

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract:

Translation is essentially an act of communication. It is the transferring a message from the source language into target language between two systems of signs or languages where the message of one system of signs is replaced with equivalent textual material of the other language by expressing its meaning and to an extent the style of language. Therefore, it is a replacement of message or contents of one language into another language. This practice undergoes a series of processes and there are barriers that the act of translation must scale through to be communicative, effective and complete. Among these challenges or barriers are social and cultural differences that exist between and among languages, nations and geographical entities. In most of the countries, a large number of social and cultural difference are observed. India is one unique example where such diversities are most evident. Languages represent the social realities, therefore, as a result, the varying conceptions of these realities of languages, the effective translation between various groups and communities is hindered. The present article seeks to identify the nature of these differences and investigate some of the hindrances emanating due to social and cultures factors that occur in the course of translation. A discussion on these barriers will bring together the scholars of translation studies to brainstorm and suggest ways to address them.

Keywords:

Barriers
Social
Culture
Intercultural
Equivalence
Translation
Society
Diversities

Introduction

Culture is the foundation of man's existence and it wields enormous influence on him in a number of ways since a person is born into a culture. Almost every society or nation has its own indigenous culture that defines its identity and shapes the perspective of its people and every sphere of their lives. It is for this simple reason that culture is seen as 'the sum of the life of a people, including their attitudes, values, beliefs, arts, science, modes of perception and habits of thought and activity' (Blackburn, 2009:86).

Culture too has a social angle; hence, it encompasses the social behaviors and norms found in human beings that are transmitted through social learning in human societies. These integrate and identify people as a group in a given time and space (sphere). As such, a culture is usually practiced within the range of a collection of people known as community or group. Such a collection of people is known as society or community which must have a social fabric of its customs, rituals, beliefs and social practices. Cultures are the pockets of the consciousness of way of life of a particular society. Dennis O Neil finds it as related to social structures of the society and states:

‘Cultures are internally affected by both forces encouraging change and forces resisting change. These forces are related to both social structures and natural events and are involved in the perpetuation of cultural ideas and practices within current structures which themselves are subject to change. O’Neil, Dennis (2006).

Acknowledging this fact, Durkheim also maintains:

There are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling which possess the remarkable property of existing outside the consciousness of the individual. Not only are these types of behavior and thinking external to the individual, but they are endued with a compelling and coercive power by virtue of which whether they wish or not, they impose themselves upon him (Durkheim 1973:51).

There is an intricate link between culture and society in the sense that cultural activities are essential for a society and meaningful to its distinct identity. While the individuals possess their own identity, they display a collective culture as a group and the most complex and rich cultures are those which are associated with society or a nation. Such cultures manifest in historical events, characters, community customs, family norms, religion, economic activities and other systems and concepts of values etc. Translation becomes an effective and meaningful tool in order to establish connections with these groups and communities; facilitating inter-cultural communication. it would be worthwhile under the circumstances to explore as to how it gets affected by a cultural communication point of view due to various socio-cultural factors and such factors be resolved and effectively further strengthened?

(Inter) Cultural communication

Culture is a system of frames, and any communication through the process of translation that occurs between and among cultures falls into the category of cultural communication. It is a kind of verbal and nonverbal communication across different social and cultural boundaries. When two or more people from different cultural and social backgrounds interact and communicate with each other or one another, intercultural communication is supposed to have taken place. It is more than simply sending a message or receiving a message with people from different cultures than ours which means that the essence of the intercultural communication lies in understanding, influencing, pursuing and making

understood, and thus it remains very complex and challenging. Hall has called it as cross-cultural communication (Hall: 1996) and stressed the need of understanding it tangibly ‘culture is communication and communication is culture....by and large, it is useless to deal with the culture at meta level (Hall, 1959: 186).

Translation

Translation studies is an emerging discipline that is assigned with the responsibility of ensuring that the message or the contents encoded in words and texts in the source language are replaced or re-stated in their original and exact form creating a similar echo in the target text. There are several approaches to the act of translation which involve sociolinguists, linguists, and semioticians at one or the other times. Let us examine some of them as under:

The socio linguists expect that the social contexts define what is and is not translatable and what is or is not acceptable through selection, filtering, and even censorship. While the communication approach of translation asserts that meaning must be translated and not the language which is nothing more than a vehicle and can even be an obstacle, hence called ‘*theory of sense*’. The hermeneutic approach enunciates that any human communication is a translation and translation is not a science but an exact of the source text and what the original text ‘*means to say*’. The linguistic approach considers any translation from the point of view of its fundamental unit that is the word, the syntagm and the sentence. The literary theory considers that a translation should not be accepted as linguistic endeavor alone but a literary one and the language which has ‘energy’ is manifested through words that are the result of experiencing a culture. The semiotic view considers translation as a way of interpreting texts in which encyclopedic contents vary and each socio-cultural context is unique, *just like gangajal (holy Ganga water or sindoor or suhagin, suhagin, kalyanam etc.)*

This polarized view of various approaches to translation has been noted by Bell. He says:

The translation theorists, almost without exception, have made a little systematic use of the technique and insights of contemporary linguistics and the linguists, for their part, have been at best neutral and at worst actually hostile to the notion of a theory of translation (Bell, 1991: xv).

Such range of approaches has created many challenges in the progress of translation since translation seeks to integrate the source and target language cultures through transmitting the message across and facilitating dialogue between societies and cultures. Bell considers the equivalence as performing the role, says:

‘The transformation of a text originally in one language into an equivalent text in a different language retaining, as far as possible the content of the message and the formal features and functional roles of the original text (Bell, 1991: xv).

The role of translation here demands perfection, competence and effort to retain the exact of the original text dealing with the complex live wire of human social relationship, and hence the go-between two unknown entities i.e. societies or cultures or groups. Translation has several approaches and can assume a number of terms with a different meaning. Munday says:

‘the term translation itself can have several meanings; it can refer to the general subject field, the product (the text has been translated) or the process (the act of producing the translation or otherwise known as translating). The process of translation between two different written languages involves the translator changing an original written text (the source text or ST) in the original verbal language (the source language of SL) into a written text (the target text of TT) in a different verbal language (the target language or TL) (Munday, 2005: 4-5)

Translation is a complex operation. Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler, in their book on translation and power relation, write:

Translation, thus, is not simply an act of faithful reproduction but, rather a deliberate and conscious act of deletion, assemblage, structuration, and fabrication-----and even, in some cases of falsification, refusal of information, counterfeiting and the creation of secret codes. In these ways, translators, as much as creative writers and politicians, participate in the powerful acts that create knowledge and shape cultures (Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler 2002: xxi).

Similar views have been expressed by Esperanca Bielsa and Susan Bassnett in their book Translation in Global News (2009: 7):

The role of the translator similarly can be seen from a dual perspective; on the one hand, the translator makes the communication between cultures possible, enable people with no access to the language of other people to open up a dialogue. On the other had the translator may collude in a process that either establish or reinforce unequal power relations between people.

The views expressed above amply indicate what constitutes translation and what role it (and also the translators) plays in the transmission of message or content of the source to target languages as text and therefore, can justify the need of translation. Translation is, thus, essential for many overt and covert reasons as it is assigned with a role of preservation of words and text in their original form even after undergoing a considerable language change process. This role of translation may not be easily achieved unless the challenges are identified and strategies worked out, for the field (discipline) of translation studies is still developing, adding up news approaches and techniques of effective translation in a complex multicultural and multilingual societies that we live today.

Anuradha Dingwany puts in this way:

The process of translation involved in making another culture comprehensible entail varying degree of

violence, especially when the culture being translated is constituted as other (as quoted by Susan Bassnett in Translation Studies, 2003:4)

Social and Cultural: A conglomerate

Considering the intricate complexities of the social and cultural fabric of our times in our societies, a look at the social and cultural mix would help in understanding the relationships and processes of communication that operates within and outside the social groups and communities. While the term social gives an impression of a large picture of the society, often tend to escape from the individual, on the other hand, the term cultural or culture creates an impression of the sum of a life of totality i.e. people's life.

In Cliff's notes the culture and society have been defined as:

Culture consists of the beliefs, behaviors, objects, and other characteristics common to the members of a particular group or society. Through culture, people and groups define themselves, conform to society's shared values, and contribute to society. Thus, culture includes many societal aspects: language, customs, values, norms, morals, rules, tools, technologies, products, organizations, and institutions--- **society** as the people who interact in such a way as to share a common culture. The **cultural bond** may be ethnic or racial, based on gender, or due to shared beliefs, values, and activities. The term society can also have a geographic meaning and refer to people who share a common culture in a particular location (accessed on 20th Feb. 2018: <http://www.cliffsnotes.com/culture-and-society-defined>).

The Longman Encyclopedia defines the culture as:

The collection of meanings, values, morals, modes of thinking, patterns of behavior, idioms of thought, of speech, ways of life, etc that identify a particular nation-state, group, or social category (1989: 271).

Culture, thus, is all-encompassing and relates to almost all our actions and concerns. It is dynamic and changes as the societies evolve. The internal and external factors such as socio-cultural changes, globalization, displacement, migration and scientific development all influence the behaviors of individuals which is reflected in the culture of the group or the community. Within a culture are carried out the social relations which means sharing a common culture in a particular location or racial bond on shared beliefs, values, and activities. It entails in social activities and interactions which are an important and major concern in translation. In the majority of our actions in society, the agent is 'we' rather than 'I' as the former aggregate the individual actions and represents a group or community of which the latter is a part. Man is by nature is a social animal who lives and relates to another human in

groups. Living in groups and communities which practices complex cultures influences their social relations and actions within and outside the group. Many factors are responsible for these complexities. Blackburn states:

...how much in the way of social bonding should emerge from our interactions with each other? Language, money, and law,... are social entities, dependent on society for their existence and their function? (Blackburn, 2009: 77).

In social relations, language is a major factor and means of expression of a society. Pondering over the role of the language in the lives of human beings and societies, Bassnett refers Edward Sapir, which claims that *'language is a guide to social reality'* and that human beings are at the mercy of the language that has become medium of expression for their society. Experiences, he asserts is largely determined by the language habits of community and each structure represents a separate reality.

Bassnett further refers to Sapir:

...no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached (as quoted by Bassnett: 2003: 13)

It is a fact that wherever interaction among individuals takes place can be assumed as a society but in this interaction, the languages also play a crucial role and we need 'a' language for each social group to represent the realities of 'a' particular group as envisaged by Sapir. Language is a commodity which is required not only for social interactions but in trade, commerce, a market which eventually leads to the necessity of money and assets and patterns and guidelines of behaviors and sanctions for respecting the autonomy of different societies and groups. For regulated behaviors in all these spheres, we need to frame law. This would automatically bring us an understanding of a system whereby we are governed by a set of norms in our dealings and relationships that belongs to a group or society.

Humans live in social groups and have their own distinct cultures of language and expression. A social and cultural dimension in translations, therefore, essential in every form of interaction. Approaches and models of translation are largely guided by focusing on target language and target text reader. Languages which facilitate interactions needs mastery which is not only essential to understand the message conveyed through the complex structures of the source languages but also to interpret them and understand the connotative and emotive meanings of the message much beyond the referent meaning. The question of different types of equivalence in view of various shades of meaning has been defined by Koller (1979a:186-91) as:

Denotative equivalence (content variance by other literature, says Koller), Connotative equivalence

(related to lexical choice, especially between near synonyms. Puts it as stylistic equivalence), Text normative equivalence (different types of texts behaving in different ways), Pragmatic equivalence (communicative equivalence- Nida's dynamic equivalence), Formal equivalence' (expressive equivalence). (as quoted by Munday, 2001:47-48)

Chomsky also underlines that a speaker can produce a new sentence of his language on any given situation and the need of ability of (target) speakers (listener) to understand it immediately even though it may very new to them. He says:

'Most of our linguistic experience, both as speakers and hearers is with new sentences (Chomsky 1964:50).

A good translator, therefore, needs to understand the varying approaches to translation in different socio-cultural settings and multicultural and multi-linguistic diversities. Since each language has its own world in which the idioms, proverbs, collocations, and models of expressions play a significant role, the challenge before a translator is daunting as to rest on the equivalence and move ahead and make the text communicable to the target reader in his/her own cultural and social settings. Some answers to these problems can be traced in a long essay of Gayatri C Spivak (*The politics of Translation*) where the title of Mahashveta Devi's 'Standayaini' has been translated as 'Breast giver', which is a more stylistic expression with an alternate translation as a 'Wet nurse'. Both have created a serious discussion in the minds. Spivak concludes this with her views:

In the text, Mahashweta uses proverbs that are startling even in the Bengali. The translator of the 'Wet nurse' leaves them out. She tries not to translate these hard bits of earthly wisdom, contrasting with class-specific access to modernity, also represented in the story. In fact, if the two translations are read side by side the loss of the rhetorical silence of the original can be felt from one to the other (Gayatri C Spivak, 1998, 95-118).

Peter Newmark gives some procedures for cultural translation and agrees that cultural equivalents are usually inaccurate but they are a shorthand, have emotional force, are useful for immediate effect on the reception, and they transport the readership uncritically into the TL culture. He also maintains culture as 'way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression (1988:94). Hervey and Higgins also consider the translation as involving not just two languages, but a transfer from one culture to another. (Quoted by Dominica E. Ukpong, in *Social and Cultural Barriers in Translation*). Considering all the arguments it can be established that the translation in social and cultural situations must be properly studied and contextualized. Such approaches will have minimum challenges in the process.

Obstacles and challenges in translating social and cultural text

It is obvious that the words and text to be translated are always housed in a culture which has social implications, therefore, it is imperative for a translator to study the ethos and values of the source text culture as well as the norms and behaviors of target language culture as it receives the cultural expressions. The language is equally significant since human beings have highly complex and phenomenon ability of expressions through language. The creative literature, the especially poetic license can give immense freedom of using idioms, metaphors; proverbs heighten the effect of the writings. Allusions are a really troublesome area for translators because they seem to be culture-specific portions of a source language. All kinds of allusions, especially cultural and historical allusions, need to be explicated in the translation for the target culture. A popular saying describes the poet at reaching any height '*Jahan na pahunch ravi vahan pahunche kavi*'. As also the famous quote of Shakespeare goes 'there is no art to know the mind's construction of the face, also substantiate this (as quoted by Dominica E. Ukpong).

Hervey and Higgins define culture-bound terms as the terms which refer to concepts, institutions, and personnel which are specific to the source culture (2002:2). They further clarify 'culture transportation' as

'Any degree of cultural transportation involves the choices of features indigenous to the target language and the target culture in preference to features with the roots in the ST. The result is to minimize the foreign features in the TT thereby to some extent naturalizing it into the TL and its cultural settings (2997:28)

Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefebvre in the collection of essays in *Translation, History, and Culture* (1990) also focus on the deep relationship between translation and culture. They find that culture always constraints translation. The cultural turn is a way forward from translation as text to translation as a culture (as propounded by Merry Snell Hornby (1990) and as quoted by Ioana Irina Durdureanu in *Translation of cultural terms: possible or impossible?* Peter Newmark (1988:82-91) proposes different translation strategies:

transference (called transcription by Hervey)

naturalization

cultural equivalents

functional equivalents

descriptive equivalents

componential analysis

synonymy

through translation -literal of common collocation, names of organization etc.

shifts or transpositions

modulation

compensation

paraphrasing

couplets (combining two different procedures)

Notes

In her book *Gender in Translation*, Sherry Simon underlines the role of the cultural turn in translation:

“Cultural studies bring to translation an understanding of the complexities of gender and culture. It allows us to situate linguistic transfer within the multiple ‘post’ realities of today: poststructuralist, postcolonialism and postmodernism.” (Simon 1996:136 cited in Munday 2001:133).

Different theorists have provided different procedures for translating culture-specific concepts. Some scholars suggest making up a new word or explaining the meaning of the source language expression in lieu of translating it. But the translator may also choose to preserve the source language term intact or to opt for a word in the target language which seems similar to or has the same ‘relevance’ as the source language term.

The new cultural approaches have widened the horizons of translation studies as it is increasingly becoming an important discipline. We may focus on Lawrence Venuti’s “invisibility” of the translator in culture or his translation strategy; ‘domesticating’ and ‘foreignising’. The way translated texts are read in the target culture can be surmised with Venuti’s words:

a translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or non-fiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not, in fact, a translation, but the ‘original’. (Venuti 1995:1, cited in Munday 2001:146).

Cultural transpositions are equally risky and in translating the names when they are to be replaced with indigenous TL literal equivalents, Hervey and Higgins suggest:

When translating names, one must, therefore, be aware of three things: first existing options for translating a particular name; second the implications of following a particular option... and third, all the implications of a choice between exoticism, transliteration and cultural transplantation (Hervey and Higgins, 2007: 30).

It would be often seen that apart from names, there are several other situations when translation is fraught with compromise which means reconciling oneself to the fact that while one would like to do a full justice to the richness of the ST, one final TT inventively suffers from various translation losses (Hervey and Higgins, 2007:34). Cultural transportation is one good alternative which involves the

choice of features and can be seen as points along a scale between the extremes of exoticism and cultural transportation.

Exoticism – Cultural borrowing - Calque – communicative translation – cultural transplantation

The gains and the losses in different situation falling into the category of compromise continue for asking for straightforward answers. Is this compromise itself not an evidence of the inability of the translator or if he has gained effectiveness, efficiency, productivity or professionalisms ...can this be an ideal achievement? The answer can be found in the statement made by Newmark :

“In considering social culture, one has to distinguish between denotative and connotative problems of translation” (Newmark, 2001: 98).

He further adds

‘there is a translation problem due to the cultural “gap” or a “distance” between the source and target languages’ (Newmark, 2001: 24).

Bell seems to have also acknowledged the problem of appropriate equivalents for culture-specific terms of the SL in the TL. He opines:

The choice of a suitable equivalent will always depend not only on the linguistic system or systems being handled by the translator, but also on the way both the writer of the source text and the producer of the target text i.e. the translator, choose to manipulate the linguistic systems in question (Bell, 1991: 18).

Adjustments and exchanges are always deliberate and conscious decisions and arise out of compulsions and lack of choices; however, they have bearing on the translation. Since most of such strategies are just remedial therapies, Palmer states:

“The words of a language often reflect not so much the reality of the world, but the interests of the people who speak it” (Palmer, 1976: 21).

Hence, there is the role of social and culture in determining the meaning in the process of translation, giving a very narrow margin to translator and language.

Concluding Remarks:

It is true that human beings interact in social and cultural groups and come across many barriers in communication which ultimately reflect in the process of translation and infringe on the effectiveness of translation. The discussion has revealed that social and culture is inseparable and often interpolate in the process of translation. The social relations and actions always happen in a culture. It is also found that the translator, despite many alternatives makes conscious choices in transacting due to façade reason but they become part of the process. It is also established that the language has its own limitation to

express terms of a specific culture in an alien culture, even though its scope is tremendous as we see in the manipulation of speech and articulation in different expressions. It may thus be said that the closest equivalents or the near most expression of the original word or text in the Target Text are always desirable. After all, the translation is 'othering' (for one who doesn't speak the native or the source text language). Translation being part of the culture is a culture in itself and its very existence brings a chance to explore and enter into a new world, a different vision and community through the efforts and pain endured in the genuine work of a translator.

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