Found in Translation: Delivering Accuracy and Neutrality is Not a Metaphor

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Abstract

Accuracy and neutrality in translation is the result of a translator's skill to compensate for the natural losses that occur when attempting to transfer ideas into another language. Consequently, the general perception that the translation process—communicating ideas and creating understanding between people of different languages and cultural background—is a matter of being called bilingual is far from reality. It is also debatable that accuracy and neutrality in translation is just a romantic notion since translators are expected to be mere bridges across cultural communication. Based on factual evidence and expert opinions, we will argue that when faced with translatability challenges in finding equivalents, it is up to the translator to invest their time and effort in learning and developing the necessary skills to choose the most adequate translation method to ultimately attain accuracy and neutrality.

Keywords: accuracy, neutrality, translation process, translatability challenges

Resumen

La exactitud y la neutralidad en la traducción son el resultado de la habilidad de un traductor para compensar las naturales pérdidas conceptuales que ocurren cuando se intenta transmitir ideas en otro idioma. En consecuencia, la percepción general de que el proceso de traducción —comunicar ideas y propiciar el entendimiento entre personas de diferentes lenguas y antecedentes culturales— es cuestión de ser bilingüe está lejos de la realidad. También es discutible la opinión de algunos expertos de que la precisión y la neutralidad en la traducción no son más que una idea romántica, ya que se espera que los traductores sean únicamente conductos en el establecimiento de la comunicación cultural. Basándonos en hechos concretos y en la opinión de expertos aduciremos que, al enfrentarse a desafíos de traducibilidad en la búsqueda de equivalentes adecuados, es el traductor quien debe invertir su tiempo y esfuerzo en el aprendizaje y la adquisición de los conocimientos necesarios para elegir el método de traducción más adecuado para, en última instancia, lograr precisión y neutralidad.

Palabras claves: precisión, neutralidad, proceso de traducción, desafíos de traducibilidad

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Translators of written texts, as well as interpreters of oral discourse, play a vital role in this increasingly diverse and global society. As Penelope Colville (2010) points out in her article "Lost in Translation," the translation of texts "allows for a more considered approach: experts can be sought, various dictionaries consulted" (p. 64). Therefore, translators should be able to invest their time and effort in learning and developing the necessary skills to choose the most adequate translation equivalent to attain accuracy and neutrality despite any challenges and misconceptions. Simply stated, accuracy and neutrality in translation are the result of a translator's skill to compensate for the natural losses that occur when attempting to transfer ideas into another language. Words, being the predominant and fundamental part of a script, are highly dynamic in the development of language (Chen, 2010, p. 164). Hence, regardless of the existence of traditional and systematic translation methods, translators will inevitably face challenges to translate or find equivalents for phrases such as metaphors, Latin, temporal, culturally loaded expressions, and verbal probability. These challenges arise especially when such expressions cannot be readily conveyed in the target culture. Consequently, the general perception of most people that the translation process—communicating ideas and creating understanding between people of different languages and cultural backgrounds—is a matter of being called bilingual is far from reality. Likewise, the opinion of some scholars that accuracy and neutrality in translation is just a romantic notion is debatable, since translators are expected to be mere bridges across cultural communication.

When faced with translatability challenges in finding equivalents, it is up to the translator to choose the most adequate translation method. Concerning metaphors, translation scholars have argued that metaphor translation can pose a problem because "transferring them from one language and culture to another one may be hampered by linguistic and cultural differences" (Schäffner, 2004, p. 1253). In her article "Metaphor and Translation: Some Implications of a Cognitive Approach," researcher Christina Schäffner (2004) further explains that translators can respond to challenges through one of the translation procedures recommended by scholars as solutions to "the ideal of reproducing [a] metaphor intact" (p. 1256). The alternatives include: substitution, "metaphor into different metaphor"; paraphrase, "metaphor to sense"; or "deletion" (2004, abstract).

However, Schäffner (2004) argues her case for a cognitive approach in metaphor translation. She comments that, rather than opting for deleting a metaphor in the target language, understanding the source metaphor from a conceptual perspective may reveal that the underlying message is present in both the source and target languages (2004, p. 1260). To illustrate her claim, she uses the example of the translation of the metaphor of the "core Europe" and the implications of choosing the wrong approach (p. 1262). The expression was used in a German document authored by the German Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union. The document warned about the "danger of the European Union (EU) of becoming just a loose federation" and called for a new "inner group" of EU member states to "lead the way to further EU integration" (p. 1263).

An important point is that the inner group referred in German as *Fester Kern* "[was] to be interpreted in a positive way in the German original text, suggesting solidarity, sincerity, and wholesomeness" (Schäffner, 2004, p. 1263). Instead, the intended message was not conveyed accurately due to the poor translation choice of *Fester Kern* into *hard core*. This translation mishap occurred because the metaphor was transferred intact, which led to a political debate between Great Britain and Germany. The target audience as well as the media interpreted the metaphor negatively because in the English version "the core was described as an exclusive group with firm, even stubborn, ideas about what the European Union was to look like," notes Schäffner (2004, p. 1263). Consequently, in addition to methodology skill, translators should be able to comprehend the lexical and contextual/conceptual meaning of words in order to maintain accuracy and impartiality in the rendition of ideas into a target language.

Historical time (time of publication of a text) is another aspect of translation that poses a great challenge. According to researchers Peeter Torop and Bruno Osimo (2010), there are two scenarios in which such a challenge can arise. One is when the historical time of the source text agrees with that of the target text, and the other when there is a marked distance between the authorial time of the source text and the current time in which the translation takes place (2010, p. 391). When a translator knows the linguistic history of temporal expression, he or she is able to research the appropriate equivalent in order to match the historical time of the source text regardless of the time the translation is done. Another time-related challenge pertains to cultural time. Torop and Osimo (2010)

explain that "cultures have different rhythm of development and a lot of cultural phenomena are missing from 'minor' cultures" (p. 391). They cite a relevant example using Estonian and Russian translators and the challenge they faced when translating text from the period of French Classicism. They had to overcome the absence of poetic language of the Classicism period since Russian Classicism "has its own tradition," along with its "stylistic repertoire," and since literature is not a representative feature in the Estonian culture (2010, p. 391). In such cases when the distance between the historical time of both the source and target text is significant, an entire tradition would have to be translated into the target culture, as Torop and Osimo suggest. The authors further imply that the cultural time of the source text "can be totally absent from the translation" (2010, p. 391). Overcoming the challenge and accomplishing the translation task would require a deep knowledge of the history and cultural differences of both the source and target cultures. This is relevant especially since the authors assert that translators can choose expressions in the target culture that are close equivalents to those of the source language in order to create "the new language of the non-existent tradition" (2010, p. 391). Inevitably, to choose the correct path and adequate linguistic equivalents in dealing with temporal expressions, we again concur with the consensus among scholars that it becomes necessary that translators seek cultural, historical, and contextual understandings of the languages and cultures involved. This notion applies to the translation of cultural-loaded phrases and Latin expressions as well.

In her article "On the Translation of Culture-loaded Words in English News," associate professor of foreign languages Chen Qi-min (2007) explains that "there are some strong culture-loaded words in English which can't convey precisely their cultural information they have just by the means of literal translation" (p. 167). An example that hit close to home took place recently in one of the larger pediatrics hospitals in North Texas. The main duty of the pediatric hospital's translation team is to render Spanish patient education documents, written discharges, consent forms, and care instructions. This type of communication is originally written in English but aimed at a diverse audience of patients and families of Hispanic origins, predominantly of a Mexican background. However, because the community of patients and families are not exclusively from Mexico but also from Spanish-speaking countries all over Latin America, challenges arise constantly when attempting to find neutral and fitting Spanish equivalents to English expressions.

One of these challenging experiences surfaced with the translation of what at first glance seemed to be an easy informative flyer about the opening of several community clinics. Upon the evaluation of the document, the translation team encountered the dilemma of translating the English word "primary" as used in "primary care," which lacked an adequate coined Spanish translation within the context of health care. Although the cognate "primario" or "primaria" can be used in this particular context depending on the case, using it would make it a false cognate. The translation team carried a thorough terminological investigation which included consulting specialized dictionaries such as the *Diccionario crítico de dudas inglés-español de medicina* by Fernando Navarro (2005). Under the entry "secondary care" of this critical dictionary of ambivalent medical expressions, it is explained that in English there is a marked distinction between 'primary care,' 'secondary care,' and 'tertiary care.' The reason is that in English this technical-loaded concept carries a distinctive and clear meaning that does not have a direct equivalent in the medical jargon of the target culture (Navarro, 2005, p. 901), making matters more complicated.

In addition, to corroborate terminology usage in Spanish-speaking countries, members of the team researched several scientific journals from SciELO, a reputable scientific electronic library online which comprises a vast amount of Latin American scientific journals. Some members also consulted with medical interpreters and physicians, and exchanged opinions about the data obtained. Their research confirmed that the difficult expression explained a cultural concept about the US healthcare system without a known equivalent in the target culture. Translators can respond to this challenge by using paraphrasing—replacing the source expression with words of low cultural information in the target language to convey accurately the information of the source term (Chen, 2007, p. 167). At the same time, Chen also points out the unavoidable translation loss of source information that occurs with paraphrasing (p. 167).

Such loss takes place, particularly, when it is not possible to convey with precision the cultural information of highly cultural-loaded words in the original text, through literal translation, substitution (which may transfer more features of the target culture than that of the source culture), or the addition of explanations. Consequently, instead of choosing "atención primaria" to translate "primary care," the team's translation choice was "atención general." Nevertheless, their choice accurately fit the context in which

the expression was used. It ensured that the expression would also be understood by most Latin American nationalities in an effort to preserve both accuracy and neutrality.

Another challenge that is present within the context of health communications is the translation of verbal probability. This is especially evident when translators are faced with the decision of choosing language equivalency to transmit health risks information related to treatments, medication, and behaviors. In their research article "Quantifying Risk: Verbal Probability Expressions in Spanish and English," researchers Lawrence D. Cohn, Miguel E. Cortés Vázquez, and Adolfo Álvarez (2009) found that Spanish speakers of Mexican origin were prompt to misunderstand the meaning of the expressions "probably" and "possible". They assessed the potential misinterpretation through a survey of the meaning and risks related to chemical exposure that included the response categories "possibly has been exposed," "probably has been exposed," and "definitely has been exposed" (Cohn, Cortés Vázquez, & Álvarez, 2009, p. 252). The authors argue "that health surveys and measures of risk perception should not include terms such as *probablemente* and *posiblemente* as verbal anchors in rating scales administered to Spanish-speaking adults of Mexican origin" (2009, p. 252). According to them, even the English counterparts of the Spanish terms, "probably" and "possibly," can cause the participants to misinterpret the level of certainty.

Moreover, per their findings, the Spanish terms *probable* and *probablemente* transmit less certainty to Spanish speakers than the English term "probably" transmits to English speakers. Thus, one can agree with their claim that this misinterpretation can compromise the validity of health questionnaire responses (Cohn et al., 2009, p. 252). The authors put emphasis on quantifying health-risk probability terms for the enhancement of health communication. Such quantification of data is very relevant in medical and community settings, especially when translators are faced with the decision of choosing language equivalents to transmit health risks information related to treatments, medication, and behaviors. Hence, translators would greatly benefit if they invested their skills to gain awareness about information such as Cohn, Cortés Vázquez, and Álvarez's tentative guide for selecting Spanish likelihood terms of use in health communications.

A shared trend among researchers and scholars is the advocacy of the more traditional descriptive approach in translation. Some of their recommendations call on translators of written and oral discourses to transmit accurately the ideas of the original text and not

to add or omit from the original (Child, 1992, p. 46). In the actual application of translation, the consensus again is that a translator takes responsibility in choosing the most adequate methods in order to carry out their expected duties (Chen, 2010, p. 167). That is, when choosing among the various translation methods, translators are expected to have the ability to take into account the target audience and the nature and purpose of the text to be translated to reduce the inevitable translation losses and maintain neutrality and accuracy. This expectation of neutrality and accuracy based on the translator's skills is also expected by the top recognized organization of professional translators in the United States.

According to the Code of Ethics and Professional Practice of the organization, translators are expected to pledge to "convey meaning between people and cultures faithfully, accurately, and impartially" (American Translators Association, 2010). In contrast to the latter, however, another perspective is represented by translation studies scholars. The argument is that neutrality in translation is just a romantic notion, a metaphor. This view is addressed in Siobhan Brownlie's article "Situating Discourse on Translation and Conflict," in which she suggests that translators are not able to go beyond cultural and political associations and act as transparent mediators of communication between people (Brownlie, 2007, p. 138). According to the researcher, the truth is that both translation and translators "do not always do good and are certainly not neutral;" the argument is that such lack of neutrality is evident especially in situations of conflict (2007, p. 138). Although some may find it reasonable to believe such claims, they are controversial and counter to the traditional view that translators are mere conduits of ideas between a source text and a target text. That is, impartiality and accuracy are the assumed and expected features of a skillful and professional translator.

In contrast, based on their convictions that translators should practice political engagement, some researchers of this school of thought further claim that the metaphor of translation neutrality "does not in fact fit with historical research in Translation Studies (. . .), which shows that translators are engaged and affiliated with cultural movements" (Brownlie, 2007, p. 137). Scholars who share this view are particularly interested in finding out how documents from previous centuries can be rendered in translation to illustrate the past in a way that can promote political agendas and ideological oppositions in current times (2007, p. 139). To illustrate the claims of the

history of translators' lack of neutrality, Brownlie (2007) considers the work of researcher Maria Tymoczko, which examined the Irish into English retranslations of the tale *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, as part of her study on the translation of early Irish literature into English. Brownlie (2007) reports that during the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, translators manipulated the text to give a different depiction of the true characteristic of the main character; they conformed to "the reigning English values and literary models of the day with regard to the figure of the hero" (p. 139). In the original Irish text the character was depicted as violent, unreliable, and lustful. In the translation, he was portrayed as an overall selfless and noble hero "who sacrificed all to protect his tribe" (2007, p. 139). Yet, this illustration, although perceived by Brownlie as specific proof of the role of translators engaged in political conflicts, makes us ponder if the translators of past times manipulated the English translation from personal agency or if they acted under the authority of others.

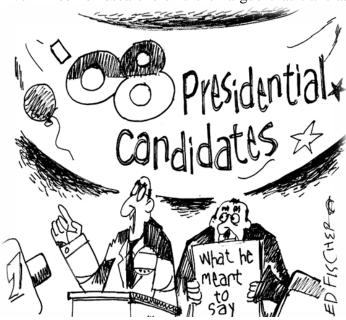Even if some researchers further argue that translators are subject to unconscious or conscious misinterpretation, resulting from their cultural, educational, and idiosyncratic background; impartiality and accuracy are still expected. Although the scenario illustrated in Figure 1 may seem amusing for some readers, misinterpreting a speaker or writer's original ideas is no laughing matter. It is still the translator's prerogative to engage

Figure 1. Ed Fisher's *'08 Presidential Candidates Speech*. Reprinted with permission from Cartoonstock.com

or not to engage in translation procedures that are deemed biased. As implied in the image, he or she may choose to ignore the expected standards of professional conduct and business practices set forth by professional translation organizations. However, we can still hope that professional translators engage in their tasks upholding the general and accepted guidelines and expectations of being a conduit of ideas and a bridge between cultures, without attaching personal judgments. In any case, if the risk exists

for engaging in translation work conducive to a lack of neutrality and accuracy, the translators can still choose to withdraw from participating in such an assignment.

Throughout their work, the researchers in this discussion explored important issues in the study and application of translation that may aid translators in choosing the right methods when faced with translation challenges. The concepts and the opinions of scholars highlight the translatability of metaphors, the formulation of potential translation procedures, and the traditional methods of finding equivalent expressions in the target culture. Similarly, they examine the issue of translating probability words in a healthcare setting; the contemporary trend found in the aspect of the impossibility of neutrality in translation; and the issue of time in translation. Certainly, it is the duty of the translator to choose the right path and methods to face translation obstacles. In an effort to refrain from displaying bias or conveying personal interest or opinions in the translated message, he or she should not omit or add ideas to the original without the knowledge or authorization of the authors. This is required especially, if in his or her better judgment, an equivalent term is not the most precise one to transmit the ideas expected to meet the audience's needs.

The actions of the translation team mentioned above serve as illustration when they chose not to take the easy route of translating the English term "primary health care" for what would have been considered a false cognate in the target culture and language. They also put personal assumptions about the target audience aside even if the audience would have accepted the team's translation choice. Therefore, when translators, whose backgrounds may not be precisely in the language, communications, or translation domains, do not invest their time and effort to seek formal training in a translation-related field, they will most likely translate empirically rather than theoretically. By translating empirically, they are more likely to convey translation inaccuracies and lack of impartiality. In order for the translator to succeed in the translation endeavor, not only should he or she be proficient in the source and target languages, he or she should also accurately resort to the translation methods and applications that are recommended by translation studies scholars.

So, should the public readily accept the notion that translators cannot transcend culture, education, and idiosyncrasies to render neutral and accurate communication between cultures and people? To accept this notion would be detrimental to supporting

translation procedures that call on translators to engage in their tasks, by upholding the generalized guidelines and expectations of being a conduit of ideas without attaching personal biases or beliefs. What if you were the speaker portrayed in Figure 1, who relies on the impartiality of the interpreter? Translators should keep in mind that, ultimately, in practice, "[d]espite all the advice to make his/her translation fit the prime reader's needs, the translator also needs to remember that, like the author, s/he will be judged in future years by the written word that remains behind ('scripta manet – verba volant')" (Child, 1992, p. 200).

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