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Meaning and context in literary translation: Language as a cultural construction

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Abstract

The significant role of cultural context in translation entails a special focus from researchers mainly that the emotive nature of language affects the contextual meaning of expressions. The emotiveness that characterizes languages stems from the considerable position culture occupies with regard to the deliberate construction of specific types of meaning in different contexts. Culture is therefore an authoritative guide simply because the way speakers conceptualize their social interaction is based in the first place on their cultural identity. More importantly, words acquire their significance by virtue of their cultural context and thus their acquired meaning differs regarding the change that may occur within any context of interaction. It is worth noting that the problematic relation between language and culture results in an ambiguous conceptualization of textual structures mainly in terms of using one word in different contexts and for different purposes. This ambiguity can be resolved by looking at languages as outer forms of communication unable to carry anything without being colored by the power of culture. Hence, language and culture influence each other and complete one another in different fields and at all levels. Adopting a socio-cultural theory was relevant in this regard to investigate the problematic relation that exists between linguistic systems and cultural meanings and how they co-exist to produce significant expressions.

Keywords: culture, emotiveness, language, society, translation



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Conceptualizing the source text authority with respect to its components and elements independently from any outer features is of significant importance. To this end, deciphering the textual significance entails investigating the intersection of language and culture when it comes to interpreting the text signs. The formation of interpretations is therefore related to the contextualization of targeted cultural expressions, as the very idea of meaning is relative and changeable, exactly like the general usage of truth.

Introduction

The main purpose of any translation is to remain loyal to the source text through a faithful transposition of the semantic and linguistic components of the original content. Faithfulness in translation is a controversial issue mainly that the preservation of the source text beauty confronts an accurate transfer of the intended message. In this regard, the focus should be on the cultural features of the source text so as to highlight the original identity and make it known for the target reader. Translation should be concerned in the first place with the internal construction of the source text, for the intended message is not found unless the different linguistic and cultural systems that form the source text are deeply and appropriately studied. Language is the surface of an endless number of ideas, feelings, perceptions and hopes of the human mind. Therefore, to fully understand the different preoccupations of humanity one has to experience the nature of contact that humans have with language. There is no doubt that language is a social tool to encode the communicative patterns that characterize the nature of interchange among the members of society. In this respect, to examine the meaning of any textual construction, the translator needs to be sufficiently knowledgeable about the linguistic systems so that the very idea of faithfulness for the original content becomes achievable. Simply put, translation cannot be reduced to a mechanical transformation of linguistic systems with the aim of transposing the embodied message. On this basis, Lyons (198, p.291) stresses the importance of social context in the formation of linguistic systems, Lyons argues:

Much, if not all, of what is covered by the term “context” is social and falls within the scope of the socio-linguistically definable notion of the domain of discourse (cf.9.4). Many authors would include within the social context of an utterance not only the more obvious sociolinguistic variables (status, age, sex of the participants; formality or informality of the situation...), but also the author’s feelings and communicative intentions.

Language is a medium whereby authors become visible for themselves and for their communities. The parts of speech enable authors to voice out their view points about themselves, about their society and even about the world. Language uncovers the intentions of the author and allows him/her to share his/her ideas with the readers. Thus, language is crucial to foster communication among members of a given society through a sort of exchange of common preoccupations. Unfortunately, this role of language sometimes confronts communicative difficulties mainly when a given utterance is out of context. Therefore, language may be misleading and triggers misunderstanding whenever the use of the linguistic systems is not contextualized. Lyons (1981, p.227) highlights the importance of the communicative context to assure an appropriate

understanding: “the structures of utterances are determined by the use to which they are put and the communicative context in which they occur.” As translation gives much importance to the meaning, a mere transformation of the linguistic system is pointless. The intended message is usually context dependent and entails a holistic study of the general components of the inner structure that produced it.

The emotive aspect of words and their translatability

The dictionary meaning is not sufficient to understand a word within a given structure. The intended meaning of a given expression is not static since it may point to different things according to situations and chiefly to how the author perceives himself and how he/she wants others to perceive him/her. Relatedly, the dictionary meaning of a given word may be misleading and can even distort the original meaning. Such a difficulty that confronts translators comes from the cultural background of the word or expression, for every word is the representation of a social situation or an emotional state of the author. For example, Arabs use “white-faced” as an expression to describe a beautiful face; however, English people make use of the same expression to describe someone who is pale or sick. Therefore, language may be looked at as a social phenomenon because it is the product of society with the aim of guiding social contacts:

A language system is a social phenomenon, or institution, which of itself is purely abstract, in that it has no physical existence, but which is actualized on particular occasions in the language –behavior of individual members of the language-community. (Lyons, 1981, p.10)

The words and expressions that make up a text are usually not neutral or objective, for they take part in constructing a given textual structure which is usually social and culturally dependent. The subjective nature of words entails that translators are culturally competent to investigate the emotive nature of languages. Shunnaq (1993) raises attention to the problematic issue of meaning within any textual structure. According to his analysis, he stresses the fundamental role of the two types of meaning that mark any lexical item; ‘denotative meaning’ and ‘connotative meaning’. Shunnaq (1993, p.37) argues that the former can be called also propositional, conceptual, and dictionary meaning. The denotative meaning, as it is illustrated above, refers to the direct relationship between the lexical item and the non-linguistic entity it points to. As for the connotative meaning, the lexical item embodies a secondary meaning to impart some sort of emotiveness to the situation as a whole. The emotiveness and expressiveness that characterize languages emerge from the environment of speakers. Words point to how people perceive their ecological environment, social contact, and cultural heritage. Hence, language users in any community borrow their communicative patterns from those entities that form their milieu. For example, the kind of weather that characterizes a certain region plays a role in enriching the vocabulary of any language and even in fostering its productivity. In communities where the weather is known to be cold, communicants say, “they gave him a warm welcome” which refers to a hearty, hospitable kind of reception. On the other hand, people living in regions characterized by their hot weather use different expressions in their daily interaction to communicate their fears, joys and excitements. For example, Arabs say “رصدل جلت يربخ” (news that freezes the chest) to describe delighting news. Therefore, language can develop its communicative patterns along those specific associations people make with their climatic circumstances. This is simply

because people are psychologically influenced by their environment which has an impact on their use of language as well. The emotiveness of language rests upon the psychological connections that relate people with their milieu. This kind of connection which becomes visible at the level of language creates translation difficulties as it brings to light the problematic issue of translatability. In this respect, Guranlik argues:

What the word suggests, that is its connotation, can be fully important as what it denotes, the words are not only grammatical tools and symbols, but that they embody as well as ensemble of notions, concepts, and psychological reactions. (1958, p.91).

Words and expressions embody a second meaning which reveals the psychological impact that environment has on language and thus on people and similarly makes languages and cultures different. It is obvious that finding an equivalent expression in the target language to convey the same perspective is challenging for translators as it entails a kind of investigation which dives into social structures of both cultures.

There is no doubt that the expressiveness of languages is derived from social interactions that is considered as a social medium whereby people communicate their cultural components. Hence, culture is considered as the way of life that unifies people and keeps them different with regard to other communities. Such a way of life is the mirror on which others are able to see the extent to which a given community is capable of transposing its cultural aspects throughout generations. The way of life that defines any cultural group can be defined in different contexts and according to several circumstances as it is shown in a variety of situations. This is because people deal with each other and comprehend one another using cultural codes that constitute the founding pillars of culture. Traditions, symbols, values and beliefs are among the main elements that construct a cultural atmosphere where people are said to share the same views concerning their daily life. Accordingly, people cannot develop culturally out of this atmosphere, as the process of cultural interaction happens when the members of a given cultural group are fully and effectively involved in social negotiations. This process helps people to evaluate their cultural position through putting into action their cultural competencies. Being a member in a cultural group is in other words an occasion for social development because “the mechanism of individual developmental change is rooted in society and culture” (Vygotsky 1978, p.7). Each social discourse encodes communicative patterns that enable communicants to possess a kind of identical and original usage of their language especially at the level of significance. Their approach to language is rather unique and typical as it refers to their emotive connections with their own language. Their parts of speech incarnate what they really feel toward what they say, for they disclose their inner assumptions along with language which is not only a communication medium but it becomes a sort of spiritual transformation of what speakers feel and go through:

Emotions play an important role in culture: in our particular context, they are expressed in words, later to influence “reality”... emotive meaning in the lexical sense consists in the hierarchical list of emotions that are aroused in the native user of the language upon using the word in question, augmented by the peripheral sense, i.e., connotations, associations, metaphors, idioms, and

nonverbal communication. (Alon 2005, p.5)

To elaborate more on Alon's words one can say that the emotiveness that marks languages has an impact even on recipients as communicants may belong to the same cultural milieu, but the reception of a message differs from one person to another. It is this emotional reaction of people to language that makes the process of understanding very difficult and that of interpretation complicated. Accordingly, in some nations and communities language is not only a medium of communication but also a cultural component that identifies people that belong to a certain cultural group and makes them socially, historically and politically unified. For example, Zaharna (1995, p.245) views Arabic as an essential pillar of Arab identity, for it gives it its color and brings to it its flavor. In this regard, Arabs are obsessed by the beauty of their expressions that are usually characterized by an emotional touch. Alon argues:

Arabic is at least in part, an emotional institution. This characteristic can be evidenced by the very important role that poetry, perhaps the strongest 23 emotional literary genre, plays in the culture. Arabic is considered to be a language that can easily transmit affect because of, powerful group experience, aesthetic character, and oral nature that seek to engage the listener's response. Added to these are its social, religious, and national roles. Grammar and syntax of the words and of the emotions too are important in conveying the emotionality of the language. (2005, p.6).

The emotional touch that marks Arabic is understood within the prominent role that poetry played in the cultural heritage of Arabs chiefly with regard to the importance that Arabs place on beautiful expressions and its musicality. Additionally, history has an impact on culture and thus on language since people understand their own language thanks to their emotive connections with their cultural heritage manifested in their mechanisms of interaction. Sometimes the impossibility of translation comes into sight as translators come across some cultural expressions that are filled with emotions and impossible to be experienced in the same way when translated to the target reader. Given that these expressions are deeply rooted in the social structure of people, they require a sociolinguistic study to decipher their intended meaning. According to Vygotsky and sociocultural theory (SCT), one's membership within a social group shapes his/her mind patterns due to the interactive relation that connects people with their social milieu (Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch 1985).

The significance of words bases itself on the nature of paradigms that govern how people perceive things. Provided that translators are sufficiently knowledgeable about a language, the outcome of their translations will usually fall on deaf ears as their transposition of the source text will fail to mirror the same experience. The fact that translators should not be monolingual is unquestionable; nevertheless, they are invited to be culturally competent as well if they want to transpose the original experience as it is viewed by the local reader. E.g., the native speakers of any language are believed to encode their own experiences about daily issues by using specific symbols that refer to their understanding of their own surrounding circumstances. People learn to benefit from each other through listening attentively to the voices of their ancestors that are carefully preserved within their cultural heritage. To understand the impact of popular culture on the emotiveness of language and mainly on its meaningfulness, we can take the following

popular Moroccan saying as an illustration:

“ةح ي حص ةدق ع دق ع و م ج ل ت ي ت ح ج ر س ت ال
ة ح ي ض ف ل ك ي ل ع د و ع ت ال م م خ ت ي ت ح م ل ك ت ال و

The example above is one of the Moroccan popular sayings that are rooted in the social structure of Moroccans as they summarize the life experiences of people through history. The Moroccan saying provided above shows that the environment of people has an impact on their language and affects their communicative patterns. This emotional relation not only relates people with their milieu, but it makes language emotive and expressive, for it usually stems from what they experience and practice every day. The horse, in this sense, was an essential element in the everyday life of Arabs and of Moroccans in particular since it stands for power, grace and sensitivity. The horse requires special treatment and only a wise Moroccan man can control his horse and make it act on his instructions. Controlling one's horse is compared to controlling one's tongue because a wise Moroccan man should be very careful about what he says especially because talkative people are not viewed as sage in Moroccan society. Relatedly, Foucault (1970) provided another example to explain the intersection of language and society. The absurd system of classification of animals in Borges's story, according to Foucault, is not absurd simply because it defines a period in which people used to think differently. An absurd expression is in other words an expression used out of its cultural context which, in its turn, differs regarding its historical context. Simply put, geography and time shape the way people conceptualize their communicative patterns.

Positive and negative connotations in context

Any lexical item can be positive and adequate within the cultural context of a certain community, but it can be strikingly negative and not acceptable in another community. For example, in most Arab countries like Morocco, owls are related to bad luck since they are accused of bringing misfortune to people. Conversely, in most western countries owls are associated with wisdom. In this respect, the lexical item is not only a signifier that creates an authentic link with the signified to foster the contact of individuals with their environment, but it renders the language socially and culturally dependent. To fully understand the nature of relationship between the signifier and the signified, one has to examine first the different cultural components that make up the mechanisms of imagination and thinking that characterize people in a given society. Therefore, for translators to preserve the local flavor of the source culture they should become culturally competent in order to help the target reader investigate what is negative or associated with evil and bad luck. On this basis, the local experience is very likely to become global. More importantly, in accordance with the dictionary meaning, an owl is a lexical item which refers to a bird, but the use of such a lexical item in the western context differs from another cultural context where owls are considered as symbols of misfortune. The meaning attributed to the word “owl” is socially constructed and has its roots in history. Lakoff (1996) believes that the meaning of words is sometimes constructed to manipulate the public as it serves to guide and control how others think. Therefore, the emotiveness of language can make a huge impact on how the reader perceives the intended meaning.

Nida (1992) gave another example of how the expressiveness of language may trigger difficulties to understand the message coming from the source culture. His translation of the

Lord's: "give us our daily bread" into the Eskimo community language was "give us today our daily fish" (Davies 2004, p. 54/ Nida 1992). The dynamic equivalence adopted by Nida in the latter example shows that "bread" will not have the same impact on Eskimo as "fish", for they have more appreciation for fish than bread. In this regard, Nida wanted to transpose the implicit meaning and preserve the core of the message. Komissarov (1991, p.44) mentioned more examples about the dynamic equivalence that Nida utilizes to paraphrase the emotiveness of some expressions:

....That the Biblical "to greet one another with a holy kiss" may be misunderstood by the receptors for whom a kiss implies a totally different kind of relationship and should be replaced with something like "give a hearty handshake all around", etc. Similar examples are given by his colleagues. In the Bible Jesus Christ says that he is "the bread of life", but since for some Mexican Indians "bread" is but as important as "tortillas", it is suggested that it is "tortillas" that could be used in translation.

There is no doubt that Nida's "dynamic equivalence" as it is illustrated above, gave priority to the target language reader over the source language reader. For him the cultural components of the source text should be modified so that the target reader can grasp the intended message. Komissarov (1991) views that this strategy may trigger ethnocentrism and hinder intercultural communication, for it stands against the discovery of new methods of thinking and different ways of describing things and situations. Komissarov claims:

The dynamic equivalence concept results in the receptors getting a false impression that the source language culture does not much differ from their own. The procedure does not bridge the cultural gap but rather pretends that it never existed. (1991, p.45).

The expressiveness of any language portrays the beauty and the uniqueness of the source culture. The environment and the cultural heritage of people provide their language with different possibilities to make any idea more powerful and more accurate. The translator's job is to understand the dynamics of social interaction in order to share the social experience with the target reader through the translation process without distorting its authenticity.

Providing additional information about a particular expression or situation enables the target reader not only to grasp the intended meaning of the source text but also to know more about the source culture. Komissarov (1991, p.46) stresses the importance of translation in the creation of cultural connections as follows:

Translation is an important vehicle for intercultural contacts. Translation from culture to culture means, first and foremost, to bring the receptors new facts and ideas inherent in the source language culture, to broaden their cultural horizons, to make them aware that other people may have different customs, symbols and beliefs, that other cultures should be known and respected.

Approaching any language necessitates an awareness of the different usages of expressions in different contexts because the conceptualization of meaning rests upon contextualizing words. Simply put, the intended meaning is not visible unless the textual structure is understood with regard to its cultural context. Feghali (1997, p.356) argues:

Kim (1988) describes languages as a veil over the reality of the culture in which it is used, involving an agreement of its users about what there is to be seen and how it should be seen.

As it is illustrated above, culture relies on language to become visible, whereas language remains pointless and meaningless if it is not used within a cultural context. People use language to convey a message that becomes meaningful only when their receptors belong to the same cultural background and share the same experience with communicants. Therefore, translators are required to examine how the source reader experiences the original content so that the features of the original experience can be successfully transposed to the target reader.

Conclusion

To conclude, as the interconnectedness of language and culture determines the meaning, every human language contains specific features to depict the everyday life of its users. The way a particular language functions differs regarding the cultural features of people. Translation permits cultures to interact and communicate as it introduces new and different perspectives about life and people to others. This helps to create an intercultural communication based on cultural encounters at the text level. Furthermore, promoting such an intercultural communication can be achieved only if translators preserve the local color of the source text through which the target reader embraces new cultural horizons. Given that the emotive nature of languages identifies language users in terms of expressiveness and productivity, dealing with expressions out of their cultural context is likely to distort the intended meaning.

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