

Critical Approaches to the Notion of Translatability and Untranslatability of Texts in Translation Studies

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Abstract: This study X-rays the different approaches to the translatability and untranslatability of texts in translation studies. It analyses the views of scholars who adopted a universalist approach, such as Wills, the monadist and the deconstructionist stance such as Gentzler and Jacques Derrida, respectively. The study concludes that nothing is lost is not a principle that could possibly survive in translation.

Key words: Notion of translatability, translation studies, X-rays

INTRODUCTION

Translation theory is central to anyone translating and interpreting literature. Along with literary theories, translation theory has become increasingly relevant. It was once strictly confined within the scope of linguistics for translation was merely referred to as a conversion of languages, from the source language into the target language. However, when research was carried out further and deeper, meaning was found to be associated not only with language or the text but also with the author and the reader who form the triad in understanding the appropriate meaning of any text. With Jacobson's tripartite categorization of translation into intralingua, interlingua and intersemiotic, interlingua translation cannot be isolated from the theories of language.

Texts of every kind are produced in the source language and translated into the target language. Since the process of translation is not a straightforward approach, many theories of translation have evolved with the purpose of applying a network of steps offered by translation theories in order to achieve a target text that will meet all the requirements of cross-cultural text adaptation. As a result of these problems some translation theorists have oscillated between the possibility and impossibility of translation of texts by postulating methodical theoretical approaches to translation.

In order not to pretend to be too exhaustive this study discusses three points of view from which the translatability and untranslatability of texts have been traditionally approached. These are: The universalist approach, the monadist and the deconstructionist approach. The study concludes that that nothing is lost is not a principle that could possibly survive in translation. Priorities must be set (Snell and Pohl, 1989).

THE UNIVERSALIST APPROACH

The Universalists claim that the existence of linguistic universals ensure the translatability of texts. This issue of translatability of texts started to be considered as such in the nineteenth century; until then, scholars had focuses their attention mainly on translation methodology and principles of translation. The development of theories on the nature of language and communication provided a growing medium for an analysis of the possibility of elaborating concepts in a language that is different from that in which they were conceived.

Quoting Schulte and Biguenet (1992) translation is one of the most necessary task of any literature. According to them, the structural differences which exist between languages are no obstacles to translation. This is due to the fact that each linguistic community has the potential of expression which generates resources for verbalizing every extra-linguistic nuance including those which go beyond its own social and cultural experience.

Edward Sapir, in his cataloguing of texts in relation to translation claimed that non-linguistic art is translatable (Saphir, 1921). This view is supported by Hjelmslev (1973) who divides languages into two categories: Restricted languages, for example, artificial mathematical languages and the unrestricted languages, for example, natural languages. Any text in any language, in the widest sense of the word, can be translated into any unrestricted language, whereas this is not true of restricted language.

From the point of view of Hjelmslev, translatability is guaranteed between unrestricted languages, that is, between natural languages. Noam Chomsky claimed that translatability of texts is possible as far as closed texts are concerned. Closed texts are texts that can be interpreted

and translated in a single way, that is, without connotations. From the point of view of Sapir, Hjelmslev and Chomsky. It can be deduced that the act of translation is a validation of the text that is deemed worthy of translation. In other words, the translatability of any text depends largely on the nature of the text. Quoting Wilss (1982):

“To apparent untranslatability which results from structural incompatibilities between languages, one can respond with potential translatability with the possibility of expressing the concepts of human language”.

Wilss’ claim implies the existence of a linguistic mediary world which controls human thought. Quoting Walter Benjamin (1992).

“Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, apriori and apart from historical relationship interrelated in what they wants to express”.

Benjamin’s claim underscores the relatedness of languages and culture and its implication for translation. In other words, everything can be expressed in every language. This view is supported by Wilss (1982): According to him:

“The translation of a text is (...) guaranteed by the existence of universal categories in syntax, semantics, and the (natural) logic of experience. Should a translation nevertheless fail to measure up to the original in terms of quality, the reason will (normally) be not an insufficiency of syntactic and lexical inventories in that particular target language, but rather the limited ability of the translator in regard to text analysis”.

It can be inferred from Wilss that the translatability of any text is determined by the extra cultural and linguistic experience of the translator. There are however, certain ways to measure and estimate the translatability of a text. Van Den Broeck and Lefevere (1979) propose the following laws of translatability of a text:

- Translatability is greater when there is a degree of contact between the source language and the target language.

- Translatability is greater when the source language and target language are on an equal cultural level of development.
- Translatability can be influenced by the expressive possibilities of the target language.

Van Den Broeck and Lefevere’s suggestion does not totally solve the translator’s problems during translation process but provides the translator with the means to approach a problematic text.

Since a translated text in reality takes the form of a publication, during the translation process it is possible for some cultural colourings, connotations and linguistic nuances can be rendered through the translator’s use of footnotes, margin-notes, commentary in the glossary, preface and illustrations by mobilizing the expressive potentials of his linguistic and cultural competence beyond the boundaries of experience of the source text.

This approach preserves the cultural differences of the source text in the receiving culture. The process of translation therefore involves delicate decision making at every step and on many levels. Advanced language skills are only the beginning; subject knowledge, social and cultural competence within two linguistic communities, professional skills and ethics round off the profile of the translator.

Proponents of the Universalist approach are: Sapir, Wilss, Schulte and Benjamin, among others.

THE MONADIST APPROACH

The monadists maintain that each linguistic community perceives and interprets reality in its own peculiar way and this jeopardizes translatability. The monadists claim that the world in which different societies live are distinct worlds, with different labels attached to colour, family, weather, tenses configuration of verbal systems and language habits of the people within each linguistic community.

The fact that each language conditions the way in which its speaker perceives and interprets reality presupposes that there will be terms which are specific to each linguistic community. It also implies that each linguistic community structures reality in a different way according to its own linguistic codes. These factors have to be taken into consideration by the translator when approaching the translation of any text: literary, technical and pragmatic. Quoting Gentzler (1993):

“Literary scholar (translator) could develop rules of solving a communication problem, arrive at a perfect understanding and correctly reformulate that particular message”.

Gentzler's claim appears contradictory with the use of concepts such as perfect, correctly. For example, a text presenting a real-life experience when given to different translators would produce dissimilar recoding. Since there is no point-to-point correspondence between two languages, this jeopardizes the idea of perfect and correct reformulation of source text message in the target language. However, the art of translation will always have to cope with the reality of untranslatability from one language to another.

The untranslatability nature of poetry presents a cardinal challenge to translators and translation theorists. Landers (2001) sees translation of poetry as an art of failure. The difficulties in translating poetry range from the formal requirements such as the analysis of metre by noting how it is stressed and how many syllables it possesses. The difficulty also borders on the transfer of metaphorically expressed contents.

The notion of adaptation as a translation technique is traditionally placed in favour of untranslatability. For example, when commenting on the origin of a text, we ask the following question:

Is it a translation?
No, it is an adaptation.

The response to the above question implies that the text does not undergo interlingual translation, it is an explicit manipulation occasioned by nonexistent knowledge of point-to-point correspondence in the target language. Catford (1965) places limits to translatability on two axes. He claims that:

- Translation between media is impossible, that is, oral form of a text cannot be translated into the written form of a given text and vice versa.
- That translation between (...) medium-levels. (phonology and graphology, grammatical and lexical levels) is impossible.

Catford is not absolutely right because it is conceivable for a translator to put into written form his translation of an oral text. Phonological devices of the source text can be compensated in the target by means of syntactical elements called iteration.

Some scholars working in the field of translation, such as Catford, assume implicitly or explicitly the existence of a basic division within the notion of untranslatability of texts. These are linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability.

Linguistic untranslatability: Linguistic untranslatability refers to translation difficulties that have their origin in the gap between source language and target language. Catford (1965) affirms that:

“Failure to find a target language equivalent is due entirely to the differences between the source language and the target language. Some example of this type of untranslatability would be ambiguity, play on words, oligosemy etc”.

Linguistic untranslatability takes place in a situation in which the linguistic elements of the original cannot be replaced adequately in structural, linear, functional or semantic terms in consequence of a lack of denotation or connotation (Basenett, 1980).

What seems undeniable is that some texts are more easily translatable than others. For example, a text with an aesthetic function will contain elements which will make its reproduction in the target language difficult, whereas a text with informative function will be easier to translate.

Cultural untranslatability: Cultural untranslatability refers to the translation difficulties that have their origin in the gap between the source culture and the target culture. Catford (1965) affirms that cultural untranslatability arises when:

“A situational feature, functionally relevant for the source language text, is completely absent from the culture of the target language is a part. For example, the names of some institutions, clothes, foods and abstract concepts among others”.

Cultural untranslatability refers to the situation where the relation of expressing certain cultural terms in the source text does not find adequate rendering in the target text culture. In other words, the relation between the creative subject and its linguistic expression in the original does not find functional cultural translation equivalent in the target language.

The validity of differentiation between linguistic and cultural untranslatability is questionable. The dichotomy mentioned above would not exist if it could be proved that all instances of cultural untranslatability respond to the impossibility of finding an equivalent collocation in the language.

The practical implication of reducing cultural untranslatability to a form of linguistic untranslatability

would greatly affect the field of machine translation since a computer could hypothetically be programmed to recognize anomalous collocations.

Proponents of the monadist approach include Gentzler. Landers, Catford and Bassnett-McGuire among others.

THE DECONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH

The deconstructionist approach is a new current of thought in translation studies. It emerged in France in the late 1960s to revolutionize translation theory. Prominent among the scholars are Andre Lefevere, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. They called for a new approach to translation. It is claimed that the translation of a text affects the way in which that text is perceived and therefore there is a re-writing of the original through translation. Target texts cease to be considered as subsidiaries of the original which, in turn, become dependent on translation. To the deconstructionists translation is seen as a process in which language is constantly modifying the source text. In other words, the target language itself acquires a new identity of its own and not merely as a form of representing the source text meaning. Gentzler (1993) observes that:

“In translation, what is visible is language referring not to things but to language itself”.

This concept is fundamental for post modern theory of translation in which the autonomy and self-reflectiveness of language is very much a defining feature. Derrida (1981) proposes a new approach to translation:

“And for the notion of translation we would have to Substitute a notion of transformation; a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another”.

Derrida is aware of the losses which are bound to occur during interlingual rendering. To this effect, he suggests to the translator the use of translator's notes. It is a technique adopted by the translator in order to retrieve the subtle differing supplementary Meanings and tangential notes lost in the process of translation.

Theorist have difficulty in staying on a descriptive technique (not normative approach) on this point because many see translator's notes as a moment of weakness, of

surrender, a laying down of the translator's linguistic and extra-linguistic arms and should therefore be avoided.

In my opinion, those who are against translator's notes should also condemn the author's and editor's notes as well. When a translator adds to the text so that the untranslated work is more understandable, it should not be considered as a weakness or as a moment of surrender. The use of footnotes (or endnotes) is part of the tendency towards the explication of contents of the translated work. And explication can be useful, useless or harmful, depending on the type of reader one addresses.

Systematic or uncontrolled explication is in any case condemnable, because it ends up being applied even in the cases when the translator is unaware of doing so. Quoting Umberto Eco (1993).

“There are losses that we could consider absolute. They are the cases when it is not possible to translates and if such cases occur, let's suppose, in the middle of a novel, the translator falls back on the ultima ratio, by introducing a footnote (...)”

Peter Newmark (1988) categorically rejects Eco Umberto's (1993) proposition. Newmark holds that it is better to prevent the use of translator's notes by introducing explanations directly in the text (Newmark, 1988). This method determines that the translation reader is induced to believe that the information added by the translator comes from the author, because there is no graphic distinction between glosses and text.

It is the method that preempts awareness in the reader of the differences of other cultures. It is not difficult to create translator's notes in literary translation but it is not too encouraging to the target audience in commercial translation and translation for newspapers because they could be too distracting.

In the case of translation for newspapers, the use of translator's notes is very trying and professionally despicable in general. It is a serious inhibition. The translator can therefore open a square bracket and rapid explain what he cannot translate and insert a translator's notes acronym and close the bracket and continue his rendering.

The deconstructionist approach presents a stimulating approach to translation. While it is necessary for the translator's smartness in the transformation of the source text into the target text, it is equally necessary that he be guided by a sober taste, so that he is not seduced by the temptation of expressivity, forgetting that his task is to reproduce the original without incurring mistranslation.

CONCLUSION

All translation is basically a craft that requires a trained, skilled, consistently renewed linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge and a deal of fair imagination, as well as intelligence and above all common sense. This study has critically surveyed the different approaches to the notion of translatability versus untranslatability of texts in translation studies. The study concludes that absolute untranslatability, whether linguistic or cultural, does not exist. Since the various strategies that translators can resort to when confronted with meaning gap between two languages and cultures are recognized as sound translation mechanisms, the debate on the notion of translatability and untranslatability of texts loses part of its validity. A perfect translation, that is, one that does not entail any loss of information from the original is unattainable, especially when dealing with literary translation. A practical approach to translation must accept that, since not everything that appears in the source text can be reproduced in the target text, an evaluation of potential losses has to be carried out. That nothing is lost (...) is not a principle that could possibly survive in translation. Priorities must be set (Snell and Pohl, 1989).

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