

TRANSLATING THE CULTURE: DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: Translation is considered to be a good medium to make an inaccessible piece of work accessible in the target language. However, the process of translation requires many more elements to be translated than just the lexical and syntactic items. These elements are specifically available in the Source Language and the translator is expected to transfer them to the Target Language. This paper seeks to firmly position the importance of the transference of the cultural aspects of the Source Language as the cultural transposition may either make or mar the beauty of the text.

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Translation is the communication of meaning from one language (the source) to another language (the target). The purpose of this activity is to convey the original tone and intent of a message, taking into account cultural and regional differences between source and target language. The Advanced Oxford Dictionary defines ‘translation as “the process of changing something that is written or spoken into another language (A.S.Hornby 1632).

Moving beyond the definition of translation, it is pertinent for us to understand the purpose of translation. In this context, Walter Benjamin very aptly remarks:

Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original? This would seem to explain adequately the divergence of their standing in the realm of art... its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information—hence, something inessential. (Benjamin Walter 15)

A few decades ago, there was a common cry in America, “Publish or perish”. In this fast growing multilingual, multicultural world, it will not be wrong to redefine the mentioned saying

for the languages which do not enjoy the status of being the international language as, “Translate or perish”. In the twenty first century, where we walk hand in hand with technology and look for the technology based solution to everything, the activity of machine translation has become a commonplace affair. Modern-day translators use sophisticated tools and technologies to accomplish their work, and rely heavily on software applications to simplify the task.

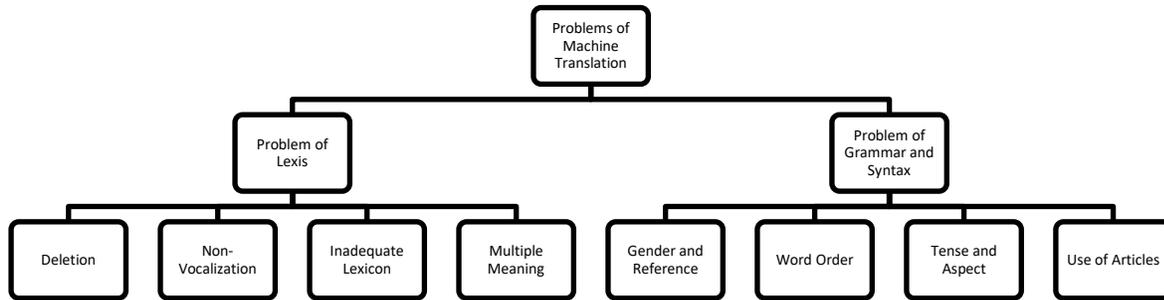
We know that Language and culture are intertwined. A particular language usually points out to a specific group of people. One just cannot understand one's culture without accessing its language directly. When you learn a new language, it not only involves learning its alphabet, and the rules of grammar, but also learning about the culture, behavior and customs of that society. In other words, language is very much ingrained in the culture.

It seems that language and culture are closely related and it is essential to consider both in the process of translation. Although there might be no specific frame and force on how a translation must be done, all translators who transfer natural meaning based on the cultural and religious norms of their society, encounter some limitations and censorship through translation.

The present paper intends to look into the challenges in the process of translation. The first part of the paper investigates the challenges of the machine translation with specific reference to the translation of context. The second part of the paper looks into the problems faced by a translator in translating the culture.

First, let us understand the process of machine translation. It is the process of decoding the meaning of the source text and re-encoding its meaning in the target language. Usually, machine translation uses methods based on linguistic rules, which means that the words will be translated in a linguistic method – the word which is most suitable in the target language will replace the word in the source language. The process which appears to be very simple actually is

not so. The problems encountered during Machine translation are either pertaining to lexis or to the grammar or syntax of the language. The following figure enlists the various problems under suitable heads depending upon their nature.



As mentioned earlier, the emphasis of our discussion will not be the lexical, syntactical and grammatical aspects of translation rather this paper would try to look into the problem of translating culture.

Meenakshi Shivram in one of her articles published in *The Hindu* remarks, “A translation is successful when a reader forgets that it is a translated text” (Meenakshi Shivram).

Is it really possible for the reader of a translated text to forget this fact? Various nuances of language make it rather impossible. Use of proverbs is one of them. Proverbs, which are integral part of every language, are simple, traditional sayings that express a truth based on common sense or experience, often put the translators in difficult situations as they are metaphorical in nature and deeply rooted in the culture. Translating and interpreting proverbs is practically impossible without the knowledge of the culture. Translation of some of the common proverbs of Urdu is being presented here to elucidate the mentioned point.

Urdu Proverb	Translation by Google Translate*	Actual Meaning	English Equivalent
<i>Andha kya chahe do Ankhen</i>	What the blind wants is two eyes	A wish coming true	--
<i>Bahti Ganga Mein Hath Dhona</i>	Washing hands in the flowing Ganges	To use the available opportunity	--
<i>Chor Ki Darhi Mein Tinka</i>	A speck in the beard of a thief	One is afraid of his or her crime	--
<i>Taali Ek Hath se Nahin Bajti</i>	Clap does not ring with one hand	It takes two to quarrel	
<i>Bandar Kya Jane Adrak Ka Swad</i>	Ginger interest in monkeys	--	Casting pearls before swine
<i>AAge Kuwan Peeche Khaee</i>	Dug well	--	Between the devil and the deep sea

*<https://translate.google.co.in>

We witness that culture gives birth to language, so it would not be wrong to say that translation and culture are intimately connected. Meaning in both source and target languages is greatly affected by their cultural context. A phrase that appears easy to translate may actually contain cultural subtleties that, unless they are accounted for, can bring just the opposite meaning than what is intended.

For every translated sentence, the translator must be able to decide on the importance of its cultural context, what the phrase really means, not necessarily what it literally means, and convey that meaning in a way which makes sense not only in the target language but also in the context of the target culture.

The famous example of President Carter is worth mentioning here. When he went to Poland in 1977, the State Department hired a Russian interpreter who did not have the

experience of translating into Polish. Because of that interpreter, Carter ended up saying things in Polish like –

“When I abandoned the United States” instead of “when I left the United States”;

Further he said –

“Your lusts for the future” instead of “your desires for the future” (Carter, Poland and a Translator)

Culture gives language different contexts. The same words passed from one culture to another obtain slightly or radically different meanings. Sometimes those meaning differences represent slight or intense value differences that could be critical in translations.

Translation, involves transposition of thoughts expressed in one language by a particular social group into the appropriate expression in the language of another group, entailing a process of cultural de-coding, re-coding and en-coding. The activity of translation does not only deal with words written in a certain time, space and sociopolitical situation; rather it is the "cultural" aspect of the text which plays the key role in communicating the desired idea.

It is felt pertinent to make mention of the following two questions which will further establish the importance of the knowledge of the culture in which the target language is embedded.

1. When does it become mandatory to have the knowledge of the culture of the target language? and
2. How much knowledge of the culture of the target language is mandatory?

In addition to this we also need to take into account the knowledge of the language which one must possess in order to be a translator. Let us consider the following two sentences –

1. *Aap ne woh imaarat kab dekhi?*
2. *Aap ne woh kitaab kyon nahin dekhi?*

Apparently, the mentioned sentences appear to be easy to comprehend and in normal circumstances a translator would translate it as; *When did you see that building?* and *Why didn't you see that book?* The word *dekhi* would be translated as the past tense of 'see'. The choice of word 'see' is correct for the first sentence but is inappropriate for the second sentence. The word 'dekhi' in the second sentence connotatively refers to 'the act of reading the book'. Lexical usage which appears to be so common in the source language may prove to be quiet challenging in the target language. Such nuances and subtleties of a language can be dealt with if the translator has a complete grip over the source language.

The process of translation starts with the understanding of the text along with all its syntactic, semantic and semiotic nuances. The following example of a famous couplet by the master poet Mirza Ghalib illustrates the mentioned point –

*Ghalib Bura Na Maan Jo Waaez Bura Kahe
Aisaa Bhi Koi Hai Ki Sab Achcha Kahen Jise*

The noted critic, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi remarks about this couplet that the play is in the word *Sab*. There is nobody in the world who is praised by all (*Sab*). At the same time a reader also gets the impression that Ghalib is an exception as all (*Sab*) are full of praise for him.

Let us also have a look at the translations of Ghalib's couplet by Aijaz Ahmad.

The couplet

*Woh Firaaq Aur Woh Wisaal Kahan
Woh Shab o Roz Wa Maah o Saal Kahan*

is translated as –

Where are those meetings, those separations!

No more those days and nights, months and years!

There is no doubt that as per the lexical translation of the text the English version almost equals the original. We are aware that there is no genre of *Ghazal* in English poetry so it is difficult to find the equivalent of *Firaaq* and *Wisaal*. It has been translated as ‘separation’ and ‘meeting’. We know that in Urdu Ghazal *Wisaal* is used for temporary and momentary condition of ‘meeting’ whereas *Firaaq* is a permanent condition of ‘separation’. It is realized here that it becomes all the more a challenging task to bring in these nuances of ideas in the target language, if the translation is to be lexical.

A very famous couplet of Ghalib –

Dil-e-Nadaan Tujhe Hua Kya Hai
Aakhir Is Dard Ki Dawa Kya Hai

has been translated by David Mathews as

My Foolish heart! What has become of you?
No cure for this pain? What can I do? (David Mathews 45)

The phrase *Dil-e-Nadaan* has been translated as ‘My Foolish heart’ which does not translate the poet’s intention, rather tends to create a different image altogether. A more suitable translation would have been ‘simple heart’ or ‘innocent heart’.

Khushwant Singh, an established name as a translator in the post independent India has translated many works. Iqbal’s *Shikwa* and *Jawab-e-Shikwa* is an acclaimed work of Singh. Many critics consider it to be better than A.J.Arberry’s (1955) translation of Iqbal’s poem. We’ll take a few examples of Khushwant Singh’s translation to reestablish our stand that the act of reproduction of a source language text in target language entails close approximation to the source language in terms of linguistic and literal features of a text but the challenge remains in the cultural transmission. Like a source language text, a translated text is required not only to communicate the message but also evoke ‘emotional response’.

Khushwant Singh renders *humnava! Mai bhi koi gul hun ki khamosh rahun*, as “Friend, I am dumb as a flower? Must I remain silent?” (Khushwant Singh 28)

Khan, while analyzing Khushwant Singh’s translation very aptly remarks:

We mark that while indulging in self-questioning, the poet conveys a strong sense of negative intensification – a mode of affirming something more emphatically. Singh uses a dummy vocative expression – *humnava* – followed by an exclamation mark that imparts a sense of wonder and astonishment. Khushwant Singh renders *humnava* as ‘friend’, replaces the mark of exclamation with a comma. The result of this is that the translator is unsuccessful in achieving the sense desired by the poet. It gives an implication of the tone of address, where as in reality the poet is not an addresser. (Khan 38-39)

Furthermore, ‘friend’ is not a close approximation to *humnava*, for ‘friend’ implies someone whose company one seeks and enjoys because of one’s love and affection. The closest equivalent of *humnava* seems to be ‘comrade’ because it denotes a sense of shared fortune and common pursuit.

To conclude, it can be said that the emphasis of translation should not be merely on language transfer but also—and most importantly—on cultural transposition. In other words translators must be both bilingual and bicultural if not multicultural.

Having established the fact that every language has its linguistic, literary and cultural identity and the art of translation has often been criticized for being responsible for the cultural loss. How can we overlook what Edward Fitzgerald (1851) remarks in *Letter to Cowell* - “The translator is in terms of reader-creator relationship with the right to reinterpret and to resurrect the literary text” (Ravinder Gragesh 23).

In other words a work of translation provides us new vistas to the source text by looking at the text with a new (cultural) perspective rendering it a kind of creativity. Don't we really need to ponder over it?

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