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Understanding, Interpretation and Engagement in Translation of Political Discourse

Abstract. Building meaning implies the existence, or maybe the creation, in some cases, of a given context. Hence, context is a key element in the comprehension process. Translation as a linguistic act, based upon making ambiguous foreign language texts legible in one's mother tongue or vice versa, relies primarily on interpretation. In fact, one's understanding of a text depends on one's understanding of its content as well as its context in the first place. Nevertheless, such a statement raises many questions whose answers are no Gospel truth. As a matter of fact, interpretation in the translation of political speeches is a case in point; it determines strategies to be adopted and positions to be taken as well.

Keywords: interpretation, translation strategies, decision-making, ideology, engagement.

1. Introduction

Translation is not merely a replacement of lexical units by others in the target language, it is much more complicated and complex. Some scholars suggest reasons why translators and/or interpreters do not come up with the same outcome. It has long been established that translation cannot be done without understanding the ST. Yet, understanding is no simple task; it goes through different stages. Many factors contribute to making the translator choose one suggestion over another. Such is the case in most types of translation, if not all of them. In political translation, decision-making is extremely significant because politics is mainly about taking sides which is quite obvious in the terms chosen and the translation strategies used. Supporting a cause and fighting with words in translation is what came to be known as *engagement*, a form of *resistance* and *activism* highly criticised for *breaching the code of ethics.*

This paper tries to explore how decisions are made in translation and what might influence translators' and/or interpreters' choices in political translation by analyzing some samples representing the main characteristics of political discourse. The examples are taken from Obama's Cairo speech delivered at Al-Azhar University, one of the top moderate Islamic institutions, in June 2009, six months after his election as first African-American, of Muslim origin, President

of the United States of America. His election campaign had « Change » as a slogan, change in perceptions and policies as well. So, when elected, he decided to address the Muslim World in a different way; he made sure to tackle all issues, controversial or not, without *hurting* his target audience, for it was meant to be « A New Beginning » as he labelled his speech. The task sounded like an uphill battle, but he managed to handle it. The official website of the White House offered translations into 15 languages and made them available on the same day, ready to be read and/or downloaded. Many TV channels, including Arabic language ones, aired the speech interpreted into national languages. Our main focus will be on the Russia Today interpretation of the speech.

2. Understanding meaning

Meaning is built in a different order depending on the role one is supposed to play in the communication process. To the sender, it is prior to expression, i.e. one thinks first of the point one wants to make and then chooses the right words to convey the message, whereas the receiver grasps the meaning after reading or hearing some discourse. Yet, words alone are just one way to make one's message shine through (Seleskovitch 1976); gestures, posture, tone, etc. are other tools that serve the same purpose.

Meaning is what an author is deliberately willing to say. It has nothing to do with the reasons and consequences of what is being said, and should be distinguished from one's motives and intentions (Lederer & Seleskovitch 2001: 269).

Dan Sperber postulates that understanding goes through two stages; the first one consists in understanding the language of the text in question, while the second one is deducing the meaning with the help of some extra-linguistic knowledge (cited in Lederer 1994: 25). However, meaning is grasped in one step only; at the discourse level. Words have different meanings according to where they are placed in the sentence, and how they are contextualized.

In the 1960s, Marianne Lederer and Danica Seleskovitch, inspired by their work as conference interpreters, put forward an *interpretive approach* to translation, also known as *the theory of sense,* after realizing there are more similarities between interpreting and translation than differences. Lederer argues that translating consists in *understanding* a text and then *reformulating* it in another language (ibid:13). Understanding a text brings together linguistic competence and encyclopedic knowledge.

It is generally accepted that a good translation is the one that has the same meaning as the original. Catford assumes that meaning is « a property of a language. An SL text has an SL meaning, and a TL text has a TL meaning » (Catford 1965: 35.) This suggests that understanding and reactions are not similar as the audience in both languages-cultures have different backrgounds, world views, ideologies, beliefs and logic; what might sound quite normal and acceptabe in one culture, could be perceived otherwise in another cultural milieu. Besides, the TT does not necessarily have the same objectives as the ST. So, the form and content of each text vary according to the function it aims to fulfill. Hence, meaning might change from one language to another.

3. Ideology and position of the translator

3.1. Ideological turn in translation

The "cultural turn" in translation is one of the main reasons translation studies started getting interested in ideology, for translation goes beyond the text to involve culture and politics (Mª Rojo López & Ramos Caro 2014: 251). This approach deals with issues such as the different situations of literature, ideological implications of translation and power relations between cultures.

Ideologies represent who we are, what our values and beliefs are, and what our relationships are with our friends and foes (Van Dijk 1998: 69). According to Fawcett, beliefs play a major role in producing a particular effect in translation (Fawcett 1998: 106-7). This can be seen in cases where individuals and/or institutions avoid some words and use others instead, or when the passive voice is privileged in order to hide some aspect of power (Schäffner 2003: 23).

This approach holds the recipient responsible for understanding the text and interpreting it. The aim is to highlight the ideological importance of translation so that it is regarded as a means of ideological resistance.

3.2 Engagement in translation

Neutrality in translation is a delusion (Guidère 2008: 98) and precision is nothing but an illusion. If we accept that the translator is compelled to take the target culture into account as he has to create the same effect so that the receiver feels no strangeness in the translated text, it follows that the strategies chosen, the decisions made and the text's parts that are emphasized demonstrate to what extent a translation might be biased, and can be used as proof of some kind of engagement in translation, whether implicit or explicit (Tymoczko 2000). As a matter of fact, the translator is interested in politics, takes sides, has political positions and their own views on what's right and wrong, and often forgets any code of ethics or commission (Baker 2009: 24).

The word *engage* has several meanings, one of which is « to enter into combat with (an enemy) » (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/engage). Such a meaning can apply to translation, for translators do experience some sort of ideological conflict (Tymoczko 2000). Speaking of *Engagement* in translation entails dealing with activism as well, since some translations « rouse, inspire, witness, mobilize, and incite to rebellion. » (Tymoczko 2007 : 213). « Engaged translators […] have political agendas and use translation as one means to achieve those agendas. » (ibid) Opting for foreignization as a translation strategy in order to resist the translator's invisibility (Venuti 1995) or enrich the language introducing loanwords and syntactic structures is one way to be an engaged translator. Nevertheless, the task of the translator, according to Archibald, is to maintain the national identity by monitoring the quality of the common language and protecting it from neologisms and the like (Archibald 2016).

In order for a translation to be a means of political engagement, the translator must have a set of goals and values that should be respected when choosing texts, and a will to manipulate and

adapt them to political agendas. Moreover, creativity is needed in diversifying translation strategies (Tymoczko 2000).

According to Chesterman, "the political engagement of the translator . . . lies outside the realm of professional ethics" (cited in Tymoczko 2007: 320) while Mona Baker argues that the political activism of some translators does not make them any less professional than their peers who are not engaged (Baker 2009).

4. Interpretation and translation

According to Walter Benjamin, translation is some sort of *afterlife* to the source text as not all works are translated at the time the original is published (Benjamin 2000: 16). However, while works get to live longer, authors either die (Barthes 1977) or no longer have any authority nor power whatsoever over their own writings, for there is no real sense of a text; once published, it is like a device that anyone can use as they please. It is not sure that the creator uses it better than any other person (Valéry 1936).

Ideas can be expressed in multiple ways; words may change but the gist remains the same. This could be explained by the fact that humans think differently because of where and how they were brought up, which has an impact on the ideologies they adopt as well as the purposes they intend to achieve through text and talk. Hence, the consequences of their utterances depend on how they say what they say and how the receiver may understand their statement. Interpretation comes right after trying to understand as a reaction to an action. In other words, interpretation is the application of understanding; what one understands and how one understands it require some foundation to base on, a starting point. Yet, Seleskovitch insists on distinguishing discourse from language when translating. Translators as well as interpreters deal with discourse, i.e. language put into context. A simultaneous interpreter, for instance, would not try to figure out the meaning of every single word separately, for what matters to them is the sentence as a whole and the ideas conveyed through it (Seleskovitch & Lederer op.cit: 104-5).The next step after understanding is interpretation, but since several possibilities might fit, the translator and/or interpreter resorts to negotiation (Eco 2006) and proceeds with an elimination method in order to finally make up their mind on which word seems to be *adequate.*

One has to admit that not all potential interpretations are *correct*; there are as many interpretations as receivers. It entails that not all suggestions can be trusted as *true* and *relevant.* If a text is found in a bottle without any hint indicating its author's name or the period of time it was written in, will it be interpreted the same way when both are known? (Eco 1992: 134). Eco argues that a distinction needs to be made between the *intention of the author* and the *intention of the text.* The text may reveal things the author did not even think of. So, if the author is still alive, they might be asked if they really intended to mean what was understood. The answer should not be used to confirm interpretation of the text but to show unconformity between the intention of the author and the intention of the text (ibid: 138). In other words, interpretations do not necessarily

uncover the truth behind text and talk. Authors may have had other intentions rather than the ones perceived as such.

5. Some political discourse characteristics and translation strategies

Language is a key element in politics; it is the tool politicians use to shape the world the way they see fit. Chilton argues that even a declaration of war is a linguistic act in the first place (Chilton 1997: 175). Thus, if one were to define *political discourse*, the easiest and simplest definition would be that it is a discourse about politics; i.e. a discourse that deals with political issues (Van Dijk 1997). Now, what is politics? One may wonder. It is « who gets what, when and how » (Lasswell 1936). So, a political discourse may be « a parliamentary debate, a propaganda leaflet, a campaign speech or a revolutionary slogan », etc. (Van Dijk 1997: 18).

As any discourse related to a specific field, political discourse has characteristics of its own, maybe not unique nor specific to it in particular, but altogether they make it *special*. In what follows, some characteristics along with examples and the strategies used to translate them will be examined.

5.1 Euphemism

Euphemism can be defined as « a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing. » (`https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/euphemism`). Longman English dictionary offers another definition where politeness is a keyword; « a polite word or expression that you use instead of a more direct one to avoid shocking or upsetting someone » (https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/euphemism). In fact, generally speaking, saving one's face is the main reason one has recourse to such a linguistic tool (Goffman 1959).

Euphemisms are either positive or negative. The positive ones are intended to inflate and magnify the euphemized items so they seem more important than they really are. Negative euphemisms, on the other hand, deflate, diminish and eradicate from the language every topic people do not like dealing with directly (Rawson 1981: 1).

Euphemisms are frequently used in political texts to conceal the realities and make atrocities look less dramatic. They are « the politician's most useful weapon for telling lies » (Newmark 1991: 158).

Euphemisms can be composed of one word only or a group of words. Manar Abdulhafeeth Abdalla studied euphemisms and compared them to fixed expressions. She came to the conclusion that there are some common traits between them and stated some difficulties a translator and/or an interpreter may come across.

It is hard to:
- identify whether it is a euphemism or not in the SL ;
- understand the form of the euphemism in the SL ;
- understand the cultural load of the euphemism in the SL ;
- find an equivalent in the TL.

- determine « what to do when the 'deceptive' content of the euphemism in the ST, if not revealed in the TT, would have an adverse effect on the members of the TL community. » (Abdulhafeeth Abdalla 2009: 40).

Since euphemisms are similar to fixed expressions, then the same strategies can be used to render them in the target language:

- Using a euphemism of similar meaning and form ;
- using a euphemism of similar meaning but dissimilar form ;
- translation by paraphrase ;
- translation by omission (Baker 1992 :72-77.)

e.g. 1 : ST : ' *The first issue that we have to confront is violent extremism in all of its forms.'*

Obama tried to avoid the usual terms « terror » and « terrorism », often used when referring to acts of violence, and employed the euphemism « extremism » instead. However, rendering «extremism» as "تطرف" in Arabic was out of question for the Russia Today Arabic interpreter (hence RT Int) who interpreted the sentence as follows:

TT : ' أول مسألة التي يجب علينا مواجهتها هي التط... الإر هاب والعنف في كل المناطق الموجودة '.
(The first issue we must confront is ex… terrorism and violence in all areas.)

The RT Int hesitated and was about to translate « extremism » as "تطرف" at first, its Arabic equivalent, but then stepped back and chose « الإرهاب » instead, Arabic for « terrorism ». This choice is not just a decision but a position taken as well. The RT Int chose not to deceive his target audience by using euphemisms which hide the truth, and decided to call a spade a spade. Such a strategy was determined by multiple factors. Firstly, interpreting an American speech for a Russian TV channel must have some effects on the end product; one just has to take a look back at history between the two countries to better understand. Secondly, the interpreter might have his own political views and agenda. Thirdly, the target audience is the most important participant in this communicative act, and that is why respecting their way of thinking is the interpreter's top priority.

e.g. 2 :ST :' *Resistance through violence and killing is wrong (…).'*
TT : ' والمقاومة من خلال العنف والقتل خاطئة (...).'

It is generally accepted, in the political and media mainstream, that the Palestinian movement fighting the Israeli occupation is a *terrorist* organization. However, Obama swam against the current and used the term *resistance* instead, a decision that brought him much criticism. The euphemism was rendered by its Arabic equivalent "المقاومة" but with a different agenda, probably. Obama had to make sure not to offend his audience in order to turn the page and start a new

chapter in U.S. relations with the Islamic world. In other words, bringing about such a controversial issue could have caused unnecessary rage and tension, or at least some discomfort that Obama tried to avoid. Nevertheless, the RT Int used the equivalent out of engagement to show support to the Palestinian cause.

5.2 Repetition

Repetition is studied under lexical cohesion and is divided into *reiteration* and *collocation.* Reiteration « means either repeating an item in a large part of the discussion by direct repetition or reasserting its meaning by developing lexical relation » (Abu Assi 2011: 21). According to Baker, items can be repeated or replaced by synonyms, near-synonyms, super ordinates or general words (cited in ibid.)

Collocation, on the other hand, is made up of two words or more that always occur together (Gazala, cited in ibid.). There is also another type of repetition called *parallelism*, which refers to « a series of two or more grammatical elements of the same type joined by *and* (or sometimes by *or*) » (Beason and Lester 2009: 298).

Repetition has many functions; it can be used :

- to emphasize;
- to create an emotional effect;
- to be questionable;
- to express annoyance;
- to persuade;
- to express surprise;
- to give instructions;
- as a filler (Rabab'ah & Abuserleek 2012 : 452-55).

Repetition can be rendered in multiple ways:

- literal translation;
- translation by synonymy;
- translation by hyponymy;
- translation by homophony;
- translation by metaphor;
- ellipsis (Jawad 2009 :759-61);
- omission;
- pronominalisation (the use of a pronoun instead of a lexical item);
- paraphrase (Najjar 2014 :31-33).

e.g. 3 : ST : *' America's strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable.'*

TT : ' التوازن الأمريكي مع إسرائيل والعلاقة التي تربط أميركا مع إسرائيل. '

(The American balance with Israel and the relationship between America and Israel.)

Repetition is used in both ST and TT. Yet, the elements repeated are not the same; the RT Int stressed the countries in question (America and Israel), whereas Obama insisted on the *bond.* This could be explained by the fact that Obama wanted to emphasize the strong relations, between the US and Israel, that can never be broken no matter what happens. The RT Int, on the other hand, knows it is a delicate issue for Muslims worldwide regardless of their languages and origins. So, instead of keeping the original emphasis, he chose to stress the two countries that remind Muslims of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Furthermore, the RT Int interpreted «bonds» as "التوازن" (balance) at the beginning of the unit in order to demonstrate how interdependent both countries are on each other.

5.3 Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech widely used in political texts as a persuasion technique. In order to better understand this concept, one has to check out its etymology. « The word metaphor comes from the Greek word *metaphora* which is derived from *meta*, meaning "over" and *pherein*, "to carry", which means to carry or to transfer something. » (Shuttleworth & Abdullah 2013: 610) So, metaphor consists in transferring some concept's meaning to another one, and by so doing, it changes the characteristics of the word in question.

As far as translation of metaphor is concerned, several strategies can be adopted. In his Ph.D. thesis, « Metaphor in Translation: A Multilingual Investigation into Language Use at the Frontiers of Scientific Knowledge », Mark Shuttleworth cites some procedures :

- «Reproducing the same image in TL, 'provided the image has comparable frequency and currency in the appropriate register'
- Replacing the image in SL 'with a standard TL image which does not clash with the TL culture'
- Translating the metaphor by a simile, 'retaining the image'
- 'Translation of metaphor (or simile) by simile plus sense'
- Conversion of the metaphor to sense
- Modification of the metaphor
- Deletion
- Using the same metaphor combined with the sense.» (cited in Shuttleworth 2013: 84)

Further in his thesis, Shuttleworth comes to the conclusion that there are some strategies which are used more than others:

- Retention
- Modification
- Removal
- Omission
- Addition (ibid: 126-132).

e.g.4 : ST : '*We were born out of revolution(…).*'

TT : ، '.(...) وكانت لدينا ثورة ' (*and we had a revolution*)

The RT Int chose to remove the metaphor. By so doing, he slightly changed the meaning. One can interpret this as a will to diminish the greatness and importance the speaker was trying to give to the fact by poetically highlighting the event. Opting for such a strategy is another way of activism and engagement in translation, for this unit was taken from a paragraph wherein Obama praised the United States of America and depicted it as one of the greatest sources of progress in the world, which is something the RT Int might not be allowed to promote as it goes against the agenda he is bound to respect.

5.4 Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a term coined by Julia Kristeva to refer to the interdependence of texts (Cuddon 1998: 424). According to Barthes, every text is an intertext (Barthes 1974), i.e. every new text contains fragments of previous texts and may become part of future ones. In other words, intertextuality consists in borrowing words, concepts, allusions, codes, conventions and practices, consciously or unconsciously, from previous texts when producing a new one (Haberer 2007: 21.)

Translation represents a unique case of intertextuality where three sets of intertextual relations exist: 1) the relations between the foreign text and the other texts, whether in the SL or the TL; 2) the relations between the foreign text and translation traditionally based on equivalence; 3) the relations between translation and other texts, whether in the SL or the TL (Venuti 2006).

In order to translate intertextual elements, several strategies are possible. Alekseeva names two:

- «full or partial loss of intertextuality;
- replacement of an intertextual element of the original text to the intertextual elements, with the same connotations in the translated text. » (cited in Klimovich 2014 : 260)

Venuti asserts that intertextual relations are seldom wholly or exactly recreated in the TT because translation is all about decontextualization. The translator may widen the gap between the ST and the TT when trying to recreate some form of intertextuality (Venuti op. cit.). Raux-Foucard, on the other hand, distinguishes other strategies varying according to intertextuality types:

- Recontextualization ;
- transcription of proper nouns respecting the properties of the TL ;
- reproduction of the same meaning (Raux-Foucard 2006).

e.g.5 :ST :' *(…)when Jerusalem is a secure and lasting home for Jews and Christians and Muslims, and a place for all of the children of Abraham to mingle peacefully together as in the story of Isra, when Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed (peace be upon them) joined in prayer.'*

TT : ' (...) أن يكون هناك تعايش مشترك بين الفلسطينيين مسيحيين ومسلمين وأن تكون الأرض التي اختارها إبراهيم
كما جاء في القصة التي يخبرنا بها القرآن الكريم حينما يلتقي موسى وعيسى ومحمد عليه الصلاة والسلام يلتقون هناك.'

(There should be coexistence between Palestinians Christians and Muslims and the land chosen by Abraham as stated in the story told by the Quran when Moses and Jesus and Muhammad, peace be upon him, meet there.)

The first thing to be noted is how *a secure and lasting home* in the ST became *coexistence* in the TT, which is quite an interesting shift indeed. Home is where the heart is, as the saying goes, where one feels most secure and comfortable; while *coexistence* means living together at the same time and/or place. This definition implies that living together does not necessarily mean feeling secure. Moreover, Obama wanted a *lasting home* for *all people of the Book*, yet, the RT Int omitted *Jews* and considered that Palestinians are either Christians or Muslims, which is quite significant. Furthermore, Obama mentioned *the story of Isra*, a well-known story to all Muslims where the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) flew to Jerusalem on a miraculous steed known as *Al-Burāq* to perform prayer with all prophets and messengers, but the RT Int chose to generalize by saying « as stated in the story told by the Quran» which could be any story (as the Quran contains several stories and parables.) Nevertheless, the cotext and the context did help make things much clearer. So, one can say intertextuality was partially kept in this unit.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, political translators and/or interpreters, as receivers of the ST, interpret what they receive based on some linguistic and non-linguistic factors. What is understood depends on one's knowledge of the topic in question, and how it is being dealt with, that is the words chosen to express ideas and convey the message, the tone, etc. This understanding determines how the text might be interpreted. As far as translation and interpreting are concerned, such factors, added to translators' and/or interpreters' cultural background, their awareness of the circumstances in which the ST has been produced, their ideology or the commissioner's, have an impact on the form and content of the TT. Hence, political translation can be very manipulative since the target audience, especially those having little or no knowledge of the SL, only get access to foreign language political texts via translation/interpreting. Thus, the reactions of the target receivers are subject to what has been transmitted to them via translation. In other words, the (non) engagement of the translator/interpreter may cause the receiver to take action according to what they believe is being faithfully transferred to them.

However, one should bear in mind that what is being understood does not necessarily reflect the ST's author intention, for they might not be aware of what their text is saying to the audience. So, translations and interpretings are, generally speaking, subjective understanding and interpretations that can be subject to criticism.

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