

Translation – A Showdown between Languages and Cultures

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Abstract

The picture that has been shown so far reveals the need of relating the concept of translation with the variety of ways of thinking and speaking, a variety that has been modeled on the historic evolution of languages, cultures, literature and societies. We can therefore enlarge this picture since translation reflects not only the “state of things” in a certain era, but it can also help in disseminating new models and styles leavened upon various different linguistic and cultural structures; it can even get that far as to impact the transformation and evolution of a culture. The latter is an aspect that is rarely taken into consideration, even though in recent times a closer relation between the literary tradition and current translations has been noted, assessing thus the reciprocal input as well.

The act of translation, in this context, goes beyond a mechanical process or a mere dislocation. Apart from the showdown between two different linguistic systems, it also brings the confrontation between two different cultures. If textual acquisition with all of its complications represents the primary objective of translation, the achievement of such an objective unavoidably goes through the aspect of the data from the initial culture. This is how their interjection in the cultural context of achievement is caused, whereas those dealing with the translated text can notice the presence of a culture, which could be completely anonymous to them.

Keywords

translation, interpretation, linguistics, culture

Introduction

The experiences to date speak in favor of the need of relating the concept of translation with the variety of ways of thinking and speaking – a variety that has been modulated on the historic evolution of languages, cultures, literatures and societies. We can, therefore, expand this viewpoint because translation does not reflect only the state of things in a given era, but rather can help in disseminating new models and styles established on various different linguistic and cultural structures, and can even go that far as to impact the transformation and evolution of a complete culture. The latter is an aspect that is rarely taken into consideration, even though recently a closer relation between literary tradition of a culture and existing translations has begun to be established, by assessing thus the reciprocal input as well.

The relations between the cultural tradition and translation, referred to by G. Steiner, is once more retaken by Gianfranco Folena at the point where he says

that “every civilization emerges from a single translation” (Folena, 1991) and “at least from Latin, the notion of translation becomes very important in establishing new linguistic and cultural traditions” (Folena, 1991).

Folena recalls that Latin literature was constructed upon translation from Greek, whereas modern German literature, especially written language, owes much to the translation of the Bible by Martin Luther.

He was able to position himself in synchrony with the German spirit, thus making way to a national language and strengthening the cultural identity of his nation. His thesis, included in the concept of “translation as tradition” (Folena, 1991), deals with the impossibility of the elaboration of a theory outside any historical experience and helps us discuss the prevalence of formalisms in theoretical linguistics. Folena’s work is also mentioned in Shuttleworth & Cowie’s *Dictionary of Translation Studies* for having coined the terms *horizontal translation* and *vertical translation* (1999, p. 71, 195). Folena distinguishes two types of translations typical of the Middle Ages, which are defined according to the relationship between the languages involved in the translation: *horizontal translation* is a translation between two languages which have a similar semantic, morphological and lexical structure, and are culturally close (a translation from Italian vernacular into French vernacular, for instance); *vertical translation* occurs when the source language (usually Latin in the Middle Ages) becomes the model language(/culture) for the target language (Folena, 1991, p. 13).

The act of translation, in this context, goes beyond a mechanical process or a mere transposition. Apart from facing with two different linguistic systems, it also causes a showdown between two different cultures. If textual acquisition represents the primary translation objective, the achievement of such an objective, unavoidably goes through the aspect of the data from the original culture. This is how their interjection occurs in the cultural context of achievement, and whosoever deals with the translated text, notices the presence of a culture, which could be completely enigmatic to them.

The art of translation

After the universe, translation remains one of the most complicated and enigmatic phenomena. In translating a foreign speech, there is always something unreachable, there is always something that can be improved, there is always something that can be done differently, there is always something... especially for those who have focused all of their hopes on the use of dictionaries...

As we all know, language is the most important means of communication through which people exchange ideas and achieve mutual understanding. The communication among people, through the language is realized in two ways, orally and in a written form. If the speakers master the same language, then

communication is carried out directly; but, when they speak different languages, direct communication is impossible. This is when translation comes to help. Many scholars define translation as a transmission of thoughts from one language to another. Therefore, translation is a very important tool that helps the realization of the communicative function when people express their thoughts in different languages. Translation plays a crucial role in exchanging ideas and opinions among different nations and serves to the issue of dissemination of values in the global culture.

Translation has existed since ancient times. Whenever two neighbouring nations have to communicate, regardless of the reasons, such as wars, trade, etc., they need translators, namely interpreters. In other words, they need a person who knows at least something from both languages so that they can understand each other, be that in rough outlines, as the worst case. In the modern world, borders are relatively open and international communication in a wide range of fields occurs on daily basis, such as culture, business, trade, education, sports, science, research, etc. On one hand, this provides a great interest for languages, but on the other, the demand for professional translators and interpreters is constantly growing. In agreements and treaties, exhibitions and fairs, conferences and seminars, congresses and scientific gatherings, tourist arrangements and guides – translators and interpreters are always required. The most frequent are cases of main European languages such as English, German, French, Italian, Spanish and Russian, though others can also find good and well-paid jobs.

What does it mean to translate? At first sight, this seems very easy and simple. What has been written or said in the original language should be formulated in another language, by constructing in this case regular and understandable clauses and sentences. However, there is an anecdote about a person who had to translate a Latin sentence in his language. The sentence was as follows: "*Spiritus quidem promptus est, caro autem infirma*".

This is an evangelic sentence meaning: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak", whereas the person in question translated it as "alcohol is good, but meat is rotten".

This translation could be fine in terms of translating every word literally and have a meaningful sentence; however, the message of the original text is not transmitted. Translating something accurately from one language to another, be it the interlocutor's speech, artistic literature or a scientific work, is quite often an art not less important than the creation of a correct copy of a masterpiece in the field of painting. Every art is a product of creation that has nothing in common with textuality. Boris Pasternak in "Boris Pasternak's Translations of Shakespeare" says, "Translation should inspire the impression of life not the

artistic impression" (Barnes, 2004). In one of the translation conferences, a presenter begins his paper presentation in this way: "Art in general is a difficult problem. But the art of translation is an even more difficult problem"; and this is how it should be; difficulties in translators' professional lives can be numerous, one of them being understanding the original source of text. If the translator does not manage to transmit the power, diversity and harmony of the original source, it is not something to be ashamed of. However, the mistake caused by misunderstanding the original text means a serious strike against the translator's reputation.

One of the most common types of translation errors are those known as *false friends* (pairs of words or phrases in two languages or dialects (or letters in two alphabets) that look or sound similar, but differ significantly in meaning). For example, *eventually* in English means *finally, in the end, in conclusion*, etc. In Albanian, the word *eventualisht* means *in case, if*; another example would be *pretend* (in English: make-believe) and *pretendoj* (in Albanian: claim, intend to reach something), etc.

There is no doubt that every translation, as a creative process, should be characterized by the translator's individuality. The main duty of a translator remains the transmission of the originals' authentic features. In order to create a suitable emotional and artistic impression with the original, the best linguistic means and tools should be applied: selection of synonyms, equivalent artistic images, etc.

What makes a good translator?

The first and most important is the knowledge of language or languages. Of course, in order to produce a genuine and almost perfect translation, one should have excellent knowledge of his/her mother tongue, of its expression tools and stylistics. A translator that has no good knowledge of his mother tongue, can not only deform the meaning of the translated text, but is at the same time a victim of his/her own professionalism. This mainly deals with artistic literary translators, though other types and genres are not excluded too.

Those that strive for gaining high-level professionalism and specialization in the field of translation and interpretation, should not only undergo the traditional written and spoken testing and/or examinations, but rather come under a general profile preparation procedure. Translators, same as writers, have to have an overwhelming life experience and knowledge.

Every language "sees" world in its own unique way, and each of them shapes their speakers' conscience. Perhaps we should also translate the way we see the world???

The great linguist, Wilhelm von Humboldt says, “All translation seems to me simply an attempt to solve an impossible task.

Every translator is doomed to be done in by one of two stumbling blocks: he will either stay too close to the original, at the cost of taste and the language of his nation, or he will adhere too closely to the characteristics peculiar to his nation, at the cost of the original. The medium between the two is not only difficult, but downright impossible” (Humboldt, 1999).

Greater difficulties emerge when the source language and the target language belong to distant cultures and civilizations. For instance, the works of Arab writers are full of citations from the Holy Qur’an and intimations on Qur’an topics. An Arab reader finds it very easily to comprehend, similar to a European reader who comprehends intimations from the Holy Bible or antique myths. In translation, these citations remain incomprehensible for the European reader.

The translation specialization, by default, is chosen by those who have the propensity for languages and who know what their ultimate goal is. Valery Larbaud seems to have defined the ideal of a translator’s specialist, when he says, “A real translator has a combination of the rarest and the most precious human features: knowledge and patience, even clemency, sincerity and lucid mind, broad knowledge and a rich and skilful memory” (Larbaud, 1981).

Non-verbal communication

We communicate with each other not only through language, but non-verbally too, in order to transmit our messages and aims. In general, we refer to non-verbal communication when we speak about “signs which are given a meaning and not about the process of analysing that particular meaning” (Knapp & Hall, 2013). Non-verbal communication can happen through the visual, audio, scent, touch and taste channels. Argyle determines five non-verbal human communication functions: (Argyle, 1988) concluded there are five primary functions of nonverbal bodily behavior in human communication:

- Express emotions
- Express interpersonal attitudes
- To accompany speech in managing the cues of interaction between speakers and listeners
- Self-presentation of one's personality
- Rituals (greetings)

Non-verbal communication can also be used to perfect verbal messages; when clarity is of a great importance, we should be more careful in making these two types of communication complement each other. People learn to distinguish

facial expressions, body movements, etc. as part of the expression of their feelings and goals.

Non-verbal communication can be classified in various different categories and modes. These include gestures, body movements, facial expressions, eyesight, clothes, as well as non-verbal vocalisms. It also includes visual symbols consisting of signs, colors, numbers and the usage of space.

Verbal communication

Semantic connections and idiomatic language

Language is far more important than various different subjects can comprehend. For example, advertisements, which consist of cultural values and elements, are sometimes difficult to translate. These could be brand names, product names, or company names, and can have different meanings in different languages and cultures.

Production companies should carefully investigate the foreign market as well as linguistic differences and varieties, before launching a certain product. When Rolls Royce decided to present their new model in the German market, they initially thought of presenting it with its original name "Silver Mist". Fortunately, the company discovered that the word "mist" in German meant "manure", "rubbish", etc. before launching the product and this is how they avoided quite a big misinterpretation.

In their new book *Found in Translation*, professional translators Nataly Kelly and Jost Zetzsche give a spirited tour of the world of translation, full of fascinating stories about everything from volunteer text message translators during the Haitian earthquake rescue effort, to the challenges of translation at the Olympics and the World Cup, to the personal friendships celebrities like Yao Ming and Marlee Matlin have with their translators.

The importance of good translation is most obvious when things go wrong. Here are nine examples from the book that show just how high-stakes the job of translation can be.

1. The seventy-one-million-dollar word

In 1980, 18-year-old Willie Ramirez was admitted to a Florida hospital in a comatose state. His friends and family tried to describe his condition to the paramedics and doctors who treated him, but they only spoke Spanish. Translation was provided by a bilingual staff member who translated "intoxicado" as "intoxicated." A professional interpreter would have known that "intoxicado" is closer to "poisoned" and doesn't carry the same connotations of drug or alcohol use that "intoxicated" does. Ramirez's family believed he was suffering from food poisoning. He was actually suffering from an intracerebral

hemorrhage, but the doctors proceeded as if he were suffering from an intentional drug overdose, which can lead to some of the symptoms he displayed. Because of the delay in treatment, Ramirez was left quadriplegic. He received a malpractice settlement of \$71 million.

2. Your lusts for the future

When President Carter traveled to Poland in 1977, the State Department hired a Russian interpreter who knew Polish, but was not used to interpreting professionally in that language. Through the interpreter, Carter ended up saying things in Polish like "when I abandoned the United States" (for "when I left the United States") and "your lusts for the future" (for "your desires for the future"), mistakes that the media in both countries very much enjoyed.

3. We will bury you

At the height of the cold war, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech in which he uttered a phrase that interpreted from Russian as "we will bury you." It was taken as chilling threat to bury the U.S. with a nuclear attack and escalated the tension between the U.S. and Russia. However, the translation was a bit too literal. The sense of the Russian phrase was more that "we will live to see you buried" or "we will outlast you." Still not exactly friendly, but not quite so threatening.

4. Do nothing

In 2009, HSBC bank had to launch a \$10 million rebranding campaign to repair the damage done when its catchphrase "Assume Nothing" was mistranslated as "Do Nothing" in various countries.

5. Markets tumble

A panic in the world's foreign exchange market led the U.S. dollar to plunge in value after a poor English translation of an article by Guan Xiangdong of the China News Service zoomed around the Internet. The original article was a casual, speculative overview of some financial reports, but the English translation sounded much more authoritative and concrete.

6. What's that on Moses's head?

St. Jerome, the patron saint of translators, studied Hebrew so he could translate the Old Testament into Latin from the original, instead of from the third century Greek version that everyone else had used.

The resulting Latin version, which became the basis for hundreds of subsequent translations, contained a famous mistake. When Moses comes down

from Mount Sinai his head has "radiance" or, in Hebrew, "karan." But Hebrew is written without the vowels, and St. Jerome had read "karan" as "keren," or "horned." From this error came centuries of paintings and sculptures of Moses with horns and the odd offensive stereotype of the horned Jew.

7. Chocolates for him

In the 50s, when chocolate companies began encouraging people to celebrate Valentine's Day in Japan, a mistranslation from one company gave people the idea that it was customary for women to give chocolate to men on the holiday. And that's what they do to this day. On February 14, the women of Japan shower their men with chocolate hearts and truffles, and on March 14, the men return the favor. An all around win for the chocolate companies!

8. You must defeat Sheng Long

In the Japanese video game *Street Fighter II* a character says, "if you cannot overcome the Rising Dragon Punch, you cannot win!" When this was translated from Japanese into English, the characters for "rising dragon" were interpreted as "Sheng Long." The same characters can have different readings in Japanese, and the translator, working on a list of phrases and unaware of the context, thought a new person was being introduced to the game. Gamers went crazy trying to figure out who this Sheng Long was and how they could defeat him. In 1992, as an April Fools Day joke, Electronic Gaming Monthly published elaborate and difficult to execute instructions for how to find Sheng Long. It was not revealed as a hoax until that December, after countless hours had no doubt been wasted.

9. Trouble at Waitangi

In 1840, the British government made a deal with the Maori chiefs in New Zealand. The Maori wanted protection from marauding convicts, sailors, and traders running roughshod through their villages, and the British wanted to expand their colonial holdings. The Treaty of Waitangi was drawn up and both sides signed it. But they were signing different documents. In the English version, the Maori were to "cede to Her Majesty the Queen of England absolutely and without reservation all the rights and powers of Sovereignty." In the Maori translation, composed by a British missionary, they were not to give up sovereignty, but governance. They thought they were getting a legal system, but keeping their right to rule themselves. That is not how it turned out, and generations later, the issues around the meaning of this treaty are still being worked out.

The linguistic concept of translation

The intensive development of the translation theory corresponds with theories of linguistics and information. Therefore, in the attempts of being an exact science, which would explain and improve the translation process, the theory of translation is related to that of information. Such a thing is possible first of all because translation itself is an act of communication.

On the other hand, scientific studies are object of the information theory and they explain the processes of sending and receiving messages. The origin of these studies dates back to the beginning of World War 2, when the American scientist, Norbert Viner, the founder of cybernetics, established them as a separate discipline. The theory of information is the basis of cybernetic studies, whereas the basic theses and interpretations on the importance of this discipline in the development of science in general have been given by mathematicians Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver. There are different communication models among people; communication can be carried out through contact, vision, clothing, music, etc. though most frequently through signals, which should previously be agreed upon. These signals can be different. The most frequent are linguistic signals, the gestures, mimics, etc. which can replace human speech, bright signals, the Morse code, and many others.

In order to have successful communication among people, certain conditions have to be met in terms of information exchange:

- The person providing the information during the simultaneous or consecutive translation/interpretation should be available;
- People receiving the translation/interpretation from the information provider, through headphones or directly;
- Communication itself aims at transmitting certain information, which in communication sciences is known as the message;
- The information contains certain matter that has to be transmitted to the receiver. This information object is known as referent;
- During the information transmission, orally or in a written form, both the sender and the receiver use a system of signs familiar to them, known as communication code;
- In order for the information to be received, a physical tool, known in communication as the communication channel, should be available.

The successful transmission of information should be realized in such a way that the receiver not only disseminates the message but s/he also analyzes it in terms of decoding the encoded information by the sender. However, in order to be able to fully comprehend the sent information by the receiver, the information context is also necessary. This context can be both linguistic and non-linguistic.

The linguistic context has to do with the extraction of the meaning of the message from the text whose part it is, whereas the non-linguistic context has to do with the so-called communication circumstance.

Linguistic components of translation

Linguistic components play an important role in the theory of communication, namely translation as a type of communication. The linguistic, psycho-linguistic and socio-linguistic components comprise important elements of translation.

Linguistic components

Every piece of information is encoded through a certain linguistic system. In this respect, language can be seen as a common code for all members of a linguistic community. Every person that takes part in translation has his/her own way of communication, namely individual language. In this respect, the German theoretician, Otto Kade, writes that there is no absolute equality in communication codes, namely participants in communication in the same linguistic environment, because there are individual linguistic differences and life experiences (Gambier & Doorslaer, 2009). This causes the creation of idiolects (individual language) in people who speak the same language.

Psycho-linguistic components

The psycho-linguistic component plays an important role in the modification of information, in situations when the sender utilizes a familiar linguistic variation. During the information encoding, the sender uses a foreign language, which he knows, and is therefore obliged to follow the recipient in decoding the information, namely in the correct transmission of its content. If there is a need of information decoding, then the sender has to act in modifying the information so that the recipient transmits its full content.

Socio-linguistic components

The socio-linguistic component is one of the most important factors of communication in terms of the accurate information transmission. In this case, the information can undergo certain modifications through the communication channel. The transmission of information through the communication channel can cause problems in given situations in terms of the accurate transmission of the content, e.g. if there are audible obstacles, which influences the modification of information.

During the transmission of information through the communication channel, a series of other factors come to surface, such as modifications in the language in which the encoding has been done, or changes in the extra-linguistic reality, such

as the content of certain notions, which some time ago had had other meanings, but are now differently understood or have another completely different meaning from previous versions.

Poetry, as the art of the written word, causes difficulties in translation, because it comprises of a very specific language and has its own peculiarities, which make it completely different from translating prose. However, the translation of poetry depends very much on the translator's professionalism, qualities, general knowledge, etc.

Conclusion

In the end, we would like to say that the role of translator has always been important for purposes of successful communication among people. Umberto Eco, has justly pointed out that "the craft of translation is a profession that belongs to the future"; modern world, regardless of how advanced it may get, will not be able to make it without translators. Therefore, this difficult task shouldered by translators requires commitment, responsibility and accountability.

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