

Limitations on Two Lexical Translation Strategies: Borrowing and Literal Translation

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Abstract

In many cases the translator finds himself faced with the task of having to fill the gap in the lexical system of the target culture. To overcome this difficulty and achieve cultural transfer from the source language to the target language, he / she uses available translation strategies (e.g., substitution, literal translation, borrowing, omission, paraphrase, addition, etc.). His / her decision to choose one rather than another of the available strategies is governed by linguistic and communicative considerations. Since reflecting on the linguistic and communicative constraints of every translation strategy lies beyond the scope of the study, the paper intends only to investigate the linguistic and communicative constraints that govern the use of two strategies, namely borrowing and literal translation. Examples illustrating these constraints will be drawn from different language pairs. This will be followed by a discussion of the study implications for translator trainees.

Keywords: translation strategies, borrowing, literal translation, linguistic constraints, communicative constraints

Introduction

Translation theorists agree that translation, in a sense, is understood as a transfer process from a source culture text to a target culture text. There are areas where the two texts neatly match, and thus transfer is likely to be easy in that the translator encounters no translation problems to be solved. Conversely, there are areas where the two texts do not match. According to Vinay & Darbelnet (1958), there are elements that are available in the source language, but are absent from the target language.

The failure of the two languages to match makes the transfer process from the source text to the target text even more challenging, because it requires the translator to carefully use rational translation strategies to bring about more effective and efficient transfer, taking into account the context of situation in which the translational act of communication takes place. Effective transfer

refers to the translator's potential for choosing appropriate translation strategies to solve a specific translation problem.

Translators can achieve cultural transfer when they come up with something that will fit the expression for the unmatched element of the source culture. According to Beekman and Callow (1974), this can be achieved through a variety of translation strategies which include borrowing, literal translation, definition, substitution, omission, lexical creation, and addition. Literal translation and borrowing are used to fill the lexical gap in the target language, while other oblique strategies, notably substitution, omission, and perhaps definition are employed to smooth over cultural differences, so that the ultimate receiver (receiver of the translation) remains unaware of their existence.

Linguistic limitations constrain the translator's freedom of choice regarding the strategy to apply in a particular case. Linguistically, the type of the strategy will depend on the nature of the contrastive relationship between the source and the target languages, on the textual properties of the two texts involved, and on the translational traditions in the target language. Communicatively, the translator's assessment of the sender's communicative intent in making reference to the cultural feature in question will depend on the nature of the strategy chosen and thus on his / her understanding of the communicative role of that cultural feature.

It should be noted here that the choice of a particular translation strategy does not mean that it will bring about an ideal or adequate translation. Actually, translations cannot be taken on a true vs false basis neither on black-white dichotomy, because the solution for the translation problem is not determined by a pre-set criteria or selections that can be subjected to absolute verification. A given translation can only be judged as wrong when the point in question is mistranslated as being off the line. For this reason, it would be more plausible to speak of varying degrees of translation appropriateness in lieu of accurate vs inaccurate translations.

The study is confined to the conditions under which borrowing and literal translation may be justified. The conditions are best expressed in terms of linguistic and communicative constraints. Linguistic constraints refer here to the extent to which the morpho-syntactic rules of the target language can either impair or facilitate the assimilation of the borrowed element. On the other hand, communicative constraints refer to the conditions that are likely to facilitate or impede communication.

Communicative Limitations on Transliteration (Borrowing)

Borrowing is simply the taking of a word (words) from a source language text into a target language text without translation. The borrowed element is either transliterated into the receptor language with little change in its graphic form, or gets adapted to the phonological and syntactic rules and normal pronunciation of the receptor language. When the phonetic articulation of the word is preserved with little change in its pronunciation, the word is in the transcription. By contrast, the transliteration is employed when a word is transferred from one writing system to another writing system with apparent change in its pronunciation. For example, the Arabic word كسر (to break), when converted to English, would therefore be *kasara* in the transcription and *kasara* in the transliteration. The translator opts for borrowing in its general sense when dealing with source-language items that have no equivalents in the target language. The transliterated elements can fill the lexical gaps and assure cultural transfer if the essential cultural elements have been transferred previously or simultaneously e.g., by means of definition or graphic representations. Otherwise, the transliterated element may provide little help, if any, to the reader. Since this is usually not the case, transliteration is avoided or combined with some other strategies, such as definition or substitution, or is accompanied with the translator's comments and explanations in the form of footnotes.

Economy of the language constitutes a communicative limitation on borrowing. If the cultural item in question in the text being translated occurs so often and has no equivalent in the target culture, then borrowing the element is preferable to translating it. In other words, borrowing the unmatched element is appreciated if it occurs repeatedly in the text, but not if it has only a single occurrence. The repeated use of the foreign expression or element in the text can be seen as being culture-in-focus and an opportunity for the receiver to absorb both the form and the cultural content of the borrowed element. Whereas a foreign element or expression that occurs once in the text may not be of special significance, and thus teaching it to the receiver would be considered uneconomical (Ivir, 1977: 176). For example, when X wants to marry Y in some Arab conservative areas, X's parents send *jaahah*, a group of people as mediators to Y's parents to get their permission on allowing their daughter to marry X. The one-time occurrence of the word *jaahah* in a text being translated into English, for instance, would not necessarily justify borrowing. But borrowing will be communicatively justified only when the cultural item in question is the focus of communication. That is, if the element *jahah* is being discussed as one essential step along with other following steps that are deemed necessary for marriage to take place. In short, if a contrast between arranged marriage and non-arranged marriage was part of the sender's communicative

intent. If the element is not culture-in-focus, it would be regarded as a mere cultural background which would not justify borrowing.

The amount of borrowing plays a role in the translator's decision regarding his choice. While occasional borrowings are more easily absorbed into the target text, their greater density per page or text impairs rather than facilitates the process of communication. According to Ivir (1978), a text that is bound with newly introduced cultural, scientific, or borrowed technological items is certainly difficult to process and is not well received by the audience. The excessive occurrence of the same borrowed item in a given text, however, may be well justified if it is perceived of as being fluid, triggering multiple meanings without any clear temporal reference or historical context, such as *imperialism* whose translation into Arabic triggers lengthy and contentious interpretations, due to its philosophical nature.

Another possible communicative limitation on borrowing is the sociolinguistic attitudes that linguists and philologists of the target culture hold. The translator must be aware of such attitudes. It might be difficult for the translator to borrow a foreign element if the linguistic community's attitudes are puritan. It is important to note that attitudes are neither immutable nor applicable across the board. According to Ivir (1987), a language that seems extremely conservative at one time may become less so at another time. Speaking of Arabic, for example, there were more Arab linguists and philologists who resisted any foreign encroachment whatsoever upon classical Arabic at the turn of the past century than they are today. Arabic today is even a bit more receptive to foreign terms not only in the scientific and technological domain, but also in the literary genres. Likewise, German is perceived now more flexible to accommodate English lexical items than it used to be; conversely, English has developed in the opposite direction. French is trying to defend itself in the first place from English lexical borrowings since other languages are perceived as a threat to the national language/ culture because of the massive scale of "invasion". Such view is also reflected in the language policy pursued by Iceland to preserve its national identity since the community there is not large enough and linguistically fragile.

Likewise, Arab readers and listeners may react negatively to the use of an archaic Arabic word as equivalent to a borrowed element as in the case of *jammās* (quick-footed camel or ass), being used by Arab purists as an equivalent to the English word *tram*. According to Stetkevych (1970), Arab purists in Cairo were forced finally to tolerate the foreign word *tram*, because *jammās*, which is etymologically of Arabic origin, was a point of ridicule by the people. In a sense, some words that are etymologically of an Arabic origin might be shunned when they seem distant and thus are not well received by Arab listeners and readers. In

a similar vein, lack of appreciation is also evident in the reluctance of the English speakers and readers to use the French borrowed words *oeuvre* and *auteur* into English literary criticism. They sound exotic, for they may not be understood outside their field or may be regarded as pretentious.

Linguistic Limitations on Borrowing

Linguistic limitations on borrowing stem from the contrastive relationship between the two languages involved. When the borrowed item fits better into the morpho-syntactic rules of the target language, it is likely to be easier, so that it can be used as if it were originally an element of the target language. For instance, Arabic can easily borrow a word like *philosophy* (*falsafah*), which means 'science of wisdom' since it poses no pronunciation and spelling problems, and can be easily manipulated in different grammatical positions, chiefly in its derivative and attributive forms. Unlike *philosophy*, *Ideology* can be linguistically naturalized with some reluctance on two accounts: it is not easy to pronounce the term in its dual and plural forms, which is in violation of the rule of Arabic brevity and ease of articulation. On the other hand, there are seven different orthographic variations for *ideology* in English-Arabic dictionaries and encyclopedias: *aideologia*, *ideologia*, *al-aideologiyya*, *al-ideologia*, to mention a few of them. These variations pose spelling and derivation problems and hence adjusting them to the morpho-syntactic rules of Arabic may become unappreciative.

There is no escape, however, from admitting that the problem of new vocabulary should call for innovative ways of derivation; derivation by analogy in the case of Arabic, to modernize Arabic by keeping it in active communication with imported terminology. Illuminated by such consideration, Al-Karmi (1988), for example, does not refrain from creating a quadri-literal root *dakrāṭa* 'to democratize' from *democracy* instead of penta-literal root *damakrāṭa* 'to democratize', since the former suits more the taste of people and is easier in pronunciation even in its singular, dual, and plural forms. Thus *dakrāṭah* 'one single democracy', *dakrāṭataan* 'two democracies', *dakrāṭaat* 'democracies' have fewer sounds than *demokraṭiyya* 'singular', *demokraṭiyyataan* 'dual', and *demokraṭiyyaat* 'plural', and accordingly are easily pronounced.

Another constraint on borrowing is the extent to which the target and source languages are seen as typologically and genetically similar. A source language text can be easily borrowed and assimilated into a target language text if the two languages involved belong to the same language family. According to McArthur (1998), the absorption of the Spanish words *armada* and *guerrilla* into English offers few problems since English and Spanish are two Indo-European languages, written with the Roman alphabets. However, some elements may be

too alien for convenient absorption. For example, although Mexican Spanish *taco* and *chili* have not posed assimilation problems, the phrase *frijoles refritos*, meaning a traditional Mexican dish of cooked and smashed beans, has because the sequence in which the noun and adjective occur as well as the double plural are alien to English. As a result, the loan translation *refried beans*, has become the choice for non-bilinguals. This implies that the translator has to make constant choices whether to translate or borrow whenever a translation problem is encountered.

Borrowing is also avoided for linguistic reasons in another case, namely, when the two languages involved share the same lexical item but is perceived differently in both languages. Thus, the German *Gymnasium*, meaning a high school, is not easily borrowed into English where it refers to an equipped indoor sports building.

Limitations on Literal Translation

A word-for-word translation works with some languages, but not others depending on the sentence structure. Bosco (2011), for example, cites the Spanish sentence: "*El equipo está trabajando para terminar el informe*", which would translate literally into English as *The team is working to finish the report*", but could not be translated into French or German because their sentence structures are different. This is not to say that all Spanish sentences could translate literally into English but not into French or German. For example, *El equipo experimentado está trabajando para terminar el informe* translates into English as *The experienced team is working to finish the report* "experienced" and "team" are reversed.

One communicative constraint on literal translation has to do with the type of the text. While free translations are more acceptable than literal translations in literary texts, since they are able to preserve the sense of the original and the norms of the target language, they are not tolerated when it comes to judicial or diplomatic documents. In the latter, the accurate reproduction of the entire content of the source text without embellishment or modification is so important.

Linguistically, brevity and ease of articulation are two commonly preferable features in the literally translated items. Speaking of Arabic, Arab linguists generally prefer one-word translation terms to two-word translation terms whenever necessary. A one-word term translation can be both derivative and attributive, whereas a two-word translation terms are much less likely to be attributive and derivative. Thus, the translator should be aware of this linguistic tendency and thus avoid the lengthy Arabic translation *al-shaatir wa al-mashtoor wa ma baynahuma kaamikh* for the English 'sandwich', which is obviously in violation of the one-term rule. Even the use of *shatīirah*

"sandwich," which comes from an existing tri-literal root *shaṭara* "to slice" by Najib Mahfuz (1964), does not seem to be adequate literal translation since *shaṭīrah* is an already existing lexical label denoting items other than *sandwich*, such as pizza, bread, and toasty. Under such circumstances, the literal translation is to be avoided.

More pertinently, literal translations are not welcome if they trigger certain syntactic clumsiness in the target language, such as the word *indivisibility* which is rendered into Arabic by rearranging its component morphemes into lengthy noun phrases: *adamu al-qaabiliyyati li ttajazzu* 'lack of the susceptibility to division'. If a given text being translated into Arabic is dogged by this term, such lengthy clumsy literal translation will recur in such a way that will not keep the readers interested in the translation. In other words, that lengthy translation may be tolerated if the English term occurs just once, but not if it recurs so often in the text.

Implications for Translator Trainees

Given the fact that choices of translation strategies are not automatic, translator trainees should be trained in the use of strategies as types of solutions for specific points in the text that require one to make choices. With more practice, trainees are likely to become more equipped and make effective and efficient translators. This may be achieved in a cooperative atmosphere where trainees work together with teachers and experts in a supportive, productive working environment that is conducive to developing trainees' self-confidence in the interpretation of the missing equivalents in the source culture, defining problems, and evaluating each others' solution. This collaborative effort can lead to awareness-raising learning process and produce adaptable, informed and resourceful translators.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the communicative and linguistic constraints on two translation strategies: borrowing and literal translation. The translator's decision to either borrow or translate literally depends on his/her knowledge of the contrastive relations between the source and target languages. It also depends on the translator's understanding of the communicative function of the given element to be translated. These can help the translator to choose the strategy that will suit the context of situation in which the translational communication takes place.

العوامل التي تحكم استخدام استراتيجيات الترجمة

محمد القرعان، قسم الترجمة، جامعة اليرموك، إربد، الأردن.

ملخص

يضطّر المترجم في حالات كثيرة إلى البحث عن مفردات لملاء الفجوة في النظام اللغوي للغة التي يترجم إليها. ويستخدم المترجم أو المترجمة للتغلب على هذه المشكلة والنجاح في نقل المعنى من "اللغة المترجم منها" إلى اللغة "المترجم إليها" استراتيجيات الترجمة المعروفة مثل التعويض، الترجمة الحرفية، الاقتراض، الحذف، إعادة الصياغة والإضافة الخ. إلا أن قرار المترجم أو المترجمة في اختيار إستراتيجية دون أخرى تحكمه اعتبارات لغوية وأخرى تتعلق بنقل المعنى. ولأن إلقاء الضوء على الاعتبارات اللغوية وتلك المتعلقة بنقل المعنى الخاصة بكل إستراتيجية من استراتيجيات الترجمة يقع خارج نطاق هذا البحث، فإن البحث سيقصر على دراسة الاعتبارات التي تحكم استخدام إستراتيجيتي الاقتراض والترجمة الحرفية فحسب، مدعومة بأمثلة توضيحية من لغتين مختلفتين أو أكثر. ويتبع ذلك مناقشة أبعاد هذه الدراسة على المترجمين المتدربين.

الكلمات الرئيسية: استراتيجيات الترجمة، الاقتراض، الترجمة الحرفية، القيود اللغوية، قيود على إيصال المعنى

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