

Issues in Translation When the Language Learning is Through a Second Language: A Study of Chinese Language Learning

Sandeep Biswas

Assistant Professor

DFEL, Chinese

Central University of Jharkhand

sandeep.biswas@cuja.ac.in

Mob: 7766907852

=====

Abstract

This paper will analytically study and discuss the problems and difficulties one faces in translation when the acquisition of foreign language is through second language learning. This article is organized in three sections, in an attempt to present as many aspects of the field of Translation Studies as possible. Section 2 is concerned with the central issues of translation, with the problem of *culture* and untranslatability. Section 3 deals with the problems in an understanding of the second language and section 4 will look into the linguistic problems in the Target Language whilst translating it from Source Language.

Keywords: Chinese Translation, Second language, Foreign language, Untranslatability

1. Introduction

What is language? The definition provided by the Cambridge Dictionary as “a system of communication consisting of sounds, words, and grammar, or the system of communication used by people in a particular country or type of work”. Some scholars may disagree to this statement, as they consider the language as not only a science of semiotics but also a science to understand the nonverbal signs and abstract notions, for example painting, music, dance, etc. People in this area do not use any verbal articulation but use the same medium to convey their message or thoughts to the audience. What is meant by the term second language or L2? Multilingualism is gradually becoming a norm in most of the continents of the world. Sometimes, a distinction is made between a ‘second’ and a ‘third’ or even ‘fourth’ language. However, the term ‘second’ is generally used to refer to any language other than the first language.¹

A distinction is made between second and foreign language acquisition. In the case of second language acquisition, the language plays an institutional and social role in the community (i.e. it

¹ Elis, Rod (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Oxford, p.11

functions as a recognised means of communication among members who speak some other language as their mother tongue). For example, Hindi as a second language is learnt in the different states of India. In contrast, foreign language learning takes place in settings where the language plays no major role in the community and is primarily learnt only in the classroom. Examples of foreign language learning are Chinese, Japanese, French, German, Italian, etc. in India.

The paper will discuss the problems of translation when the foreign language learning is through the second language. It becomes significant to understand the notion of translation. Some people have stated that *translation* is the communication of the meaning of a source-language text by means of an equivalent target-language text. The definition presented by Nida is translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning (语意: *yǔyì*) and second in terms of style (语体: *yǔtǐ*). Translation articulated by non-Europeans writers are three recurring stratagems: a redefinition of the terminology of faithfulness and equivalence, the importance of highlighting the visibility of the translator and a shift of emphasis that views translation as an act of creative rewriting.²

Here, it will be useful to understand what translation is and what interpretation is. What is generally understood as translation involves the rendering of a source language (SL) text into the target language (TL) so as to ensure the (1) the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar and (2) the structures of the SL will be preserved as closely as possible but not so closely that the TL structures will be seriously distorted.³ So it can be deduced that the translator is a force for good, a creative artist who ensures the survival of writing across time and space, an intercultural mediator and interpreter, a figure whose importance to the continuity and diffusion of culture is immeasurable.⁴ Roman Jakobson distinguishes translation into three types:⁵

- 1) Intralingual translation or *rewording* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language).
- 2) Interlingual translation or *translation proper* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language).
- 3) Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign system).

Both original and translation are now viewed as equal products of the creativity of writer and translator, but the task of these two is different. It is up to the writer to fix words in an ideal, unchangeable form and it is the task of the translator to liberate those words from the confines of their source language and allow them to live again in the language into which they are translated.⁶ Now, let us see what an interpretation is. According to Freeman Tilden “Interpretation is an

² Bassnett, Susan (2002). *Translation Studies*, Third Edition. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. P.6

³ Bassnett, Susan, *ibid.* p.12

⁴ Bassnett, Susan, *ibid.* p.4

⁵ Cited in Bassnett, Susan, *ibid.*, p.23

⁶ Cited in Bassnett, Susan, *ibid.* p.5

educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information”.

The official Romanization or *pinyin* is also provided with the Chinese characters for an easy read.

2. Cultural Barriers in Translation

Before we consider in detail the barriers which culture posits for translation, it is imperative to define the term ‘culture’. Raymond Williams suggests three broad definitions. First of all, culture can be used to refer to ‘a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic, development’. Using this definition, we would probably think of examples such as poetry, the novel, ballet, opera, and fine art. A second use of the word ‘culture’ might suggest ‘a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group’. Here culture as a particular way of life—would allow us to speak of such practices as the seaside holiday, the celebration of Christmas, and youth subcultures, as examples of culture. These are usually referred to as *lived* cultures or cultural practices. Finally, Williams suggests that culture can be used to refer to ‘the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity’. Here—culture as signifying practices—would allow us to speak of soap opera, pop music, and comics, as examples of culture. These are usually referred to as cultural texts.⁷

Today the movement of peoples around the globe can be seen to mirror the very process of translation itself, for translation is not just the transfer of text from one language into another, it is now rightly seen as a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures, a process during which all kinds of transactions take place mediated by the figure of the translator.⁸ Here John Dryden formulated three basic methods of translations:⁹

- (1) metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another;
- (2) paraphrase, or translation with latitude, the Ciceronian ‘sense-for-sense’ view of translation;
- (3) imitation, where the translator can abandon the text of the original as he sees fit.

Due to globalization, it is necessary to understand the languages and cultures of others. In translations, culture stands as a very difficult hurdle. It is said that ‘No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural languages.’¹⁰ Culture stands a huge hindrance when the translator is translating a foreign language. For example, let’s assume that there is one Chinese, one Indian and one Indian interpreter who knows both Hindi as well as Chinese. When the Chinese person says that “我从来没

⁷ Storey, John (2004). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Third edition. Beijing: Peking University Press, p.1

⁸ Bassnett, Susan (2002). *Translation Studies*, Third Edition. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. P.6

⁹ Bassnett, Susan, *ibid.* P.66

¹⁰ Cited in Bassnett, Susan, *ibid.*, p.23

有吃别人动过筷子的饭” (wǒ cónglái méiyǒu chī biérén dòngguò kuàizi de fàn), he translates as “I never had food in which others had used chopsticks”. Now, this translation by the interpreter, according to the *metaphrase* of John Dryden, is right, as he has translated each and every word of the speaker into TL. But the interpretation leaves ambiguity in translation, as the sense is not clear. This meaning is similar to the opinion of Liang Shiqiu (梁实秋) about Lu Xun that reading Lu’s translation is consequently, like “reading a map and trying to locate places with one’s fingers.” Liang noted that they are more than just “stiff translation”; they are nothing more than “dead translation” (死译: sǐyì).¹¹ Here in this situation *paraphrase* or sense-for-sense translation will be applicable. This type of translation arises when the interpreter is not fully acquainted with the *culture* of the source language/foreign language. The translators should not be naïve in the professional world while dealing with peoples of different cultures, according to Daniel Gile. He suggested “the speaker has to provide the frame for the Message so that the listener could understand what was being referred to”.¹² The above example shows how the lack of understanding of the cultural background of Chinese hinders the translator in translating the text. Let’s take another example where English is a foreign language for the translator. Talking to the West, Western people often use the word ‘Fuck’ in their daily life. Interestingly this word is called a magical word in English. In parts of speech, this word can be used as a Verb (transitive/nontransitive), noun and adjective. For example: if an American wants to say a very hot girl, they would say a “she is fucking hot”. Here the word ‘fuck’ doesn’t contain any derogatory sense, but in a positive sense which has the meaning of ‘very’, an adjective. Similarly, this word can be used to express fraud, ignorance, trouble, aggression, displeasure, difficulty, incompetence, suspicion, enjoyment, request, hostility, greeting, apathy, innovation, surprise, anxiety, etc. Apparently it is very clear that if English is the second or foreign language for the interpreter, and if the interpreter is not familiar to the culture, then his/her translation will be called into question, as the most possible translation into Chinese would be “她真他妈的辣” (tā zhēn tā mā de là) (*metaphrase* or word by word translation). Here the interpreter fails to understand the cultural background of the word, as the English sentence may be spoken by many people, but the Chinese (translated one) will only be spoken by some hooligans. Here the interpreter may find it difficult to comprehend the meaning of ‘fuck’ in different contexts, as there may no similar kind of words in his first or second language, which will be equivalent to the text. The understanding of the culture of the second or foreign language will help the interpreter to comprehend the text and to translate it in a significant way. As many scholars think that besides knowledge of a language, comprehension implies knowledge of the outside world, also called in the literature extra-linguistic knowledge, world knowledge or encyclopedic knowledge.¹³

In terms of *culture*, another problem in foreign language acquisition through the second language is *untranslatability*. In simple terms, untranslatability is a property of a text or of any

¹¹ Leo Tak-hung Chan (2001). “What’s Modern in Chinese Translation Theory? Lu Xun and the Debates on Literature and Foreignization in the May Fourth Period”.p.202

¹² Gile, Daniel (2009). *Basic concept and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.p.57

¹³ Gile, Daniel, *ibid*.p.81

utterance, in one language, for which no equivalent text or utterance can be found in another language when translated. Catford distinguishes two types of *untranslatability*, which he terms *cultural* and *linguistic*.¹⁴ We will here discuss the *cultural* untranslatability, and in chapter 3 we will talk about *linguistic* untranslatability. Cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in the TL culture of a relevant situational feature for the SL text. It can be understood by the concept of God the Father which cannot be translated into a language where the deity is female and vice-versa. There are certain expressions in a language where one can find equivalent words for translation of the text, semantically one may be right in translation, but the meaning in the target language would not convey the same meaning as per the source language. Let's see some idioms and some colloquial expressions in Chinese, the idiom: 青梅竹马 (*qīngméizhúmǎ*). Each Chinese character has some specific meaning in English, whilst translating the idiom in a *metaphrase* manner; one cannot deduce any meaning out of it. Translation involves far more than the replacement of lexical and grammatical items between languages and, as can be seen in the translation of idioms and metaphors, the process may involve discarding the basic linguistic elements of the SL text and achieve 'expressive identity' between the SL and TL texts.¹⁵ In the same way, the colloquial expression in Chinese “好什么好，好你个头” (*hǎo shénme hǎo, hǎo nǐ gètóu*) which means 'it's not good', but translating it in *metaphrase* or in *paraphrase* way, the meaning will still be in ambiguity. Let's take some more example, in kindergarten kids learn rhymes. In Chinese also there is a rhyme for counting which goes like this “一颗豆豆两颗米，那个出口就是你” (*yī kē dòu dòu liǎng kē mǐ, nàgè chūkǒu jiùshì nǐ*). In comprehending this rhyme, one may find difficulty in making any sense out of it. It is even more difficult to translate it. There is a similar kind of expression (rhyme) in Hindi also. One may find it even difficult to translate because in Hindi the word doesn't represent anything but are merely sounds. Sometimes the meaning and usage of a single word in a first or second language may be different from some other languages. In that case, one should understand the cultural phenomenon behind it. But still if one can understand it *culturally*, s/he may not find any equivalent word in the target language. With the translation of the word *hello*, the standard English form of friendly greeting when meeting, the problems are multiplied. The dictionaries give:

French: ça va?; hallo

German: wie geht's; hallo

Italian: olà; pronto; ciao

While English does not distinguish between the word used when greeting someone face to face and that used when answering the telephone, French, German and Italian all do make that distinction. The Italian *pronto* can only be used as a telephonic greeting, like the German *hallo*.¹⁶ In case of Chinese also the same conditions are applied. When the Chinese meet someone face to face, they greet as “你好” (*Nǐhǎo*), and when they receive a call they say “喂” (*wéi*), whereas in English for both the above situation they use *hello*.

¹⁴ Bassnett, Susan, op cit.p.39

¹⁵ Bassnett, Susan, ibid.p.34

¹⁶ Bassnett, Susan, ibid.p.26

3. Challenges in Learning Second Language and Its impact on Learning a Foreign Language

We have already discussed in the introductory part that a second language functions as a recognised means of communication among members who speak some other language as their mother tongue. Through linguistic research, it has been found that sometimes people fail to understand the second language completely, as it is not their first language or their own mother tongue. The lack of understanding is not only in its *cultural* domain but also in its lexical parts. This sometimes creates misunderstanding in the second language itself, which can mislead the translator in translating the second language text into the target language. An individual easily adapts the first language once it will be imparted to him/her. It can be understood by a simple example. A Chinese baby born in Bangladesh will easily grasp the language Bengali. Although its parents are Chinese, the kid will be fluent in Bengali after acquiring Bengali for a few years. But later on if the kid has to be shifted to China, then s/he won't be able to grasp Chinese as quickly as s/he has learned Bengali (here we assume that the only language which s/he learned in Bangladesh is Bengali and Chinese was not imparted to her as her mother tongue). Actually, the kid's brain is just like a white paper where one can write anything with the help of a pen. But once it is inscribed, it will be very difficult to remove it from the paper. If also one removes it, still the minute imprints will stay back on the paper.¹⁷ This situation is the same as the learning process of a language by the kid. Once the first language has been imparted to the kid, it will be a bit difficult to impart a totally different language to him/her, as the kid will adapt the second language through the understanding of the first language.

The above situation is applicable in the learning of a foreign language also. The individual will learn the foreign language through the understanding of the second language which will put some hurdles in front of the interpreter to master the foreign language. To clear the statement, let's assume that a Hindi speaker is learning Chinese through English (here English is a second language for the individual). Now in Hindi, there is a grammar for singular and plural. Like one student (singular) will become plural by adding a suffix 's' to it. Both in Hindi and in English there are particular suffixes by which one can make a singular form into plural one. In contrast to Chinese, it also has a suffix to make singular sense into plural, which is 们 (*men*). For example 我们 (*wǒmen*: we), 你们 (*nǐmen*: you all), 他们 (*tāmen*: they), 人们 (*rénmen*: peoples), etc. But this grammar rule is not applicable to all nouns or pronouns. The suffix 们 can only go with + human nouns or pronouns to make it plural (see the above Chinese examples). But if someone wants to say that "there are many stars in the sky", it will be wrong in Chinese to say "天上有很多星星们" (*tiān shàng yǒu hěnn duō xīngxīngmen*). Here the suffix is not applicable with the noun 星星 (stars), instead, the sentence will be "天上有很多星星" (*tiān shàng yǒu hěnn duō xīngxīng*). If the interpreter interprets it as "星星们" (*xīngxīngmen*), then the reader of this text will be confused. This is the specialty if a language that what one finds in the SL will be completely different in some other language. An individual learning Chinese, as a foreign language, through English or Hindi, as a second language,

¹⁷ Biswas, Sandeep (2016). "An Exploration and Analysis of the Issues Regarding the Teaching of Chinese in Indian Universities." *China & the World Cultural Exchange*, Vol.211 No. 5, p.133-136

will face this problem in translation. The above example showed that foreign language learning through a second language might become a hurdle.

Lack of understanding of the second language not only lies on lexicons but also on the semantics. Sometimes the meaning of the word in the second language is not clear to the interpreter himself. In that case, his interpretation will be called into question. To understand the above statement let us take the example of the English word ‘Civilization’. Here, dictionaries have defined civilization in various ways; these definitions can bewilder the translator. So once the translator is not clear about any concept or meaning of a word, s/he will not be able to translate the SL into TL. This kind of translation often misguides the audience. Taking another example from classroom observation, Indian students, when learning Chinese, they often misunderstand the concept of 和 (*hé*) which means ‘and’. The Chinese word 和 (*hé*) is basically used to connect consecutive nouns or pronouns, like 我、哈利和安娜都学习汉语 (*wǒ, Hālì hé Ānnà dōu xuéxí hànyǔ*) which means I, Harley and Anna all study Chinese. It can’t be used as conjunction ‘and’ of English, which functions to connect two different sentences.

4. Specific Linguistic Hindrance

Let us see the specific linguistic issues when language learning is through a second language. Edward Sapir claims that: “No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The world in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.”¹⁸ The above definition can be also said that no lexicons and the semantics are similar in different languages. The meanings of some words are only confined to some particular language. In this case, translation will be very difficult. Through linguistic research, it has been found that the equivalent synonyms in one language, with different usage, may not be there in other languages. Like in Chinese the meaning of 嘲笑 (*cháoxiào*), 哂笑 (*shěnxiao*), 讥笑 (*jīxiào*), 讥讽 (*jīfěng*), 嘲讽 (*cháoofěng*), etc. are same in English, which is to laugh at or to sneer at, which is the closet translation to only 讥笑 (*jīxiào*). But in Chinese words have different meanings regarding the usage of the words. The word 嘲笑 (*cháoxiào*) has the sense to laugh at someone while criticizing the person. But in English translation ‘to laugh at’ doesn’t carry that sense. Again, the word 哂笑 (*shěnxiao*) is the meaning between 嘲笑 (*cháoxiào*) and 哂笑 (*shěnxiao*), but again it is impossible to translate this word into English. Another example of this problem can be the Chinese word 忽然 (*hūrán*) and 突然 (*tūrán*). The meanings of both the words are ‘suddenly/all of a sudden’, but the usages of these two Chinese words are completely different. For example, 突然 (*tūrán*) can be an adjective as well as an adverb, whilst 忽然 (*hūrán*) can only be an adverb.

On the linguistic level, untranslatability occurs when there is no lexical or syntactical substitute in the TL for an SL item.¹⁹ Linguistic untranslatability occurs when a formal feature of the

¹⁸ Bassnett, Susan, *ibid.*p.22

¹⁹ Bassnett, Susan, *ibid.*p.39

Source Language is functionally relevant in the Source Text, and the Target Language has no formally corresponding feature. For example, the English tongue twister: “Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear. Fuzzy Wuzzy had no hair. Fuzzy Wuzzy wasn’t fuzzy, was he?” has no equivalent translation in Chinese, and which is equally a tongue twister. Due to globalization, new words are emerging on the dictionaries. Sometimes it is almost impossible to translate those words into any other language. For example 干部队伍要革命化 (*gànbù duìwǔ yào géming huà*), 年轻化 (*niánqīng huà*), 知识化 (*zhīshì huà*), 专业化 (*zhuānyè huà*).²⁰ There are no equivalent words in English for these words in Chinese. Similarly, gender-biased languages, like Hindi, can’t be translated into Chinese or English.

To avoid the above situations, there are some remedies of untranslatability. Linguistics has come out with two possible solutions to untranslatability. A) the use of literal translation, concerning on the immediate language of the message, B) the use of an artificial language somewhere in between the SL text where the special feelings of the original may be conveyed through strangeness.²¹ In support of these two solutions Cicera expresses: “If I render word for word, the result will sound uncouth, and if compelled by necessity I alter anything in order or wording, I shall seem to have departed from the function of a translator.”²² It has been said that “communication is possible when account is taken of the respective situations of speaker and hearer, or author and translator”.²³

5. Conclusion

Language acquisition, as stated above, is still a young discipline and still has a long way to go. Translators continue to translate, and the extended discussion that has begun with such issues can now be joined by anyone who, having encountered problems while translating, wants to move from a pragmatic, empirical position towards a more scientific, collaborative discourse.

Here the languages in question belong to two different and distinct language families. Which means that both English and Chinese have their different cultural, linguistic features. When English is a medium to learn Chinese, the conceptual gaps which prevail in English learners’ repertoire become problematic for the learners of Chinese as a foreign language. This continues when the learners involved in translation.

References

1. Bassnett, Susan (2002). *Translation Studies*, Third Edition. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

²⁰ Du, Rong (2002) (ed.), *Speaking Chinese About China*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.p.168

²¹ Bassnett, Susan, op cit.p.72

²² Bassnett, Susan, ibid.p.51

²³ Bassnett, Susan, ibid.p.44

2. Biswas, Sandeep (2016). "An Exploration and Analysis of the Issues Regarding the Teaching of Chinese in Indian Universities." *China & the World Cultural Exchange*, Vol.211 No. 5, ISSN: 1004-5015.
 3. Du, Rong (2002) (ed.), *Speaking Chinese About China*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press
 4. Ellis, Rod (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Oxford.
 5. Gile, Daniel (2009). *Basic concept and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
 6. Leo Tak-hung Chan (2001). "What's Modern in Chinese Translation Theory? Lu Xun and the Debates on Literature and Foreignization in the May Fourth Period".
 7. Storey, John (2004). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Third edition. Beijing: Peking University Press
- =====