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Markedness, Relevance and Acceptability in Translation

Niculina NAE*

Abstract

The article discusses the problem of faithfulness in translation, and focuses on the shift of coherence which occurs in the process of rendering a text from a source language (SL) into a target language (TL). Starting from Jakobson's (1959) and Nida's (1969) hypothesis that any text is, in principle, translatable, the paper stresses the role of the translator in translating a text in such a manner that it is intelligible and acceptable in the target language and by the targeted readership. Translation is basically seen as an offer of information made by a producer to a recipient (Reiss and Vermeer 1984/1991). Nevertheless, given the various ways of generating information in a language, the task of reproducing this piece of information in a different language with different means while obtaining the same effect upon the target receptors is extremely challenging for translators. As many translation theorists pointed out, the main difficulty lies not in language differences, but in cultures and value systems, which made B. L. Whorf (1976) conclude that translation is impossible. Moreover, the existence of distinct registers even within the same linguistic and cultural system imposes the necessity of adapting the text in order to make it understood by the targeted readership. The theory of markedness, pioneered by Jakobson and Trubetzkoy, may be a useful tool in distinguishing between general vs. particular, or normal vs. abnormal usages within various registers of the same linguistic and cultural system. The article offers a few concrete examples of how a translated text can be modified to meet the expectations of various categories of readers. In our demonstration we rely on Newmark's idea that a faithful or accurate translation must be first and foremost communicative rather than strictly semantically correct.

The rapid expansion of information and communication technology during the past decade has created an increased demand for translation. Translators are confronted with an increased volume and speed of communication, which requires specialized knowledge of several disciplines, simultaneously with mastering more than two or three foreign languages. A translator who possesses adequate knowledge, experience and skills can translate relatively easily into his/her native language; however, when having to do what Newmark (1995) calls a *service translation*[1], problems related to faithfulness and accuracy of translation arise. As Newmark (1995) points out,

I shall assume that you, the reader, are learning to translate into your language of habitual use,

*Lecturer, Nagoya University of Commerce and Business

> since that is the only way you can translate naturally, accurately and with maximum effectiveness. I fact, however, most translators do translate out of their own language...

The task of producing a faithful and accurate translation into a second or third language is more complex and the results tend to be rather mediocre. Although linguistic knowledge of source language (SL) and target language (TL) is prerequisite, bilingualism does not automatically imply that one possesses the necessary skills for becoming a professional translator. In addition, besides training, cultural background and skills, a good translator must constantly update his knowledge of the subject. A translator must be able to write clearly, economically and resourcefully in a target language (Newmark 1995).

Translation requires ability to "read through the lines", that is, to understand and interpret not only the overt meanings, but also the covert meanings or the fine nuances of the utterances. The task of the translator is to make his/her product "read" like an original text from the viewpoints of both information and expression. To this end, the translator works with the means of the target language and often within the limitations imposed by language, culture, understanding, and, last but not least, expectations of target readers. The task is not always facile and has discouraged many theorists. For example, while linguists such as B. J. Whorf (1976) favor the idea that the gap between cultures and value systems renders a text impossible to translate, E. Nida (1969), R. Jakobson (2000), W. Benjamin (1968), J. C. Catford (1965) and others stress the possibility of translation. According to Benjamin (1968), at the core of translation lies the concept of *universal language*, which is beyond the action of merely transposing words from one given language into a different idiom. Referring to literary translation, Steiner (1975) points out that good translations reflect the translator's ability of perceiving the *essential significance* of the original, whereas poor translations *communicate too much. Their seeming accuracy is limited to what is non-essential in the fabric of the original* (p. 63). In conclusion, it is not language or culture distinctions to blame, but rather the translator's lack of experience and inspiration.

There are two major approaches regarding the problem of faithfulness in translation. One is focused on the *intention* of the author, and the other on *target audience* and expectations of the reader vis-à-vis the translated text. The author-centered approach requires that the translator identify the ways in which the author seeks to attract the attention of the audience. Thus the translator is first of all a reader and semantic decoder. On the other hand, the reader-centered approach is closely linked to the concepts of *relevance* and *acceptability*. The translation must convey the information/expression contained in the original text and must also be understood and accepted by readers. The translator must be flexible in order to render the original text with the means of the target language. A translation that distorts the target language risks clumsiness and fails to fulfill the expectations of its targeted readers. Also, in some cases, one must be aware of the specific segment of readers for which a certain text is produced. For example, children's literature does not use the words and expressions which occur in texts whose target readers are grownups. In the same vein, Gutt points out that,

> ... a handbook on automobile maintenance written for the mechanic may use the normal technical language of the trade; but if the same information were to be adequately translated into language suitable for a history professor, many technical concepts would have to be expressed by descriptive phrases and explanatory sentences, and the resulting material would be much longer (Gutt 1991).

The translator takes upon himself/herself the task of rephrasing, rewriting and adapting, which are necessary in order to make the translation intelligible for its readers. Theories of relevance and markedness can be useful for both understanding the intention of the original and transposing the text correctly into the language of a specific segment of readers.

Markedness is based on the principle of opposition. It is closely linked with the distinctive feature analysis in phonology pioneered by Roman Jakobson. This theory emphasizes the importance of relations between elements in a structure (Waugh 1976). Jakobson regards oppositions as necessarily binary, where one term of the opposition, the unmarked, provides more general information than the marked, which is more specific. Besides phonology, markedness relationships can also be found in morphology, where paired grammatical categories, such as gender or number exhibit marked vs. unmarked features (Jakobson VII: 94).

In syntax markedness is manifest basically at the level of word order. In English the unmarked word order is SVO (*e.g. The man hit the ball*) and AN (*e.g. The red ball*), whereas in German it is SVO for main clauses and SOV in subordinate clauses. However, when one wishes to assign predominance to a certain feature, this unmarked word order can be modified with a marked, and more significant one (e.g. The ball was hit by the man) (Asher 1994/5: 2380).

Semantic markedness includes pairs of antonyms such as good/bad, long/short, old/young, whose markedness features can be judged according to criteria of breadth of distribution, frequency and prototypicality. If we take, for example, the usages of the pair young/old, we observe that "young" is more restricted than "old", therefore marked. On the other hand, "old" has a broader distribution, since it may have a particular usage, as shown below in the examples below.

(1) old/young

a. How *old* are you? (can be paraphrased as *What is your age*?)

b. How *young* are you?

(2) tall/short

a. How *tall* are you? (can be paraphrased as *What is your height*?)

b. How *short* are you?

The a. examples show nothing specific about the age or height of the interlocutor. On the other hand, the b. examples imply that the addressee is actually young or short, that is, they are more specific about the age and the height of the interlocutor (Battistella 1990: 3). When referring to one's own age, one can say, "I am 6 years old", but not "I am 6 years young". Likewise, for the tall/short pair, one can say, "I stand 150 cm tall", but not "I stand 150 cm short", no matter how short or how tall the person may be. Cultural oppositions are also an interesting case. Analyzing the markedness values of right and left in symbol classification, Battistella points out that in familiar European cultures, the right hand is "the good hand", whereas the left hand is seen as less active, with its development methodically thwarted (Battistella 1990). He suggests several sets of polarities which derive from the right/left opposition and underlie myth, ritual, and social convention, as shown below.

UNMARKED	MARKED
right	left
male	female
life	death
auspicious	inauspicious

Lack of mark has been often associated with attributes of "generality", "prototypicality", "normality", "naturalness", "frequency" etc. (Greenberg 1966). Culturally speaking, the unmarked choice is considered to be the "normal" one. The problem which translators are confronted with is that markedness relationships may differ greatly from one culture to another, and even more, from one subculture, group, occupation and context to another. What is generally accepted as the norm in one context may be denied as deviant in a different context of the same culture. Discussing context sensitiveness in markedness relationships, Aert Kuipers points out that a text written with white chalk will stand out on a blackboard, but not on a white one (Batistella 1990: 5).

How does markedness apply to the domain of translation/interpretation? First, it is worth mentioning that the word "translation" itself is unmarked, and denotes rendering of a text from a foreign language into one's mother tongue. Its marked equivalent in English is "service translation"

(Newmark 1988). Translation is viewed as an offer of information (Germ. *Informationsangebot*) made by a producer to a recipient (Reiss and Vermeer 1984/1991). However, translation can be viewed as *secondary* information, being a sort of imitation into a target language and culture of information produced into a source language and culture for the benefit of source language users (Baker 1998).

Based on a profound knowledge of the languages and cultures between which translation is made, markedness relationships help the translator decipher the intention of the original and transpose it correctly with the means of the target language. The preference for some constructions, words, gestures, attitudes etc. which, in a given context may be considered marked, may signal the author's intention to *foreground*[2] certain features. Foregrounding is based on the *crucial characteristic of human nature...*, which is, in Pike's opinion, *...our ability to select and guide into attention almost anything that we please* (Pike 1975: 27). Nevertheless, unlike the transmitter of the source message, who can thwart the message the way he/she pleases, the translator's freedom is limited to conveying the message in such a way as to obtain from the target language receptors a similar effect to that obtained from source language receptors. The translated message should be literal enough to assign prominence to those elements as indicated in the original text, while at the same time free enough to be relevant and cohesive with the text as a whole (Halliday 1981: 334). Steiner argues that,

> Any model of communication is at the same time a model of translation, of a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance. No two historical epochs, no two social classes, no two localities use words and syntax to signify exactly the same things, to send identical signals of valuation and inference. Neither do two human beings (1975: 45).

Faithfulness to the target audience means to identify the ways to make the translated text *relevant* for a specific segment of readers. According to Sperber and Wilson (1988), an assumption is relevant in a context *if and only if* it has some contextual effect in that context. Gutt (1991) defines relevance as adequate contextual effects at minimal processing cost. When rendering in French an (marked) expression like *It's raining cats and dogs*, a faithful translation approximates the meaning of the original, even if some of the original effect may be lost. Therefore, instead of the literal *Il pleut des chats et des chiens*, which is a "faithful" but incorrect translation, the translator resorts to the closest (unmarked) corresponding equivalent in TL which is *Il pleut à seaux/ des cordes* (Vinay and Darbelnet 1995), or *Il pleut à verse*, which Catford (1965) calls "TL lexical normalization". "Normalization" in this context means to transform the deviant, and unintentionally marked translation of an ordinary English utterance into a normal French utterance. Unless the situation (mental disability of the speaker, etc.) requires otherwise, *Il pleut à verse* is the acceptable translation. Deeming any text more or less translatable rather than absolutely translatable or untranslatable, Catford defines equivalence as an instance when the text in both source language and target language is relatable to the functionally relevant features of the situation.

According to Shoshana Blum-Kulka (1986), the process of translation brings about *shifts in coherence and cohesion.* Coherence *is a covert potential meaning relationship among parts of a text, made overt by the reader or listener through process of interpretation*. Besides faithfulness, a translated text must be coherent. The coherence rule stipulates that the target text must be coherent enough to enable its readers to understand it, given their assumed background knowledge and situational circumstances. A text must be translated in such a way that it can be interpreted by the recipients as coherent with their situation (Vermeer 1978: 100, Baker 1998: 236). On the other hand, cohesion is *an overt relationship holding between parts of the text, expressed by language specific markers* (Blum-Kulka 1986: 17-18). The shifts in coherence may be a) text focused and b) reader focused. Whereas text-focused shifts of coherence are linked to the very process of translation, reader-focused shifts are linked to the changes in readership through translation. As Blum-Kulka (2000: 304) points out,

> For the reader, the text becomes a coherent discourse if he can apply relevant schemas (e.g.) based on world knowledge, subject matter knowledge, familiarity with genre conventions) to draw the necessary inferences for understanding both the letter and the spirit of the text....Thus, King Lear would not "mean the same" to the British reader and to the French bilingual reader who can read and understand the original.

Deviations of the register may produce a marked effect against the background, which is justified and acceptable only when so expressed by the author of the original. When the register shift is not indicated in the source text, it causes a disruption of the balance between source and target language and therefore a poor translation. P. Noss (1986) exemplifies with several problems encountered by translators of the Bible. In the Holy Book, translators and readers were admonished not to add to nor cut from the contents of the prophecies lest the plagues cited therein be added to them (Noss 1986: 199). This made translators pursue faithfulness even at the risk of rendering their translations unintelligible. For example, the use of the passive in the New Testament is an unmarked means of expressing God's name in the original text; however, in some languages passive is non existent, or, it may not have the same function as in the source language. For example, in Thai the passive has a marked usage, being used for referring to unpleasant experiences (Noss 1986: 202). Asymmetries in connotative meanings are also problematic for translators. The phrase "The God is my Shepherd" is acceptable by English or Hebrew readers, who can distinguish between the concrete and the figurative usages of the word "shepherd". When translated into Gbaya, a language spoken in Central African Republic, the word "shepherd" lacks the figurative mark, and the target reader of this phrase can only understand that the psalmist owned a flock of sheep and it was the Lord who looked after them（Noss 1986: 203）.

Change of registers influences the quality and acceptability of a translated text. In his book *Honyaku no Gihou*（The Technique of Translation）（1997）S. Tobita comments on the translation problems encountered by his own students, exemplifying with a passage from a story written by Ruth Ainsworth. Here is the original text in English:

> There was once a little sparrow. He lived in a nest in the ivy on an old stone wall. He had four brothers and sisters. When he had grown some soft brown feathers and could move his wings up and down, his mother began to teach him to fly…

I examined the examples of translations provided by Tobita and made an attempt to analyze them in light of the concepts of markedness and relevance/acceptability discussed above.

The first thing a translator must do, as Gerding-Salas（2000）points out, is to

> … define some essential starting-points for the approximation of a text to be translated, such as the author of the text, the aim of the text, the readership, and the standard to be used, for which it is important to identify and categorize the author, the message, the kind of discourse, the translator and the readership.

The story, written by a popular author of children's literature, narrates the adventures of a little sparrow. It starts with the typical introductory phrase "there was once…", which marks the beginning of a narration. Also, the contents of the fragment gives a clear hint of the readership. The narration is targeted at preschool children; therefore, when translating it into Japanese, one must operate changes into the register, adapting the style and language to meet the understanding level of the little readers. The sentences are short, concise, and lack superfluous stylistic ornaments which would make them difficult to understand. Humanization of the main characters is another point aimed at attracting the sympathy of the readers. The author does not refer to the little sparrow as "it", but prefers to use the male, animate pronoun "he". And finally, the story lacks the rhythm and flow of literature which targets adult audiences. Below is the translation Tobita had expected from his students（all Japanese translations belong to Tobita):

（1）昔、一羽の小雀がいました。彼は古い石壁に這う蔦の中の巣に住んでいました。彼には四人の兄弟姉妹がいました…

This "translation" may be a product of anyone who has a minimal knowledge of English and Japanese. It is faithful to form, rather than style and knowledge level of the readers. Although translation（1）is literal up to the point where the author translates correctly "brothers and sisters" as "kyoudai shimai", he/she makes an attempt at normalizing it, to use Catford's term. Instead of translating the sentence *He lived in a nest in the ivy on an old stone wall* as *karewa furui ishikabe no tsuta no naka no su ni/no naka ni kurashite imashita*, where the repeated occurrence of the particle "no" disrupts the intelligibility of the sentence, he chose to translate it as *He lived in a nest of ivy which crept up on an old stone wall*（Kare wa furui ishikabe ni hau tsuta no naka no su ni sundeimashita）. The translation operates a lexical and grammatical normalization, and may be considered correct from the lexical and grammatical points of view. Unfortunately, there is more to translating than a simple equivalence between words and phrases. One has to consider the fundamental difference between registers in English and Japanese. Whereas for the little readers of the original text words like "little sparrow", "brothers and sisters", "nest" etc. are acceptable, the mere transposition in Japanese results in words and expressions that are almost incomprehensible for preschoolers. Therefore, one must be familiar with the style of such literature in Japanese and operate several fundamental changes in the text as presented below. Here are two examples of the students' translations.

（2）ちいさなすずめは、４わのおにいさんすずめとおねえさんすずめといっしょに、いしのかべのうえのつたのなかにある、おうちにすんでいました

（3）こすずめは、いしのかべのつたのかげのいえに、よにんのおにいさんとおねえさんとおかあさんと、いっしょにくらしていました

Both translations reflect a certain consideration of the "target reader" factor. They are written entirely in hiragana, and instead of rendering "brothers and sisters" as a correct but in this context unacceptable "kyodai shimai", they both chose "oniisan（suzume）to oneesan（suzume）", which is a language children are likely to be more familiar with. Moreover, the word "nest" was replaced in translation with that which means "home"（ouchi/ie）, which is again closer to the little readers' understanding.

However, the two examples above lack the expected consistency and readability. T２ contains too many repetitions of "suzume" and "no". Moreover, the translator seems to hesitate between referring to the birds as "nin"（which goes for humans）or as "wa"（the prefix for birds）. Finally, the translation lacks the introductory phrase or sentence which announces the beginning of a story. T３ is also marred by the frequent repetition of "no" and "to" and by the lack of introduction.

Tobita suggests two versions, a more general one for adult readers, where some of the Chinese characters contain the reading as well, and another one, for children, written in hiragana only. Here they are.

（４）（target readers: mothers）

小さなスズメさんがいました。古びた石のかべにはっているツタのなか巣にがあって、そこにくらしていたのです。おにいさんやおねえさんも四にんいました。…

（５）（target readers: children）

かわいいすずめのぼうやは、ふるいいしのかべにはっているつたのなかのおうちにすんでいました。このぼうやにはおにいさんとおねえさんがよにんいました。

The differences between the two versions are easy to notice. Besides that, T４ is more faithful to the original than T5. Moreover, T４ can be considered a freer rendering than T1, because it brings elements which add up to the expressiveness and readability of the text. Let us analyze T1, T４ and T５ and point out the differences and the way in which these may affect the general impression of the translation.

T１	T４	T５
一羽の小雀	小さなスズメさん	<u>かわいい</u>　<u>すずめのぼうや</u>
古い石壁	古びた石のかべ	ふるい　いしの　かべ
這う蔦の中に	はっているツタのなかに	はっている　つたのなかの
巣に住んでいました	巣があって、そこにくらしていたのです	<u>おうち</u>に　すんでいました
彼には		この<u>ぼうや</u>には
四人の兄弟姉妹	おにいさんやおねえさんも四にん	<u>おにいさんと</u>　<u>おねえさん</u>がよにん

Whereas T１ is a faithful and informative but rather uninspired translation of the original, in T４ and especially T５ efforts have been made to modulate and re-create the atmosphere of the story with a view to the virtual reader. Thus the distance from "一羽の小雀" to "かわいい　すずめのぼうや" is considerable in that the former uses correct terms which are more frequent in adults' written language and even in academic writing, whereas the latter is not what purists would call a translation equivalent for "little sparrow" (it means "a cute baby/kid sparrow"). Also, the purely referential character of T１ does not allow for a closer proximity between (virtual) story-teller and (virtual) reader, whereas in T４ and T5, this proximity is considerable, which makes them if not more literally faithful, at least more acceptable in the given situation. Another important point which may be relevant about the basic differences between children's literatures in English and Japanese stories can be noticed if one considers the underlined words and expressions in the table above and their English equivalents in the original text. Whereas in the original English words such as "little sparrow", "brothers and sisters", "nest", "he" share the features of [-human] or [±human], which implies that the readers are, or should be aware that the main characters of the story are non-human, the Japanese version aimed at children chooses to endow such words as 小雀, 兄弟姉妹, 巣 with [+human] features（小雀→かわいいすずめのぼうや, 兄弟姉妹→おにいさんおねえさん, 巣→おうち, ４羽→よにん）in order to render the characters and the situation more familiar.

As seen in the discussion and examples above, relevance and markedness are useful in interpreting a text as a message aimed at a given target and identifying the points on which the author focuses in order to obtain stylistic effect. The questions, "what kind of readership is targeted?", or " what language/norms/values etc. are acceptable/unacceptable in this particular group?", may help the translator generate a text which would be faithful if not always to the original form, but to its author and readers.

Notes

1. *Translation from one's language of habitual use into another language*（Newmark 1988: 52）
2. The term *foregrounding* was first introduced by P. L. Garvin in his translation of the Czech "aktualisace", a concept employed in the works of several Prague scholars. It defines *the kind of deviation which has the function of bringing some item into artistic emphasis so that it stands out from its surroundings*（Chapman 1973: 48）.

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