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The translation of idioms: problems and practical techniques from a didactic point of view

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Abstract

Words in all languages rarely appear isolated from other words or they are seldom matched together at a random order. These lexical patternings are categorized as collocations, idioms and fixed expressions. The present paper aims at exploring at a theoretical level the specific lexical patternings and techniques of translating them into the target language. It starts by making the crucial distinction between “word” and “morpheme” and it moves on by examining the main differences between “collocations”, “idioms” and “fixed expressions. The paper centers on the difficulties that a translator is likely to encounter in translating them in the target language and conveying their actual meaning. It specifically presents certain translation techniques for handling such difficulties based on the model suggested by Mona Baker in her work “In Other Words” with the hope to help future translators to handle problems that are due to lack of equivalence above word level. The main conclusion drawn is that various factors need to be considered in deciding on how to convey the meaning of these idiomatic uses of language such as the cultural context in which they occur, the individual lexical items of which they consist as well as the text type in which they occur.

Keywords: *equivalence above word level, difficulties in translating idioms, distinction between idioms and fixed expressions, naturalness and readability, translation techniques.*

Introduction

One of the key-concepts in Translation Studies is equivalence, its core features and problems arising from lack of equivalence between the source and the target text. There are different types of equivalence such as equivalence at word level, grammatical

equivalence, syntactical equivalence, textual equivalence and pragmatic equivalence. Equivalence at word level explores the meaning of single words and what happens when in the target language there is no equivalent word that expresses the same

meaning as the source language word. A level above word level concerns the combination of words with other words to form conventionalized or semi-conventionalized structures of language.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Distinction between word and morpheme

The present paper centers on equivalence above word level and on combination of words acting as idioms and fixed expressions. It is essential that we start our research by attempting to establish what a word is, the types of meaning it can convey and the ways that different languages choose to express meaning. According to Bolinger and Sears (1968, p. 43), word is “the smallest unit of language that can be used by itself” while Baker (1992, p.84) defines written word as “any sequence of letters with an orthographic space on either side”. The act of translating aims at communicating the full content and meaning of a segment of text from one language into another language. The overall meaning is conveyed through units which are more complicated than the single word and through complex structures and linguistic devices. Within this framework, linguistics has suggested the distinction between the terms “morpheme” and “word” as follows: morpheme makes up the minimal formal element of meaning in a language and thus it cannot express more than one meaning and cannot be further analysed, whereas, a word may contain several different nuances of meaning. It should be stressed that practically speaking it is quite difficult to strictly define the basic meaning of a word with certainty and this is because the nature of language does not permit words to bear only one distinct meaning and thus their meanings are subject of negotiation and obtain specific color in specific contexts. One of the most difficult tasks that a translator comes up with is that he has to conceive the meaning of words with precision so that he can transfer them into another language. This forces translators to make a much stronger effort than the average reader in order to understand accurately the text to be translated.

The problem that translators usually have to handle is the choice of the most suitable equivalent in a given context or the lack of equivalence that is due to both linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. Lack of equivalence means that the target language has no direct equivalent for a word that appears in the source text. Similarly, the choice of the most accurate equivalent depends not only on the linguistic system of the source language but also on several other parameters such as the source text writer and the methodology that a translator chooses in order to handle the particular linguistic system.

1.2. Above word level

Words seldom appear in a text on their own; most of the times they occur in combination with other words. Another feature of words is that they do not occur at random, they rather follow certain rules and they also undergo restrictions regarding ways they are combined so that they can convey meaning. These rules do not concern individual words but whole classes of words, although few of these rules also apply to individual words rather than classes of words. What we will discuss next is this type of lexical patterning and the possibility of certain words occurring in combination of other words as well as the degree of naturalness in such combinations. In particular, we will make the crucial distinction of combination of words under two main headings: on the one hand collocations and on the other hand idioms and fixed expressions.

1.3. Collocations

A generalised assumption of what a collocation is would be a tendency of certain words to co-occur frequently in a given language. Baker provides the definition of collocations as “semantically arbitrary restrictions which do not follow logically from the propositional meaning of a word”. For instance, English speakers typically say “pay a visit” and not “perform a visit” or “make a visit”. They also “break rules” but they do not “break regulations”, they “waste their time” and not “squander time”. Such collocations express the likeness of certain language communities for specific modes of expression and linguistic configurations and they do not represent any inherent order of the world that is around us. However, it should be stressed that these collocations often depict the cultural context in which they are embedded by reflecting the social or ideological environment in which they appear.

Each word in a language is considered to possess a range of items with which it collocates, to a larger or least degree and some words are characterized by a wider collocational range than other words. For example, the verb “run” has a vast collocational range such as “run a business”, “run a company”, “run a course” and “run a show”. Beekman and Callow (1974, p. 32) mention that there are two basic factors that determine the collocational range of words which are the following: first, its level of specificity: the more general a word is, the wider its collocational range is and, secondly, the number of senses it has since the majority of words have several different senses and, thus, they acquire different set of collocates for each of these senses. A specific characteristic of collocations is that those which often recur in a language they become part of the standard linguistic repertoire and they do not strike our attention as something unusual when we encounter them within a text, whereas, those which do not regularly appear in a text, they catch the reader’s attention as something unusual and unnatural.

1.4. The translation of collocations

Since the collocational patterns between two languages differ, their transference from the source into the target language can create problems and difficulties in the act of translating, some of which can be very difficult to handle than others. The main source of difficulty is due to the fact that a translator is likely to misinterpret a collocation in the source text because of interference of his native language. This can be explained by the fact that a collocation in the source language may correspond only in form to a corresponding collocation from a target language.

Another main difficulty in translating collocations involves the translator’s effort to achieve both accuracy in meaning and naturalness. In practice, accuracy is certainly a very important criterion for producing quality translations but the translator should also keep in mind that he should opt for collocations that are familiar and sound natural to the target reader so that he can keep the communication open.

Since some collocations depict the cultural setting in which they appear, in case that the cultural settings between the two languages differ, it is likely that the source language text will contain collocations that will transfer ideas with which the target readers will be unfamiliar with. There are culture-specific collocations that convey ideas which are likely not to have been previously expressed in the target language by expressing cultural concepts that are unacceptable in the target language.

1.5. The definition of idioms and fixed expressions

The main feature of collocations is that they are quite flexible forms of language that allow certain variations in form. Within this framework, the collocations “deliver a letter”, “a letter has been delivered” and “delivery of a letter” are different forms of the same collocation and they are all acceptable. Furthermore, although in a collocation the meaning of each word depends on the rest of the words it occurs with, it does not, however, lose its individual meaning in a collocation. For example, a “dry cow” is a cow which does not produce milk, however, both the word ‘dry’ and the word ‘cow’ retain their individual meaning. At the extreme scale of collocations, are the idioms and fixed expressions in the sense that they are characterized as “frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form”, while as far as idioms are concerned, they are types of collocations the meaning of which cannot be deduced from its individual components. Normally, a speaker is not allowed to make any changes in idioms such as change the order of words in an idiom such as “the long and the short of it” or change its grammatical structure, replace one word with another or delete a word from an idiom. Similarly, fixed expressions such as “Ladies and Gentlemen”, and “All the best” do not allow any variations in form. In addition, fixed expressions such as “as a matter of fact” have quite transparent meaning that can be deduced from its constituents, unlike the meaning of idioms such as “fill the bill”. Fixed expressions such as “Merry Christmas” or “Yours sincerely” play a crucial role in communication by incorporating the stereotyped aspects of experience and they are widely used in every language.

2. Method

2.1. Difficulties in translating idioms and fixed expressions

The most important difficulty in translating idioms involves the translator’s inability to recognize them since there are many different idioms that are not all easily recognizable. The less sense an expression makes in a given context, the more possible is to be recognized as an idiom. This can be explained by the fact that some idioms bear two meanings: the literal and an idiomatic one and thus a translator can easily identify the literal interpretation of it but to miss the play on an idiom. The first step in translating an idiom would be for a translator to recognize it, especially those idioms which bear two meanings, a literal and a non-literal meaning and his ability to distinguish between the two senses of an idiom undoubtedly makes up an important asset in the act of translating.

Once the translator recognizes an idiom, he has to decide on how to translate it in the target language, a process that entails certain difficulties the most important of which can be summarised as follows:

An idiom or fixed expression may not have an equivalent idiom or fixed expression in the target language. The way a language chooses to express its meaning seldom coincides with the way another language chooses to express the same meanings, something that makes the effort to find an equivalent idiom or fixed expression very difficult or quite impossible. For example, a language may choose to express a certain meaning by a single word, another language may express the same meaning through a fixed expression and a third language may choose an idiom for the same meaning.

In addition, some idioms may be culture-specific and appear in a certain cultural setting just like simple culture-specific words. What makes such idioms untranslatable is not the specific

components they consist of but the general meaning they aim to transfer that is related to culture-specific environments. However, this does not make culture-specific idioms untranslatable. Although the English expression “to carry coals to Newcastle” is a culture-specific expression which denotes providing goods to someone who has already much of it, the same meaning is conveyed in French through the expression “porter de l’eau a la riviere” which in back translation means “to bring water to the river”.

Another main difficulty is that in some cases an idiom or fixed expression may have its corresponding one in the target language but may differ regarding the context of use. The English idiom “to sing a different tune” means that someone says or does something which contradicts to what he has said or done before. In the Chinese language, there is a similar counterpart “chang-dui-tax-xi” (“to sing different tunes”) which has the same meaning but its use differs since it may have political connotations and it can also mean complementary points of view.

There may be an idiom in the source language that is used both in its literal and idiomatic sense at the same time which cannot be reproduced both in its literal and idiomatic sense in the target language. Thus, the play on idiom in the source text is likely to be reproduced in some languages but not in some others.

The frequency of using idioms as well as the context in which it is used may differ from one language to another. The English language uses idioms in various types of texts such in advertisements and promotional brochures. The use of idioms in English is actually a question of style; on the contrary, the Arabic and Chinese languages make the sharp distinction between written and oral discourse and they usually avoid using idioms in the written discourse which is characterized by a high degree of formality.

2.2. Model for translating idioms and fixed expressions

The question to be raised is how to translate idioms and fixed expressions and which factors affect the translator’s choice of strategies. What should be stressed is that it is not only the question of whether there is a similar idiom or fixed expression in the target language but many other factors should be taken into consideration, as well. The main parameters that should be considered are appropriateness or not of using idiomatic language in specific text types, the context in which the idiom should be translated, the importance of the individual items that make up the idiom and the rhetorical effect that may have on the target readership (Fernando & Flavell, 1981, p. 81). It is not enough to find a similar both in meaning and form idiom of the source language to the target language since the previously mentioned factors should be definitely considered.

The technique of using in the target language an idiom that conveys the same meaning and consists of equivalent lexical items as the idiom in the source language is the ideal technique although it can rarely be applied. The fixed expression “things are not always as they seem” is translated in French as “les choses ne sont pas toujours ce qu’elles paraissent” which in back translation is translated into “things are not always as they seem”.

There is also the technique of using an idiom in the target language which is similar in meaning to that of the source text idiom but dissimilar in form. The translator may find an idiom or fixed expression which conveys the same meaning to that of the source language but it may vary in form and consist of different lexical items from those of the source language idiom. The English

expression “one good turn deserves another” which means “a good action deserves a good return” has its equivalent in meaning in French “a beau jeu, beau retour” which expresses the same idea by using different lexical items.

Another useful technique that is proposed by Baker (1992) for translating idioms or fixed expressions is the use of paraphrase in case that there cannot be found an equivalent idiom or fixed expression in the target language in order to convey the meaning of the idiom or fixed expression of the source language. This makes up the most common technique in order to handle stylistic differences between the source and the target language. For example, the English expression “push another pony past the post” has been translated in French “favoriser un autre candidat” which in back translation means “to favour another candidate”.

As happens with single words that can be omitted in translation, the same can happen with idioms and fixed expressions that can be omitted in translation either for stylistic reasons or because the meaning cannot be easily conveyed through paraphrase. Another proposed strategy is the strategy of compensation: this means that a translator may either omit an idiom or play down idiomaticity at the specific point it appears in the source text and put it in another point in the target text. This strategy is not limited to idioms and fixed expressions but it can also be used in order to make up for loss of meaning, emotional effect or for stylistic reasons that would not be feasible to achieve at the given point of the target text. As Mason (1982, p. 29) observes, the translators of Asterix being unable to translate certain puns at the points they appeared in the source text, they decided to introduce these puns in different frames of the cartoon.

3. Conclusion

Finding the most natural collocation and the right level of idiomaticity will certainly improve the quality of translations. The ultimate goal to achieve is naturalness and readability so that the target text feels less “foreign” to the target readership. The first step to follow in translating idioms and fixed expressions is to recognize them in the source text and interpret them accurately. The next step is to decide on how to translate them into the target language which is a decision that depends on a number of factors such as the importance of the particular lexical items which constitute the idiom, the appropriateness or not of using idiomatic language in a given register in the target language as well as the context in which it is translated.

The ideal solution would be to find an idiom of similar meaning and similar form to that of the idiom of the source language. However, there are many restrictions and factors that affect the translator’s decision even if he has found the closest equivalent. It is often possible to find an idiom similar in meaning to that of the source text but dissimilar in form consisting of different lexical items. It is also feasible to translate an idiom or expression through the technique of paraphrase when a match cannot be found in the target language. Finally, there is the alternative of the technique of omitting the idiom mainly for stylistic reasons or because the meaning is impossible to be paraphrased or the technique of compensation by changing the position of an idiom in the target text and moving it into another point in order to make up for loss of meaning. The translator’s ultimate goal should be to achieve naturalness and readability in the target text by producing a text that does not sound “foreign” to the target readership.

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