

TRANSLATION: THE PROBLEM OF MEANING AND EQUIVALENCE

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Abstract

Translation has been used by humans for centuries since the appearance of written literature. In a simple term, translation is the transmittal of written text from one language into another. In other words, translation is the communication of meaning from one language (the source) to another language (the target). The aim of translation is to convey the original tone and intent of a message, taking into account cultural and regional differences between source and target languages. Since, translation demands a deep understanding of both the source and target languages, translators need to know the structure, grammar, idioms and culture of the languages. This is why being a translator is not just being a bilingual but also a bicultural. A translator is able to interpret and transcribe a message suitably, according to its purpose and target audience, taking into account not only language aspects, but also social and cultural factors. To achieve this, translators are faced with many problems. This paper explores the problem of meaning and equivalence in translation.

Introduction

The history of translation is as old as the existence of written texts. For instance, the Rosetta Stone was a major evidence as it not only represented ancient translation works, but it gave modern translators and scholars the opportunity to translate and study Egyptian Hieroglyphics. According to 'Languageconnections', thus:

At around 2000BC, clay tablets were used to decipher symbols from Sumerian and Eblaite, which were ancient semitic languages. Hieroglyphics from both of these languages and many others were also inscribed on the Rosetta Stone – a stone slab that was discovered in 1799 by members of Napoleon's French army.

The history of translation spans multitudes of centuries. Translation serves as an important tool in helping to understand history and development of previous

civilizations. Translation has been a significant tool in helping to bridge the gap between cultural and religious barriers in the past and at present. For the history of translation spanning multitudes of centuries, *Kwintessential* notes:

It is known that translation was carried out as early as the Mesopotamian era when the Sumerian poem, Gilgamesh was translated into Asian languages. This dates back around the second Millennium BC.

Besides the translation of Sumerian poem into Asian languages around the second Millennium BC, a crucial role in history was played by the translation of religious texts. One of the foremost translation of religious texts in the West was the translation of the Old Testament into Greek in the third century BC. The translation is known as the Septuagint, a collection of Jewish Scriptures translated into early Koine Greek in Alexandria, Egypt between the third and first centuries BC. One of the earliest recorded translations of considerable effort in English is perhaps the translation of the Bible around 1100AD. Sawant (2013) puts it thus:

The most significant turn in the history of translation came with the Bible translations. The efforts of translating the Bible from its original languages into over 2,000 others have spanned more than two millennia...The Bible continues to be the most translated book in the world...The Bible is available in whole or in part to some 98 percent of the world's population in a language in which they are fluent.

The history of translation has been a topic that has long been debated by scholars and historians, though it is widely accepted that translation predates the Bible (*Kwintessential*). Linguists and scholars in translation field have made many attempts to produce translations of the Bible for a number of centuries as early as third century. The need for translation has been apparent since the earliest days of human contact, trade, and interaction; whether the need is for religious, cultural, historical or educational purposes.

Translation is as old as human civilization. Since the dawn of civilization, human beings have been using language to translate their thoughts and ideas. When we use a set of symbols or codes to communicate or transfer an idea or thought or a feeling to the person whom we address during act of communication, we are in a sense translating. With the evolution of human society, human beings became more anxious to know about the thoughts and feelings of people in distant places. Hence, the need for translation arises.

Meaning of translation

According to Kasparek (1983), the ancient Greek term for translation, 'metaphrasis' (a speaking across) has supplied English with metaphrase (a literal or word-for-word translation) as contrasted with paraphrase (a saying in other words). Metaphrase corresponds to 'formal equivalence' and paraphrase to 'dynamic equivalence'. For Tatarkiewicz (1992), the concept of metaphrase (word-for-word translation) is an imperfect concept, because a given language often carries more than one meaning; and because a similar given meaning may often be represented in a given language by more than one word. Nevertheless, metaphrase and paraphrase may be useful as ideal concepts that mark the extremes in the spectrum of possible approaches to translation.

The English word translation has been derived from the Latin word translation, which itself comes from trans- and latum - together meaning 'a carrying across' or 'a bringing across'. In other words, it is the business of carrying across a message/written content from one text to another and from one language (source language) to a different language (target language). It is best seen as a communication process where the transfer of a message/written content from one language into a new language takes place. Whatever may be its meaning, every act of translation involves the expression of sense. A translation is a text that is considered to be different from the original (the source text) but it is also a fact that the source text and translated text are the same in terms of the sense they convey. It is often said that translation gives new clothes to a piece of writing by putting it in a different form.

Translators and scholars are yet to decide whether translation is an art or a science. It is called an art as all good translations are expressions of the creative urge of the translators. Likewise, it is a science because of the technical formalities and complexities involved in its process. Baker (2002) cited in

Alwazna (2012) says that some translators argue over the merit of regarding translation as an art asserting that translation is one of these professions that need general knowledge, aptitude and practice, and therefore, they argue against formal academic training in translation. They are of the opinion that translation is an art that requires talents and practice. Long (1996) believes that the notion of turning translation into a science is just a wishful idea which has no applications in reality. Savory (1969) cited in Alwazna (2012) claims that translation lacks a set of universally accepted principles to be regarded as an autonomous science. Chukovskii (1984) says that translation should be regarded as a high art. On the contrary, some translators and scholars see translation as a science without a hundred percent precision and predictability. Berkeley (1991) argues that some sciences, particularly those dealing with humanities, do not possess a complete predictability level. According to Alwazna (2012:54), "some scholars support the notion of viewing translation as a science in the form of word for word". Other scholars view translation differently; they believe that translation is both an art and a science (ibid). Ordudari (2008) cited in Alwazna (2012) argues that "In theoretical terms, translation can be seen as a science, while it appears reasonable to be considered an art from a practical point of view". Some scholars define translation as an art or craft and some others call it a science. The writer is in support of the view that translation is both an art and a science.

Qualities of a good translator

The importance and role of translators cannot be overemphasized. The translator's role in relation to a text has been compared to that of an artist, e.g., a musician or actor, who interprets a work of art. Translators in the course of their work have shaped the very languages into which they have translated. They have acted as bridges for conveying knowledge between cultures; and along with ideas, they have imported from the source languages, into their own languages, loanwords and calques of grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Translation>). Kasperek (1983) highlights on the daunting task of a translator thus,

The complexity of the translator's task cannot be overstated; one author suggests that becoming an accomplished translator – after having already acquired a good basic knowledge of both languages and cultures

- may require a minimum of ten years' experience. Viewed in this light, it is a serious misconception to assume that a person who has fair fluency in two languages will, by virtue of that fact alone, be consistently competent to translate them.

The significance and relevance of translation in our daily life is multidimensional and extensive. Translation helps us to know about the developments in the field of creative arts, education, literature, business, religion, science and politics. Translation has become so relevant that people visualize it as a socio-cultural bridge between communities and countries. People now feel the importance of interacting and remaining connected with the people of socio-cultural communities, both in their respective countries as well as countries across the world. Translators have made important contribution over the centuries in dissemination of ideas and information to a large audience, in shaping of cultures and in a sense helped unite the world. The need for translation has existed since time immemorial and translating important literary works from one language into others has contributed significantly to the development of the world culture (www.onehourtranslation.com).

A good translator is not born, but made. Some of the qualities that distinguish a good and successful translator from a bad or unsuccessful translator are mentioned below.

1. Faithfulness to the original text and the author: A competent translator should try to get into the mind of the writer of the original text in the source language. The translation should have all the ease of the original composition.
2. Technical expertise: the translator has to be an analytical person with necessary flexibility and adaptability with a thorough knowledge of the subject (of the source text).
3. Using the right tools: the experienced translators know how to use the tools like good monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, encyclopedias, e-dictionaries, glossaries of technical and standard works, etc pertaining to the SL text and style guides to help him/her out in moments of difficulty.
4. Focus on creativity: expert translators are always creative.

5. Focus on reading as an important pre-requisite: a serious translator should read a lot to have an in-depth understanding of the nuances of the languages s/he deals with.
6. Linguistic competence: a seasoned translator should be well-conversant with the grammatical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features as well as the socio-cultural contexts of both the source language and the target language.
7. Specialization: a mature translator should have sound knowledge of the discipline to which the target text belongs.
8. Giving a finishing touch: In an act of translation, you should have enough patience and do the job sincerely.

Definition of translation

According to Crystal (1997:346), “when people are faced with a foreign language barrier, the usual way round it is to find someone to interpret or translate for them”. The terms translation and interpretation are often used interchangeably. While both activities involve transferring a message between two different languages, translation refers to transfer between written texts and interpretation refers to the spoken discourse and the unrehearsed transfer of a spoken message from one language to another (Richards et al, 2002). In this work, the focus is on translation and not interpretation.

Foster (1958) defines translation as a mental activity in which a meaning of a given linguistic discourse is rendered from one language to another. It is the act of transferring the linguistic entities from one language into their equivalents into another language. Translation is an act through which the content of a text is transferred from the source language into the target language. Catford (1965) sees translation as is the replacement of textual material in one language (source language) by equivalent textual material in another language (target language). For Ghazala (1995), translation is generally used to refer to all the process and methods used to convey the meaning of the source language into the target language. That is, when translating, understanding the meaning of source text is vital to have the appropriate equivalent in the target text thus, it is meaning that is translated in relation to grammar, style and sounds. Newmark (1988:5) who

defines translation as “rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text”. According to *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, “translation is the communication of the meaning of a source-language text by means of an equivalent target-language text”. The above definitions of translation can be summed thus; translation is an activity, a process or method of transferring or replacing linguistic entities or textual materials from a source language to a target language bearing in mind the meaning and equivalence. Nugroho (2018) citing Nida and Taber (1982) states that “translation is closely related to the problems of language, meaning and equivalence”. He goes further to say that “translation is a process which is intended to find meaning equivalence in the target text”. Machali (2007) and Baker (1992) emphasis on the term ‘meaning equivalence’ since it is the meaning which is transferred from source text to the target language.

Problem of Meaning in translation

In translation practice, translators are faced with many problems, linguistically and otherwise. Whether it is a linguistic or sociocultural problem, the purpose of translation is to render or convey the meaning of the source language into the target language (Foster, 1958 and Ghazala, 1995). Again, according to Crystal (1997:346), “the aim of translation is to provide semantic equivalence between source and target language”. To buttress what Foster (1958) and Ghazala (1995) say, Malmkjar (2011) asserts that “translation is an activity that aims at conveying meaning or meanings of a given linguistic discourse from one language to another”. She goes further to say that translation can be defined in terms of sameness of meaning across languages. In line with this assertion, Haas (1962) says that translation is supposed to be possible on the account of a twofold relation of an entity, called ‘meaning’; two expressions are viewed as ‘vehicles’ of the same meaning. He further explains thus,

Strictly, then, when a sentence or speech or novel is translated, say from French into English, what is supposed to be translated or transferred is not the French sentence or speech or novel at all; it is something utterly different, something inaudible and invisible – “the meaning” itself...

Andy Bayu Nugroho, a lecturer at English Department of the Faculty of Languages and Arts Yogyakarta State University in his article titled "Meaning and translation", explains that translation is an effort of finding equivalent meaning of a text into the second language. In this case, translator is faced with a text as a unit of meaning in the form of sets of words or sentences. According to him, the main question in translation is of meaning which always appears in the process of translation, not translation as a product of the process. Hatim and Munday (2004:34) cited in Nugroho (2018) suggest that "one of the key problems for the analyst was in actually determining whether the source text meaning had been transferred into the target text". It is obvious that meaning is a major problem in translation. Nida and Taber (1982:56) classify meaning into two classes: referential meaning and connotative meaning. Zaky (2005) cited in Nugroho (2018) in 'Translation and Meaning' also differentiates meaning into two categories, referential meaning and associated meaning (which includes connotative meaning). He mentions that referential meaning is also known as 'the meaning of reference is often referred to as the "referential" meaning, the "conceptual" meaning, or the "denotative" meaning'. Nugroho (2018:5) sums it up thus, "Giving the meaning of a word referentially, a translator must be aware of any markers appear in the text. There are two markers that can be used to give meaning of words, syntactic marking and semantic marking". He goes further to assert thus,

Translation is not merely concerning on meaning as a unit of lexical meaning. The process of rendering meaning involves some aspects as diction, grammatical structure, communicating setting, and cultural context of the source text. Meaning of the source and target texts must be equivalent.

And the above assertion will lead us to the problem of equivalence.

Problem of equivalence in translation

Beside the problem of meaning in translation, the other serious problem is the equivalence. The concept of equivalence can be said to hold an important position in translation field. This topic has been a particular concern to most translation scholars and theorists like Vinay, Darbelnet, Nida, Taber, Jakobson, Catford, House, Baker, Pym, Leonardi, etc. Leonardi (2000) says that equivalence

can be said to be the central issue in translation although its definition, relevance, and applicability within the field of translation theory have caused heated controversy, and many different theories of the concept of equivalence have elaborated within this field in the past fifty years. He also asserts that “the notion of equivalence is undoubtedly one of the most problematic and controversial areas in the field of translation theory”. Vinay and Darbelnet (2000:342) cited in Leonardi (2000) define equivalence in translation as a procedure which “replicates the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wording”. Pym (2010:7) cited in Sun (2012) says that equivalence is a key concept in translation theory. It is “a relation of ‘equal value’ between a source-text segment and a target segment”, and “can be established on any linguistic level, from form to function”. Nida (1964) argues that there are two different types of equivalence, namely formal equivalence which focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content and dynamic equivalence which is based upon the principle of equivalent effect. Baker (1992) as cited in Sun (2012) discusses equivalence at a series of levels: lexical (word level and above word level), grammatical (number, gender, person, tense, and aspect, and voice), textual (cohesion), and pragmatic (coherence and implicature). Of these levels, the lexical level probably creates the most noticeable difficulties for translators. Kade (1968) proposes four types of lexical equivalence: one-to-one (one source-language item corresponds to one target-language item), one-to-several/several-to-one (an item in one language corresponds to several in the other language or vice versa), one-to-part (only partial equivalents are available resulting in ‘approximate equivalence’), one-to-none (no equivalent is available in the target language).

If a word has no equivalent in the target language, this can pose varying levels of difficulty (Sun, 2012). There are strategies used by professional translators for dealing with various types of non-equivalence, such as translation by using a more general word, a more neutral/less expressive word, or cultural substitution (Baker, 1992). Some problems of non-equivalence at word level, according to Baker (1992:17), is “related to cultural differences, where there is no equivalent words in both source and target languages”. Although translation involves “two equivalent messages in two different codes” (Jakobson, 1959:233), exact equivalence is of course impossible: no translation could provide a translation that was a perfect parallel to the source text, in such respects as rhythm, sound,

symbolism, puns, and cultural allusions. It therefore follows that there is no such thing as a 'best' translation (Crystal, 1997).

Conclusion

Having known that translation is all about creating a meaningful equivalence between source language and target language, a translator has a difficult task. Consequently, a translator should bear in mind that "each language has its own distinctive forms of representing the meaning. Therefore, in translation the same meaning may have to be expressed in another language by a very different form" (Shamami, 2012). Because of this, difficulty in defining equivalence in meaning seems to result in the impossibility of having a universal approach (Leonardi, 2000). And to render a satisfactory translation, the translator needs to be acquainted with phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, idiomatic, religious, and cultural systems of both source language and target language (Karimi, 2006). Without this knowledge and more, a translator may not be able to solve the problem of meaning and equivalence in translation.

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