

Intercultural Complexities: Translation as a Process of Cultural Decoding, Recoding and Encoding

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ABSTRACT

Linguistic relativity (also known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis) proposes that language determines thought and the speakers of a particular language perceive the world based on the framework provided by that language. Therefore, language can be considered to be an expression of culture, individuality and identification of its own speakers. This principle has an influential implication for translation. If language shapes thought and culture, it means that ultimate translation is unattainable. Translation, in actual fact, should be considered as the de-coding, re-coding and encoding of thought and culture from one particular language used by one social group to the appropriate code of thought and culture of another group. In this world of globalization, as cultures are more and more brought into contact with one another, multicultural considerations are being brought into focal attention? We are not just translating words; rather, most importantly, we are dealing with the "cultural" aspects of the text that we are to translate. As a result, this article is to cast light on multicultural considerations in translation with the aim of providing an insight into the complex task of a translator and help him, as far as possible, overcome these complexities.

KEYWORDS: Translation, linguistic relativity, globalization, intercultural complexities.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, translation has always been a challenging concept. Many scholars, researchers, and theoreticians have tried to define it. However, defining translation is really easier said than done. If we just consider translation as the act of transferring a text from the source language into the target one, we would simply underestimate the role of other important factors like the original context of the text, the original audience as well as the unique features of the original medium, i.e. the source language, used by the author. Ginter (2002:27) believes that "if translation is defined as source text induced text production, translation into a foreign language will always be an instance of intercultural communication". Also, Trivedi (2008:2) says that it was not long time ago that a shift occurred in the way language was considered by scholars as the "...literary texts were constituted not primarily of language but in fact of culture, language being in effect a vehicle of the culture".

Needless to say, that the roles of the above-mentioned factors are of crucial importance. That is because language can never be analyzed without focusing on its culture. Language and culture are interrelated. Therefore, translation is not an easy task as the translator should have enough knowledge about the subject, source language and the target one. More than that, a successful translator is someone who can remain as loyal as possible to the message of the original text despite the fact that he is asked to change the language of it. That can never happen unless the translator has enough knowledge about both the source culture and the target one. As Ginter (2002:30) says "the translator, as it has been proved, should be an intercultural mediator".

To use an analogy, let's imagine a room with yellow walls. A painter paints the walls red. However, the room is still the same room though the color of the walls is different now. A translator should be like a painter i.e. he should change the language of the text without changing the fundamental message of the original text. Nonetheless, the translator needs to be aware of the key feature of the source and the target culture so that he can transfer the text into a new language without changing the meaning and the message of the original text. Therefore, a translator should imagine himself in the author's shoes to be able to convey the meaning and the message of a text in another language. As Gadamer (1976:57) says "to understand a text is to come to understand oneself in a kind of dialogue." This contention is confirmed by the fact that the concrete dealing with a text yields understanding only when what is said in the text begins to find expression in the interpreter's own language.

Exploring the history of translation, we notice that a new field of study, of course, is well and truly established when books, articles and encyclopedias of the subject begin to be published (Schulte & Biguenet, 1992; Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997; Baker, 1998; France, 2000; Classe, 2000; Venuti, 2000; Robinson, 2002; Gentzler, 1993, among others). This was the case for translation studies during the last few years. When scholars got to publish books, articles, and encyclopedias on translation, this field of study began to be well established. Traditionally, translation was seen as a subdivision of linguistics, on the simple basis that translation was a transaction between two languages. Catford (1965) defined translation as a "substitution of TL [i.e., Target Language] meanings for SL [i.e., Source Language] meanings." It can be noticed that translation, at its early stages, was considered to be more of a linguistic endeavor but a paradigmatic departure took place when translation turned out to be more of a complex negotiation between two cultures rather than just a transaction across linguistic codes. Hence the unit of translation is no longer considered to be structural such as a word, a phrase, or a sentence, the whole language bound with the culture should be brought into focal attention. As Melby & Foster (2010:4) say "professional translators do not limit their contextual focus to the text surrounding a word or phrase."

Multiculturalism and Globalization

Multiculturalism and globalization, being contemporary trends, have a say here because these trends have had some bearing on virtually everybody throughout the world as well as on the between-the-nations relationships appearing from the modern world order. Pym (2003:6) believes that "globalization moves things, trade increases, and innumerable products reach consumers who do not share the language and culture of the producers." Here we find that translation is not only increasing, but that it is changing its key concepts". Furthermore, as technology develops and advances at a frantic rate, nations and their cultures have, therefore, started to amalgamate. We are at the entrance of a new international paradigm. Boundaries are diminishing and dissimilarities are fading away. The well-defined outlines that were once distinguishing now lose color and become fuzzy. Translation as a task of transposition of thoughts conveyed in one language by the members of one social community into the appropriate and suitable expression of another community demands a process of cultural de-coding, re-coding and en-coding. Within this era of globalization, where communication is a matter of everyday life, multicultural considerations are being taken into account more than ever by many translators and scholars in applied linguistics. A translator having a full command of both languages should first decode all the cultural values of the language being translated and encode the same values into the target language while making the required adjustments based on the values of the target community. Bassnett & Lefevere (1998:138-139) believe that "the study of translation, like the study of culture, needs a plurality of voices. And similarly, the study of culture always involves an examination of the processes of decoding, recoding, and encoding that comprise translation." The main point to be made here is that we are not just dealing with words written in a certain time, space and socio political situation; rather, it is the "cultural" portion of the text that we should cope with. The process of re-coding across cultures, should subsequently share out corresponding values in respect to the target culture to ensure trustworthiness in the eyes of the intended reader.

Having in mind all the key factors influencing the translation process, translators may find themselves in a state of doubt with many questions surrounding them. Ginter (2002) believes that complying with "cultural issues" is the main problem of the translators:

"The main problem for the translator is how to comply with cultural issues, i.e. to decide which issues take priority: the cultural aspects of the source language community, the cultural aspects of the target language community, or perhaps a combination of the two, a compromise between two or more cultures? The choice of cultural strategy may result in source-culture bound translation (the translation stays within the source language culture – so called foreignisation), target-culture bound translation (the translation stays within the target language culture – so called domestication) or in a 'hybrid', where the translation is a product of a compromise between two or more cultures". (p. 28)

As translators, we are confronted with a foreign-though-unfamiliar culture that necessitates its message to be conveyed in a familiar way. That culture conveys its idiosyncrasies in a "culture-bound" mode; i.e., there are proverbs, cultural words and a great number of idiomatic expressions that are inherently and exclusively connected to the intended culture. So we are called upon to do a cross-cultural translation whose success will depend on our understanding of the culture(s) we are working with. AS Ginter says (2002:27) "translation is recognized as an act of culture-specific communication. A translator is the first reader of the other culture as is shown in the foreign language text and, consequently, has to present the other in a primary process."

To remedy these intercultural differences, many theorists have proposed different theories regarding cultural translation. Nida (1964) claimed that dissimilarities between cultures may cause stricter barriers for the translator than do dissimilarities in language structure. Regarding translation of cultural elements, he pays more attention to

dynamic equivalence which strives to join the receptor with modes of behavior appropriate within the context of his own culture without insisting that he understands the cultural patterns of the source-language context. However, finding a balance between the source and the target culture is a demanding job. Ginter (2002) gives the following comments on the difficulty of "bridging the gap between two cultures":

"Hence, the translator will have to bridge the gap, small or large, between two cultures. Culture is to be understood not only in the narrower sense of man's advanced intellectual development as reflected in the arts, but also in the broader anthropological sense of all socially conditioned aspects of human life, as a totality of knowledge, proficiency and perception. Culture has thus to do with common factual knowledge, usually including political institutions, education, history and current affairs as well as religion and customs". (p. 27)

Newmark (1988) defined culture as "the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression," consequently recognizing that each language community owns its own specific cultural characteristics. He further introduced "Cultural word," words that readers are unlikely to understand, and proposed some translation strategies for this kind of concept depending on the particular type of the text, requirements of the readership and client and the relative prominence of the cultural word in the text.

According to Newmark's classification (1988) cultural words can be sorted out in the following way:

- 1) Ecology: hills, winds, plains
- 2) Material Cultures: food, clothes, houses
- 3) Social Culture: work and leisure
- 4) Organizations, Customs, Activities, Procedures, Concepts:
 - Political and administrative
 - Religious
 - artistic
- 5) Gestures and Habits

accordingly, he proposed contextual factors for translation process being inclusive of:

- 1- Purpose of text
- 2- Motivation and cultural, technical and linguistic level of readership
- 3- Importance of referent in SL text
- 4- Setting (does recognized translation exist?)
- 5- Decency of word/referent
- 6- Future or referent.

Language and culture may accordingly be viewed as being strongly related and both aspects must be taken into consideration for translation. When striving for a good translation of cultural words and notions, Newmark (1988) recommends two contrasting methods: transference and componential analysis. As he puts it, transference gives "local color," keeping cultural names and concepts. Although accentuating culture, yet to be meaningful to the readers, he declared that this method may lead to problems and reduce the comprehension of particular aspects. The importance of the role of translation, as a way of communication, made him propose componential analysis which he claims to be "the most accurate translation procedure, which excludes the culture and highlights the message".

To fill the cultural gaps and help the translators out as much as possible Newmark (1998) suggested the following strategies:

- 1) Naturalization:

An SL word can be transferred into TL text in its original form.

- 2) Couplet, triplet and quadruplet:

A technique/strategy adopted by the translator while transferring or naturalizing in order to avoid any possible misapprehension: as he puts it, it is a variety of strategies blended together to tackle one problem.

- 3) Neutralization:

Neutralization is some sort of paraphrase at the level of word. When the SL word is neutralized it is paraphrased with some culture free words.

- 4) Descriptive and functional equivalent:

While explaining a source language cultural word there are two elements: one is descriptive and the other one would be functional. Descriptive equivalent deals with size, color and composition. The functional equivalent deals with the purpose or function the SL cultural-specific word is to fulfill.

- 5) Explanation as footnote:

The translator also has the choice to give further information to the target language reader. He may well provide this added information in a footnote.

6) Cultural equivalent:

The source language cultural word can also be translated into its appropriate target language cultural-corresponding item.

7) Compensation:

Compensation can be applied when facing a shortcoming regarding meaning, pragmatic effect or metaphor in some part of a text. The item or concept can be compensated in other part of the text through the thoughtful provision of further appropriate information or additional clues to get the precise cultural-specific concept across.

Hervey and Higgins (2002) also supported cultural translation rather than the literal one. According to Hervey & Higgins (2002) acknowledging literal translation leads to the assumption that there's no cultural translation at work. But what is evident is that there are some cultural obstacles to be taken care of. Hervey & Higgins (2002) believe that the choice of features should be indigenous to target culture not to the features in source culture. Here the foreign features should be reduced and to some extent naturalized. They provide a scale ranging from exoticism; an extreme which is mostly based on source culture, to cultural transplantation which is mostly based on target culture. These scales include 1) Exoticism where the degree of adaptation is low, 2) Calque including TL words in SL structure, 3) Cultural Borrowing; that is transferring the SL expression verbatim into the TL with no adaptation of SL expression since it is believed that after a while they usually become a standard in TL, 4) Communicative Translation which is adopted for culture specific clichés such as idioms, proverbs, fixed expression, etc. In such cases the translator substitutes SL words with an existing concept in target culture, and 5) Cultural Transplantation where the whole text is rewritten in target culture. Wiersema (2004) also shared his idea regarding the concept of globalization and translation. He claimed that translation can be done in a more foreignizing/eroticizing manner in a way that culturally bound elements are not translated. He supposed that this trend contributes to learning and understanding foreign cultures.

Conclusion

From the above discussion and reviewing the related literature, it is inevitably evident that translation has more-than-ever come to be more of a cultural task than a linguistic one. In the world of postmodernism, where multiculturalism and globalization have even more led to hot debates and controversies over the role of culture in communication, translation as a way of communication is not free from controversies. Many theorists and translators no longer view translation as a linguistic endeavor. Scholars like Nida (1964), Newmark (1988), Hervey and Higgins (2002), Wiersema (2004) and many others have focused on this issue and have tried to come up with different ideas on how to handle these intercultural complexities. The translator can decide that SL cultural points be transferred into the TL with no adaptation on the basis that this in itself leads to learning the foreign culture. Another possibility is that SL cultural points be neutralized in such a way that some requirements like decency be met. However, the present study suggests that translation can best be viewed as a process of cultural decoding; where the SL culture should be decoded by the translator who is assumed to have a good command of both SL and TL culture, recoding and encoding the same concepts into the TL culture with the norms and standards like social, political, administrative, and religious ones thoughtfully and conservatively taken into consideration. Although many have tried to overcome this hurdle in translation, the answer to the problem is not clear-cut yet. This all depends on the translator's answers to these questions: what should be translated? How should it be translated? And many other questions like these remain to be answered by the translator while translating a piece of text.

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