

The Translator and the Nature of His Work

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ABSTRACT

Translation the art and science of converting the source language (SL) message into the target language (TL) has the translator in charge of its operations, taking cognisance of the various ways adopted in the process. From the initial reading of a given text, to its interpretation, one begins to appreciate the task before the translator. Then come the exegesis, the analysis, the translation proper, the appraisal, and the search for the right context. Bilingualism without which no translation takes place enables him to do a comparative work between the languages in contact just as it permits him to break the barrier in communication between individuals. This paper seeks to bring what the translator does to the attention of the reader and to acquaint him with his *modus operandi*. It concludes that through the translator's endeavour, the world has gained unhindered access to books translated into various languages for information and action.

Keywords: bilingualism, translation, source language, target language, text, exegesis, and translator.

1. INTRODUCTION

The German expression *Sprachmittler*, i.e., mediating languages, gives an apt description with regard to who the translator is one that mediates between people of different languages in order to bring about a linguistic reconciliation between them. However, according to Gyorgu Rado (1981:133), translators "must not stop at the point of mediating languages. What we do is much more: mediating between ideas, men and nations, and so working for comprehension and peace." On the other hand, translation, an operation performed on languages by the translator, is defined in its dual nature written and spoken by Finlay (1971:1), in these words:

A translation may be defined as a presentation of a text in a language other than that in which it was originally written. The word "written" should be stressed, since it distinguishes translating from the start from interpreting, which may be defined as the presentation of a statement in a language other than that in which it was originally spoken. Translating is concerned with the conversion of the written word, interpreting with that of the spoken word.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the translator reaches out to the speakers of different languages through the process of translation, written and oral, with the former as the focus of the present study. Analytical, and interpretative in methodology, this paper aims at examining the work of the translator in the light of the functions discussed below.

The Translator as an Analyst

Every translation is capable of being analysed either by the translator of a particular work, or by another translator who is competent to do so. The analysis is necessitated by the fact that translation, as noted by Newmar (1981:184), is basically an academic discipline. Such an analysis can be done to verify a number of things one of which is the techniques used by the translator in conveying the source language message to the target language. The analysis of a translation is also justified by the fact that although it is an art subject, every approach to translation is highly scientific, requiring technical proof for every translation done. For instance, a look at the translation techniques proposed by Vinay *et al* (1977:46-55) shows a progressive movement from the simplest translational methods to the most complex. In ascending order these techniques are: loan words, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence and adaptation.

In analysing a translation then, the translationalist can use the above as his basis for assessment, and that enables him or the translation student to know at a glance the particular technique used while translating from SL to TL. Here are examples:

2. Borrowed words

French: Le marketing, le dollar, un bifteck, le football, le forcing, un party, le hamburger, le milk-bar, etc (borrowed from English)

English: Colonel, lieutenant, tête à tête, raison d'être, esprit du corps, fait accompli, savoir faire, laissez faire, etc (borrowed from French cf. Vinay *et al* p. 47).

2.2. Calque

French: Les quatre Grands (the big four)

Strictelement parlant (strictly speaking)
 English: Economically weak (économiquement faible)
 Compliments of the season (compliments de la saison)
 (cf. Vinay *et al* p.47)

2.3. *Literal translation*

French: L'encre est sur la table
 English: The ink is on the table
 French: Un visiteur auguste
 English: An august visitor
 French: Un homme respectable
 English: A respectable man
 (cf. Vinay *et al* p. 48; Ekpenyong 2002: 460)

2.4. *Transposition*

French: Défense de fumer
 English: No smoking (cf. Chuquet et Paillard 1987: 12)

2.5. *Modulation*

French: Complet
 English: No vacancies (cf. *ibid.* p. 34)

2.6. *Equivalence*

French: C'est simple comme bonjour
 English: It is as easy as A, B, C. (cf. Vinay *et al* pp. 52, 55)

2.7. *Adaptation*

French: Bon appétit
 English: Hi (U.S.) (cf. *ibid.* p. 55)

In 2.1 above, both French and English make use of loanwords, borrowing from among themselves. Calque, a peculiar kind of loaning which consists in borrowing a foreign language's syntagm, while translating the linguistic tools literally, is the principle used in 2.2. In 2.3. the process is that of word for word. In 2.4. it is the replacement of one part of speech with another, i.e. *fumer* a verb with *smoking*, a noun. In 2.5. it is the process of changes in viewpoint as a translation technique while the meaning still remains unchanged. In 2.6. it is the question of an equivalence between French and English, and occurs whenever two languages have the same situation but different structural and stylistic approaches. Expressions such as the above, along with idiomatic and set expressions are usually translated through this technique. In 2.7. the process is that of a situational equivalence i.e. a situation which does not exist in the TL but has to be created by the translator. Consequently, *bon appétit*, the usual French greeting at mealtime, a situation which is lacking in

English, finds a suitable equivalence in Hi! in (American) English.

3. The Translator as an Exegete

In translation, exegesis is the procedure or technique used by the translator to discover the intended meaning of the author from the text. It is suitable for all forms of translations e.g. Bible and literary translations. According to Nida, *et al* (1974:200), exegesis is described as "that discipline whose methods and techniques aim at understanding a text". It calls for skill on the part of the translator in reading the source text in its original language and takes into consideration such factors as the author's cultural background which in turn guides him in arriving at the appropriate meaning. To do exegesis therefore is one way through which the translator becomes familiar with the text he is translating. Exegesis also calls for the use of aids to translation such as dictionaries. Familiarity with words, phrases, sentences and the style of the original author is equally a function of the translator's role as an exegete, just as it helps to draw his attention to the connotative overtones and the mood of the text.

Methods of exegesis include (1) reading through the entire source text (2) noting certain words especially those that are technical or problematic (3) doing a word list to be guided by (4) finding out from people (5) noting the immediate and broader contexts of words.¹

4. The Translator and the Text

The whole business of translating hinges on a text in the case of the written translation, and on oration or speech in the case of an oral translation or interpreting. The text defines translation either as pragmatic, i.e., scientific/technical translation, or as non-pragmatic, i.e., literary translation, etc. The text, according to Nida, *et al* is described as "a specimen of linguistic material displaying structural and semantic coherence, unity, and completeness, and conveying a message..." (p. 200). It would be clear from the above that without the text, which ranges from as little as a word to as voluminous as an encyclopedia, the translator would not carry out any translation exercise. The text is usually mentioned in the context of the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) texts (cf. Catford, 1978: 35). With the SL text in the hands of the translator which has already been actualised by the original author, the translator is usually the one to produce the TL text. In other words, without the translator there would be no TL text, hence no translation.

5. Translator as a Man of Context

The overwhelming importance of context to translation can hardly be adequately stated. Although context can have a limit in governing the meaning of a word, its role is of paramount importance in translation. According to Newmark (earlier cited),

A word can be legitimately stipulated to mean

anything. context is the overriding factor in all translation, and has primacy over any rule, theory or primary meaning (p. 113).

Also, according to Nida, *et al* (earlier cited), context is described as:

The total setting in which a word is used, including the CULTURAL CONTEXT and the linguistic context, which in turn consists of the SYNTACTIC CONTEXT and the SEMOTACTIC CONTEXT. One function of the context is to select for each word the single appropriate meaning, and so to avoid ambiguity in a discourse (p.119).

Writing in the same vein, Ekpenyong (1997:90, 97) has observed thus:

...there is an inseparable link between translation, text and context, which justifies why any translation (always dependent on a given text) is expected to be done in harmony with an existing context, hence contextual. a good translation is possible if and whenever the translators stay within the provisions of the original text and its context.

The logic behind any discourse involving context and translation is that every translation that is done without due regard to context can be misleading, ambiguous and inaccurate.

6. The Translator as a Critic

Like in the other fields of study, it is sometimes necessary to take a critical look at a translation that has been done by some translator in the past. This exercise which is applicable to all categories e.g. literary, scientific/technical as well as Biblical translations has one main objective to appraise a particular translation in terms of its accuracy and faithfulness, etc, in relation to the original. According to Ekpenyong (2002:60, 64), every objective criticism appraises a translation both in terms of its merits and demerits. Consequently, after his appraisal of the translation of a certain literary work, Okiwelu (1998:121) has made the following observation:

In the study of a translated piece of work, be it literary, scientific or technical, what is of fundamental interest to the translato-logist is the faithfulness of the translation to the original text. Another area of interest to him is the technique employed while carrying the message from the

source text (ST) to the target text (TT).

As was stated earlier, the critical analysis of a translation seeks to bring out the errors and ways of correcting them. For instance, having pointed out the weaknesses of a translated work, Okiwelu goes on to say:

...*So Long A Letter* still harbours some traces of over-translation such as exaggeration, mis-translation such as errors in interpretation and especially under-translation such as omissions and want of poetic touch. The result of this stylistic inadequacy is the loss *So Long A Letter* conjures in the reader. In the main, however, it must be noted that the merits of the translation outweigh its demerits. For instance, but for this translation which is still the best if not the only one available here so far, Mariama Bâ may not have been as popular as she is today in Anglophone African literary scene. It is only hoped that a revision work will be carried out on this edition of *So Long A Letter* in order to eliminate some if not all those translation lapses which still litter here and there in the book (p.131).

Discussing the merits of Ligny's translation of *Things Fall Apart*, e.g. the suitable target title, etc, Ekpenyong (Ibid: 60-67) equally points out the demerits of Ligny's translation, namely, mis-translations of words with certain cultural attachment; mis-translations of certain idiomatic expressions, and mis-translations due to wrong vocabulary.

The Translator and the Comparative Work

By its very nature, translation is based on the existence of many languages, and allows for comparative study, and analysis at different levels. The mere fact that each translato-logical operation is an exercise occasioned by a source text which already exists, and a target text which is as yet potential, means that the translator can have a lot to compare, and to contrast between them in the course of his work. Certain socio-cultural factors such as the pronouns *vous* and *tu* in French in relation to the pronoun *you* in English will certainly arrest the translator's attention. In other words, a look at such languages as are mentioned above shows that while the former has pronouns that are considered formal, polite and casual, the latter simply has one pronoun in expressing these relationships. According to Trudgill (1974:102-103);

A further important feature of the social context is the context of the person spoken to, and in particular the role relationships and relative statuses of the participants in a discourse. In languages other than

English the position may also be complicated by the problems of personal pronoun selection. Most European languages, for instance, unlike English which has only *you*, distinguish, especially in the singular, between a polite and a familiar second-person pronoun.

Similarly, as the translator places the SL and the TL for translational analysis, the similarities and the differences between them will be seen in the context of the voices. For example, while an English sentence in the active voice can be translated into French in the same voice, the same may not be true between English and *Ibibio*, one of Nigeria's four major languages after Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, and one of the world's major languages (cf. Garry, *et al*, 2001:317). Here are examples:

English: The hunter killed the lion (active voice)

French: Le chasseur a tué le lion (active voice)

English: The lion was killed by the hunter (passive voice)

French: Le lion a été tué par le chasseur (passive voice)

English: The hunter killed the lion (active voice)

Ibibio: Atautop ama owod ekpe (active voice)

English: The lion was killed by the hunter (passive voice)

Ibibio: Atautop ama owod ekpe (active voice)

From the comparisons given above, it is clear that while the passive voice exists in English and French, it is lacking in *Ibibio*, consequently, translating the passive voice of a language such as English or French into *Ibibio* has to be done only in the active voice.

8. The Translator as a Communicator

In the context of the discourse, the translator is seen as a communicator due to the fact that he facilitates communication between people speaking languages that are not mutually intelligible to them. Among humans, language remains a basic means of communication with uninhibited continuity if all the speakers speak a common language as was the case in the pre-Babel period, when according to the Bible, the whole world spoke just one language. As everyone is aware, the world is no longer monolingual, but a plurilingual community where thousands of languages are spoken. For most people therefore, communication is continuous so long as they speak the same language, but it is hampered whenever two individuals speak languages that are not common to them. Over the years, the translator has remained the only *bridge* in the face of the ever increasing need among mankind to communicate. He has acted as such either in the written or

oral capacity due to the bilingual skill which he has acquired, which has given him the singular advantage of speaking, writing and using two or more languages alternatively.

In other words, the fact that the translator has already understood the message in a language which the unilingual individual does not understand has placed him in a position to act as a communication facilitator, bringing the people together. According to Mounin (1963:4), the translator is bilingual by definition, which underscores his facilitating role in communication defined as "the process of creating meaning between two or more people" (cf. Akpan 1993:5). Such facility as made possible by the translator can be readily appreciated against the background of the different versions of new source texts; as we listen to sermons and legal proceedings being interpreted into different languages in churches and the court of law; or to news translations from the local and foreign radio/TV stations.

9. The Translator as an Editor

The duty of an editor is a well-known one, and has to do with the preparation of a material e.g a literary work for publication. In the field of translation, the aim of every translated material is for it to be made use of by the intended target audience in forms of letters, books and magazines, etc. Before the final product of any translation comes to the reader however, a lot of behind-the-scene events normally take place one of which is editing, which also justifies the existence of editorial committees in translation (cf. Nida, *et al* 1974). Editing a translation is a two-way affair, involving both the source text (ST) and the target text (TT). Prior to translating, the translator is expected to do a general survey of the text he is translating in order to discover what needs to be restructured, or even eliminated for one reason or the other. More light is shed by Newmark (p. 149).

Theoretically, the translator has to account for every portion and aspect of cognitive and pragmatic sense in the SL text. In fact, he is justified in pruning or eliminating redundancy in poorly written informational texts, in particular jargon, provided it is not used for emphasis. He may sometimes reduce a 'filler' verb (e.g do, take, pay, effect, etc.) plus its deverbal noun to its basic verb, where the difference in meaning is inappreciable.

Furthermore, the translator has the duty of normalizing errors that usually arise due to what Newmark also refers to as the use of words in a faulty or idiosyncratic sense. But perhaps one of the greatest reasons why the translator should act as an editor is due to what Newmark equally calls bad writing which is usually exposed during the process of translating, and which must be normalized by the translator himself. According to him, nothing demonstrates the complexity of language, and of specific texts, more vividly and explicitly than translation. Further, nothing exposes

good writing and bad writing so nakedly as translation. Bad writing is bad writing in any language, and what sounds impressive in language X or Y may indeed be more clearly shown up as rubbish in language Z.

It follows from the foregoing that the translator, in addition to the main task of converting the ST message to the TT, has to see himself as an editor doing the editor's job in relation to his work, an activity which suggests correcting and refining of a translation prior to its release. It is the same as what is going on in the publishing houses. It has to be noted that what the translator does editorially to the ST, he does also to translation, through proof reading and revision, etc.

10. The Translator as a Linguist

The word *linguist* brings to mind the word *linguistics* two terms closely related in meaning. We can gain a better understanding from their definitions just to see their relevance to our discourse. In Ndimele (1997:192, 193), the linguist is one who studies human language as a way of gaining access to the human mind in order to discover the relationship between the language of the people and their culture. In Essien (2000:1), linguistics is defined as the scientific study of language as an entity through objective and rigorous descriptions and analysis.

As seen above, linguistics is the scientific study of language, and the linguist one who also studies language. What about the translator, and what makes him a linguist? The answer is found in Catford's (1965) theory of translation. In that theory, translation is shown as an operation performed on languages by substituting a text in one language for a text in another language (Ibid:1). This operation is done by the translator when he transfers a message from the SL to the TL. Catford further submits that the theory of translation is essentially a theory of applied linguistics (Ibid: 19). Actually, the translator's knowledge of foreign languages (bilingualism by definition), as well as his/her knowledge of linguistics makes him/her able to use languages in practical terms, and thus a linguist whose job or vocation is to translate (cf. Newmark 1981:181).

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to study the work of the translator in its multifarious contexts. That is because his profession which has language as the basic raw material (cf. Baker 1999: 4), cannot be said to begin and end with the translator simply jumping at a given source text with the intent of transferring its message to the target text. The nature of the text he is going to deal with, and the complexity of the translation process, cannot allow his work to function in that order. To operate effectively then, the translator has to see himself as that professional who, by reason of his calling, has to combine different functions in the translation process at any given time. Such roles, as discussed earlier in this article, have the advantages of enabling the translator to arrive at a translation that is

scholarly and analysable. They also help him in the discovery of the intended meaning of the SL author through exegesis; the production of a translation that is contextually correct; the attainment of a translation that will be accurate due to an objective criticism; the promotion of meaningful communication between people speaking different languages due to the translator's mediatory role; the production of a material that is suitable for publication due to the careful editorial work of the translator; and due to his role as a linguist which is what actually enables him to translate.

Notes

¹The writer obtained some of the information or material on exegesis at a Bible Translation Seminar held at Enugu, March 5-9, 2001 under the sponsorship of the International Bible Society (IBS) Nigeria.

²The writer is a member of the Ibibio Bible Translation Team presently engaged in Translating the Bible into Ibibio language under the auspices of the International Bible Society IBS.

³According to Dr. M.E. Ekere, Department of Languages and Linguistics, in his *Study Guide* entitled DLS 2042: Introduction to Editing and publishing (p.1), Editing suggests the art of correcting, refining and publishing a piece of copy. Editing begins the moment an author, writer or reporter composes a story.

⁴ Translation apart from referring to the actual exercise of conveying the meaning of the SL text to the TT, also refers to the result of the exercise.

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