

Translating and Interpreting The mother tongue as the target language

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Abstract: *The present article intends first to point up the difference between a translator's task and that of an interpreter though both are required to master the target language to a large extent. Interpreters, however are faced with an easier task for many reasons when they translate into their mother tongue, in particular, because interpreting generally involves general questions and topics which are rendered in a rather spontaneous manner. Translators, in contrast, are supposed to master specialized fields such as business, sciences, law cases, literature and so on, even though the target language is usually theirs. The second part of the paper attempts to deal with the difficulties of translation and interpreting in relation to the diglossic issues that Arabic as the target language raises.*

Keywords: *Translation, mother tongue, interpreting, target language, diglossia.*

Résumé : *Le présent article souligne la différence entre la tâche d'un traducteur et celle d'un interprète bien que les deux doivent nécessairement maîtriser la langue cible. Les interprètes, cependant, sont confrontés à une tâche plus facile pour de nombreuses raisons lorsqu'ils traduisent vers leur langue maternelle, en particulier parce que l'interprétation implique généralement des questions et des sujets généraux qui sont formulés de manière plutôt spontanée. Même si la langue cible est généralement la leur, les traducteurs, en revanche, sont censés maîtriser des domaines spécialisés tels que les affaires, les sciences, la jurisprudence, la littérature, etc. La deuxième partie de l'article traite des difficultés soulevées par la diglossie durant la traduction et l'interprétation à l'arabe comme langue cible.*

Mots clés : *Traduction, langue maternelle, interprétariat, langue cible, diglossie.*

1. Introduction

Since time immemorial, human beings have had to be in contact with others speaking different languages, and thus, for communication to occur, they have always been in need of people competent enough to translate various messages resulting from trade and business transactions, conflict and truce negotiations, political and economic interviews, etc. The transference of messages from a source language (SL) to a target language (TL) can be handled in two forms: oral speech in the case of interpreting, and written text in that of translating. It is evident that the two activities have similarities, particularly the 'knowledge' of the two languages in concern. But can 'translation' be considered as synonymous to 'interpreting'? Or are there any significant differences as to the medium used for reaching the target audience?

The mode or medium of transference is not the only characteristic that distinguishes a translator from an interpreter. The spoken/written contrast is just the

tip of the iceberg. The second section of this paper will attempt to highlight the more important differences between the two processes of transferring information from one language to another. Then, the following section will raise the issue that stems from the diglossic nature of certain linguistic situations such as that of Arabic. What are the linguistic and socio-cultural problems related to lack of competence among translators and interpreters whose mother tongue, the TL, is not a standard form, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in our case, but a low variety of it?

2. Concepts defined

2.1. Interpreting

The overall meaning of the term ‘interpreting’ is widely applied in many fields in addition to its use in relation to language transference. Some of these uses result in the products called ‘judicial interpretation’ in law, ‘exegesis’ in text interpretation, ‘model interpretation’ in logic, mathematics, computing, etc. But what we are concerned with here is the primary meaning of the term, i.e., that of converting in ‘real time’ oral speech in a source language into another with a comparable or approximant meaning, the aim being to facilitate communication between speakers of different languages. A more sophisticated view is brought by Reiss (1971:161) who defines translation as "a bilingual mediated process of communication which ordinarily aims at the production of a TL text that is functionally equivalent to a SL text".

It is evident that the activity of interpreting predates that of translating; we can indeed easily imagine interpreters having existed and performed language mediation well before written forms appeared. But while the term ‘interpreter’ seems to be a bit misleading from an etymological point of view, as the Latin root *interpres* means ‘expounder’ (i.e. someone competent in explaining something obscure), the word *Dragoman*, a term formerly used for ‘professional interpreter’, which comes from old Akkadian via Arabic *turjumān* (ترجمان)¹, is more appropriate for the translational activity as the dragoman’s job was to render *in vivo* and as accurately as possible someone’s speech into a target language understood by the rest of the community.

The activity of interpreting has developed through history according to the various settings in which different languages were in contact, and thus, in relation to the various purposes, there have been a number of types of interpreting, such as business interpreting, diplomatic interpreting military interpreting, health-care interpreting, court interpreting, radio/TV media interpreting, etc.

Research in interpreting began to build a discipline identity of its own in the 1990s though it has close links with translation studies in fundamental ideas such as, for example, the notion of equivalence between the SL and the TL (see below). But on the whole, research approaches on interpreting have drawn heavily on social

¹ Cf. A well-known Arabic saying: اللسان هو ترجمان القلب meaning ‘The tongue is the heart’s interpreter’.

sciences, in particular psychology, linguistics, and pragmatics, as well as sociology and cultural anthropology. In a word, interpreting development has been shaped by disciplines concerned with language use in social interaction.

2.2. *Translating*

In contrast to interpreting, translating is a relatively recent activity as it only started in contexts where languages were written. This goes back, however, to antiquity, as far back as the Sumerian, the Egyptian and the Greek eras, when the meaning of written source texts in foreign language forms had to be rendered in the community language by some ‘specialist’ in two or more languages.

Both terms, ‘translation’ in English and ‘traduction’ in French, come from Latin, meaning respectively ‘binging across’ and ‘leading across’; but Ancient Greek had the term *metaphrasis*, ‘speaking across’, which supplied modern languages with ‘metaphrase’, meaning ‘word-for-word translation’ as opposed to ‘paraphrase’ which is saying something in other words. Although these two concepts seem to be inadequate for translation, they have been considered as extreme ends of a continuum quite useful in translation approaches. Early translators, like Cicero (1st C. BC), Martin Luther (16th C.) and Samuel Johnson (18th C.), were quite aware of the importance of the source text to be transferred into a target language and took account of many features such as meaning, lack of words in the TL, faithfulness in translating but also care about wrong meaning in word-for word translation. St Jérôme, a Catholic priest well-known for his translation of the Bible (4th century), said: “It’s the meaning that we have to render, all the meaning, and not the words”².

Recent research in translation theory has used two modern concepts, ‘formal equivalence’ corresponding to *metaphrase* but most importantly ‘dynamic equivalence’ used for *paraphrase*. Researchers have insisted that a judicious, well thought-out combination of these two tools can lead to faithful and transparent translation. The notion of *equivalence*, as proposed by Nida (1964) and others, has been a crucial object of research in translation studies, though all agree that there cannot be “full equivalence between two codes”, as Jacobson (1968) states ³. To reach the best possible rendering of an SL text, researchers propose the consideration of a number of factors mentioned in Wilss’ statement:

Translation is a transfer process, which aims at the transformation of a written SL text into an optimally equivalent TL text, and which requires the syntactic, the semantic and the pragmatic understanding and analytical processing of the SL. (Wills 1982:3)

As a matter of fact, successful translation takes all such features into account in the attempt of rendering the SL text into a linguistically, emotionally and culturally

² Original St Jérôme’s words (in Latin) : *Non verbum e verbo sed sensum exprimere de sensu.*

³ Quoted in Munday (2001)

equivalent TL message. But, because of the differences between languages at various levels including semantic and socio-cultural considerations, perfect equivalence between the two texts is practically impossible. Even Nida (1975:27) states in this respect that "all types of translation involve 1) loss of information, 2) addition of information, and /or 3) skewing of information".

Though the concept of equivalence has led to so many controversies in translation theory, since the emergence of machine translation, researchers have concentrated again on equivalent elements between different languages, the aim being to reach as close translations as possible. It is evident that in spite of the development of computer sciences, machine translation will not work for the translator whose human revision of the TL text remains indispensable. Indeed, what we can get from the machine is speed but not high quality.

3. Translation vs. Interpreting

Lay people seem to know what the two words 'translation' and 'interpreting' mean in social life and some might even make a distinction as to what a translator does and what an interpreter is, explaining that the former is concerned with written text while the latter comes up with oral speech. But other criteria are necessary to characterize each process.

One fundamental differentiating criterion that characterizes translation is the 'time factor', as explained by Kade (1968). Indeed, while the interpreter has virtually no time at his disposal for the oral text to be transferred in the TL, the translator deals with the SL in the form of written text (or recorded tape, sometimes), and thus has the ability and time to refer to the text as often as necessary; and after as many attempts as needed, with the help of dictionaries and other reference tools such as online translating programmes, the translator will eventually get the final written product which can even be reviewed by another translator and improved in its form.

Following Kade's (1968) characterization of the two types of translational activity, Pökhacker (2004:11) states that "interpreting is a form of Translation in which a *first and final rendition in another language* is produced on the basis of a *one-time presentation* of an utterance in a source language." (bold in original). As a matter of fact, an interpreter-audience event may be compared to any type of communicative face-to-face interaction requiring immediacy from the speakers, that is producing speech 'here and now'! One important thing that differs, however, is that the interpreter is required to convey, in a more or less spontaneous manner, a piece of discourse that is **not** his or hers as in the context of conference interpreting; that is, an interpreter is somehow involved in acting the role of the SL speech in terms of emotional feelings that can only be rendered by means of the production of appropriate stress features and intonation.

The translator, too, has to render a text that is not his/hers, but then no spontaneity is involved given the time factor they have at their disposal: in addition, suprasegmental features are not the concern of a written TL text. In relation to this, the types of competence a translator possesses are far from being equivalent to an

interpreter's competence. Indeed, while both share a set of skills, in particular linguistic, cultural and professional ones, as well as pragmatic competence, there are competencies that are specific to each. Interpreting generally involves general questions and topics which are rendered in a rather spontaneous manner. Translators, in contrast, are supposed to master specialized fields such as business, sciences, law cases, literature and so on, even though the target language is usually theirs.

In addition to such specializations, as Wilss (1982:58) rightly argues, translation competence calls for "an inter-lingual super-competence based on a comprehensive knowledge of the respective SL and TL, including the text-pragmatic dimension, and consists of the ability to integrate the two monolingual competencies on a higher level". A good interpreter, on the other hand, should have additional types of competence, in particular, socio-cultural and pragmatic competences together of course with interpreting techniques and memory skills.

While translation scholars have discussed the problematic concept of equivalence, researchers in interpreting have aimed at reaching the 'ideal standard' measured in terms of notions like accuracy, completeness and fidelity. But both notions, 'ideal standard' and 'equivalence', only remain applicable to a certain extent, particularly if both the SL and the TL are standard forms of genetically closely related languages.

4. Translating, Interpreting and Diglossia

The formulation of translation theory has attempted to include TL variation and dialect use in its considerations, but such attempt has not encompassed diglossic situations, and here appears again the notion of equivalence. Do interpreters and translators possess enough communicative competence for conveying messages or texts in a colloquial TL or in a Low variety? How will they behave linguistically in diglossic settings, when the SL is, for instance, a colloquial form of Arabic? As a matter of fact, the source text might be in a slang form loaded with cultural features traditional sayings and folk expressions. Wouldn't it be unfaithful to translate or interpret such dialect specificities, in Algerian Arabic for example, into the standard form of the language?

The linguistic phenomenon termed 'diglossie' by W. Marçais (1930) and introduced in sociolinguistics by Ferguson (1959) interferes to a large extent with many other linguistic issues. Ferguson defines diglossia as a linguistic situation characterized by the co-existence of two varieties of the same language in complementary distribution. The High variety (or H) of Arabic for example, a prestigious form of the language, is only used in formal situations such as education, written and spoken media, etc., and is not acquired as a mother tongue by any portion of the community. The Low variety (L) is the real mother tongue consisting of the whole array of colloquial forms spoken in the different Arabic countries. Ferguson (1959:245) writes in this respect, "One of the most important features of diglossia is the specialisation of function for H and L."

Obviously, it is towards the High variety that an Algerian translator, for instance, has to render meaning and expressions from a source text written in another language. One important reason for, in addition to the formality of the register in the SL, lies in that the genuine mother tongue is not written, and thus, translating and Colloquial Arabic seem to be unconnected altogether. But in reality, much dialect discourse can be written, as is the case in folk poetry and songs, personal diaries and TV subtitles. Therefore, a translator may chose to use to write an Arabic dialect text in MSA script, and in this way, genuine rendering of expressions based on popular feelings and expectations in a given language, say French for instance, will be possible in a colloquial form of Arabic, the primary aim being to reach equivalence in the two languages in terms of socio-economic or geographic association, or simply to meet the mood in given social text where a higher form of the language would be inappropriate. A good example could be an SL text in an English vernacular to be translated for a target community using a popular form of Arabic.

But an interpreter whose mother tongue is one of the many dialectal forms of Arabic, and not the formal variety called Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)⁴, will find difficulties not only in speaking that H variety in a spontaneous manner which the conference or the event normally requires, but also to convey equivalent meanings and expressions of the SL, in particular on cultural and pragmatic dimensions. Only a fully-competent interpreter at all levels in MSA will convey the TL expressions and meanings in a quite successful manner.

5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted first to show that though translation and interpreting, two tightly related translational activities, share a number of features, in particular linguistic, pragmatic and professional skills, as well as the aim of reaching an optimal degree of equivalence, they differ in some other skills: time factor and mastering specialized fields for the translator; spontaneity and pragmatic knowledge for the interpreter. The paper then raises the issue of diglossia in relation to the two activities and the additional difficulties found in using low language forms as a Target Language.

⁴ MSA is now the common acronym that represents a modern form of Arabic that stems from Classical Arabic. It is the standard variety used, across the whole Arab world, in formal situations, in written text, in education, etc. MSA is not the mother tongue of Arabic speakers.

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