم’, etc.).

Recognizing Arabic and English as intonation-oriented languages has clear-cut implications for translation strategy. For, at the stage of comprehending the meanings of Source Language Texts, the attention of Arabic and English translators should be especially drawn to the role of intonation and illocutionary particles.

In dealing with illocutions, a translator should examine all potential perlocutions. That is, the effects and responses that can be predicted on the imagination, feelings and actions of the Target Language reader to ensure perlocutionary equivalence. This position is quite close to Nida's (1986) 'dynamic' or 'functional' equivalence, or to Newmark's (1988) 'equivalent effect'. The following is an example. Imagine a man receiving a letter on which underside is written: "Thanking you for the punctual payment of your bank account." Any translation of this phrase, no matter how literally similar to the original version will be inadequate from the perlocutionary point of view.

The translator should produce a translation that would be as perlocutionary ambiguous as the original. In which case, the "punctual payment of your bank account" leaves the readers unsettled as to whether they should feel satisfaction at having already paid, or be convinced that the person involved must at present pay the bill³. That, would place the readers of the original and of the translated version on the same foot.

To translate a medical leaflet, for instance, translators do not require extra-linguistic data. They would just transmit the instructions found in it. Here, only a sound knowledge of the Target Language vocabulary is necessary.

Taking stock of the preceding discussion, one should conclude that approaching Translation from a pragmatic point of view, would be to take into account all those features which go beyond the sentence. These, shall

³. Hickey, L. (1998), *The Pragmatics of Translation*. Multilingual Matters LTD.

reach the reader and its context, be it intra-textual or cultural.

What could be witnessed, however, is that most of the texts presented to students were of a scientific and an economic interest. Technical terms are given more importance than literary ones (even if literary texts are handled being part of the syllabus). The reason may be that Algeria, considering the quantity of imported products, and the number of foreign enterprises hiring Algerian workers, is much in need for technical translators.

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