

The Cultural Aspect of Language in Translation

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Abstract

This paper is about the significant implication of the cultural aspect of language in translation. Culture is a vital component of language. Language in fact is used to maintain and convey culture. It is therefore essential to consider both aspects for translation. For this specific reason translators are permanently faced with the problem of how to treat the cultural aspects implicit in their target texts. This paper then emphasises that translators must be conscious that translation does not imply simply the replacement of words in their original language with their nearest equivalents in another language, but rather it is a complex process that requires both linguistic and cultural competence of the target language. This paper argues also that a good translator is the one who does first research on the lexical content and syntax of the target language along with ideologies, value systems and ways of life of the culture of his/ her target language in order to avoid unpredictable and mostly unwanted results.

Today's cross cultural world has known a growing awareness of the role of culture in translation studies where translators are regarded as active mediators between cultures. This has led also to a growing frustration on the part of the translators as to their capacity to treat the cultural aspect implicit in a source text, and thus to find the most appropriate technique of successfully conveying these aspects in the target language (TL). Thus, since culture is a vital component of language, it is essential to consider both aspects for translation.

The fact that culture and language are very closely interwoven has been long recognised by linguists and anthropologists who stressed the close relationship between language and culture. Such an idea was advocated for instance by Brown who thought that "*a language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are*

interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture"¹. Byram who shares such a view added that *"the language holes the culture through the detonations and connotations of its semantics"*¹. Kramersch, on the other hand, identified three ways how language and culture are bound together. First, language expresses cultural reality: with words people express facts and ideas, but also reflect their attitudes. Second, language embodies cultural reality: people give meaning to their experience through means of communication. Third, language symbolises cultural reality: people view their language as a symbol of their society¹.

Culture, on the other hand, can be defined as *"the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organisation of a particular country or group"*¹. And since language and culture are inseparable, it is essential to consider both aspects in translation. The latter, indeed, does not imply simply the replacement of words in their original language (ST) with their nearest equivalents in another language (TT), but rather it is a complex process that requires both linguistic and cultural competence of the target language (TL). During the translation process thus one is not only dealing with two languages, but also with two cultures that, in many instances, may vary as translation expert Toury has put it: *"translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions"*¹. According to him, translators *"operate first and foremost in the interest of the culture into which they are translating"*¹ They, therefore, need not only to do research on the lexical content and syntax of the target language, but also the ideologies, value systems and ways of life in a given culture.

Translators, however, often come across various constraints during the process of translation, because different languages reflect different cultures and values. They may come across unwritten assumptions in the source texts such as knowledge of historical events, customs, opinions and prejudices and other accepted norms of behaviour. For this specific reason translators are permanently faced with the problem of how to treat the cultural aspects implicit in their source texts (TT). A cultural interpretation of the source text (ST) is therefore required before the process of translation.

Customs and tradition are parts of a culture and for translating a translator must be aware of these aspects. Be it a marriage or a funeral,

a festival or some vows, any translator can get into problems if he/she translates without comprehending or understanding the significance behind the occasion. The word Thanksgiving for instance has a special meaning in the United States: it tells a whole story about American history and identity. Its equivalent in French is “action de grâce“, but since Thanksgiving does not exist in France, French readers of an American English text that was translated to French where the term Thanksgiving has been translated into “action de grace” will understand it simply as a global religious term - with the idea of “praying and thanking”. While historically religious in origin, Thanksgiving is now primarily identified as a secular holiday in the United States¹. In this case, it is probably better to retain the term Thanksgiving in the English language – perhaps with an explanatory note if required. The translator thus must be aware of the cultural changes of his source language that are going in turn to affect both use and meaning of some terms in the source text. For this reason, the text in the target language has to be recreated with the cultural nuances made as explicit as necessary for the text to be equally understandable to the readers.

Culture, however, expresses its idiosyncrasies in “a culture bound”. Most of the time, “culture-bound” such cultural words, cultural beliefs and morals, proverbs, and of course idiomatic expressions are intrinsically and uniquely bound to the culture concerned. As a result, sometimes it is impossible to be tied to the form of the original language. This in fact what translation expert Toury has recognized as the shifts that occurred during the process of translation. He explained that are two kinds of shifts: ‘obligatory shifts’, which are “caused by the different grammatical structures of the source and target languages”¹, and ‘non-obligatory shifts’, which are “motivated by literary, stylistic or cultural consideration”¹. This implies that the activity of translation brings about a number of shifts in the linguistic, aesthetic and intellectual values of the source text (ST).

A translator thus might find it easier performing some ‘obligatory shifts’ which are prompted by structural differences between the source (SL) and the target language (TL) such as grammar, syntax and lexis. Yet, the translator has to take into account the cultural differences between the languages, because identical symbols in the two languages do not necessarily convey the same meaning. Much

worse is the difference in people's experiences and the variation of conceptual boundaries from one language to another "*in a way that defies principled explanation*"¹ (Leech, 1974:3). The translator then has to play the role of a competent proxy on behalf of his readers; he must identify the areas of cultural overlap and linguistic interference between the two languages. The example that we can take here is a translation of a Japanese text into English. Japanese, as one should expect, is a very different language of unique yet a very aesthetic culture. Japanese people place a high degree of importance on being polite, and these attitudes percolate into their language and their documents. So a person who is involved in translating Japanese to English has to make sure that the translation not only conveys the intended meaning but is also accepted by the reader as comfortably as their original language. In every culture, the sense of modesty and respect can be expressed linguistically, but in the target culture, those protocols are more strict and specific when the addressee is older or in a higher social status than the speaker or writer.

In the target culture, when one refers to someone of a higher or respected social status, it is customary to use honorifics¹ such as *sonkeigo*, a form of speech or writing to emphasise respect; *kenjogo*, to express humbleness or modesty; and *teineigo*, to show politeness. Each type of speech or writing has its own vocabulary and verb endings. One must carefully apply the appropriate degree of honorific because if it is used in the wrong context, it can be insulting to the recipient or to those who are referred to. Since there are no honorifics in English, the translator must find an appropriate *shit* that goes along with same cultural meaning

Inappropriate usage of honorifics may also denote a lack of culture or intelligence on the speaker's or writer's part. The target audience who has no direct access to the original text totally depends on the translation to project an image of the original work and its writer. Indeed, translation is influential in projecting a certain image of the writer and his or her work. Therefore, translators inevitably attempt to use the most appropriate degree of honorifics in the target text (TT) to present the original writer as a 'well-educated' and 'well-mannered' individual, as well as to project an acceptable image of the original work.

A slavish adherence to words equivalence in translation does not guarantee a good quality translation as one language cannot express the actual meaning of the other. An accurate translation from the source language to the target language requires a sufficient knowledge of the target culture. The cultural aspect then helps in communicating the message in the way it should be to avoid unpredictable and mostly unwanted results.

References

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