

บริบททางวัฒนธรรมในการแปล

Cultural Contexts for Translation

วันที่รับบทความ : 5 มิถุนายน 2563

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วันที่แก้ไขบทความ : 4 สิงหาคม 2563

วันที่ตอบรับบทความ : 13 สิงหาคม 2563

บทคัดย่อ

ปัญหาหนึ่งที่พบได้ในวิชาการแปลของนักศึกษา คือ นักศึกษาขาดความรู้ความเข้าใจในเรื่องบริบททางวัฒนธรรม ทำให้นักศึกษาไม่ตระหนักว่าภาษาและวัฒนธรรมนั้นไม่อาจแยกจากกัน จึงทำให้เกิดข้อผิดพลาดในการแปล วัฒนธรรมมีบทบาทและความสำคัญต่อการแปลอย่างยิ่ง ดังนั้นบทความเรื่องบริบททางวัฒนธรรมในการแปล (cultural contexts for translation) มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อมุ่งเน้นความสำคัญของบริบททางวัฒนธรรมในการแปลอันประกอบด้วย บทบาทของวัฒนธรรมในการแปล ความสำคัญและอิทธิพลในการแปล คำเฉพาะทางวัฒนธรรม คำเฉพาะทางวัฒนธรรม การแปลคำเฉพาะทางวัฒนธรรม และบริบททางวัฒนธรรม

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Received: June 5, 2020

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Revised: August 4, 2020

Accepted: August 13, 2020

Abstract

One of the problems found in students studying Translation is that the students lack the knowledge and understanding of cultural contexts. They may be unaware of the fact that language and culture are inseparable leading to mistakes in translation. With regards to this, the article “Cultural Contexts for Translation” aims to provide the importance of cultural contexts for translation including roles of translation, importance and influences of translation, culture-specific items, translation for culturally specific items and cultural contexts.

Keywords: problems in translation, culture, contexts, translation

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Introduction

With the advent of information technology and globalization, there comes an increasing need for translation. Video sharing platforms such as YouTube provide subtitles in a variety of languages. Webpages displaying their content in multiple languages have become the norm. These phenomena respond to the needs of multicultural communities and allow for intercultural communication. It could be said that translation is in high demand.

According to Burrow-Goldhahn (2018), the importance of translation skills and the demand for translation are increasing. This is to satisfy the diverse needs and wants of people from different cultures and languages enabling them to communicate effectively in society. However, the dilemma in which the translation industry has been facing are issues such as whether developing language technologies such as Computer-Assisted Translation or Machine Translation have replaced the need for human translators. According to Ghelardoni (2016), human translators are still needed because they not only translate meanings of words, but also convey the tones, the emotions and communicative purposes intended in the text and express them in the target language.

Translation involves at least two languages, in other words, two cultures. It is common knowledge that language and culture are intertwined. Language records, reflects, and represents culture and at the same time language is influenced and constructed by culture. They are essentially inseparable entities. This brings with it, the need to study cultural contexts for translation.

Roles of Culture in Translation

As culture and language are deeply intertwined, culture plays an important role in translation. Therefore, every time a translator translates a piece of text, he or she needs to consider the cultural context, what the source text really intends to communicate, not just the literal meaning, and convey this meaning and its cultural concepts in the target language.

This is an important element of effective translation as different languages have different viewpoints and attachments for each word. It can be said that all words have a cultural meaning. Neglecting the roles of culture in translation could be likened to neglecting the importance of the heart and its role in the functioning of the body as a whole.

Importance of Culture in Translation

In translation, the translators need to remind themselves of cultural differences. Regardless of what languages are used in different countries, the cultural contexts will inevitably differ. Even in English-speaking countries, there exist countless words and phrases with different meanings which differ depending on the country where they are used. For example, the word ‘jelly’ for the British refers to a fruit-flavored gelatin dessert while for the Americans, it refers to a clear or translucent fruit spread or preserve.

There are many concepts, ideas and practices that exist in one culture which may not necessarily exist or be comprehensible in another culture. These unique culturally based subtleties are intermingled within the meaning of the word. Therefore, some words in the source language are so distinct, that cannot be rendered in other language.

Cultural contexts influence meanings in both the source and target language. A word or phrase in the source language that seems easy to translate may contain a whole different implication in which the translators are unaware of the cultural context and convey the opposite meaning to the target language.

A Google search for the phrase ‘Lost in translation’ reveals a number of humorous translation mistakes which may be interpreted differently depending on the cultural context. This reveals the fact that translation which focuses solely on word meaning, without considering the cultural contexts can lead to many misinterpretations. The mistakes may seem hilarious in some social contexts but may be viewed as being inappropriate when doing business. The impact of such poor translations could lead to the user of the language being perceived as being unprofessional or in some cases make them seem indifferent. It is, therefore, the translators’ responsibility to take culture into consideration when translating with the realization that culture and language are interconnected.

Influence of Culture on Translation

In addition to the important role of culture in translation, culture also influences translation. Zhang (2018) stated that translation is a cultural activity and it is influenced by social and cultural factors. Therefore, these factors impact the translation of the text, the choice of translation strategies. Consequently, translators from different cultural backgrounds may translate the same piece of translation differently. Culture can help

promote as well as influence translation, and somehow can limit translation in some cases.

The influence of culture on translation can be divided into two main aspects: Firstly, the influence on the translator and secondly, the influence on the translation activities.(Zhang, 2018)

The Influence of Culture on Translators. As stated above, translation and culture are inseparable, and translators need to consider the cultural context while translating. Therefore, in the process of translating, the translator is the key person whose responsibility it is to convey meaning from source language to target language. His knowledge, experience, and living environment play a vital role as the translator makes a choice in translation unconsciously influenced by cultural factors. According to Zhang (2018), the accuracy rate of the translation is higher when the translator understands the cultural background than that of the translator who lacks this knowledge.

The Influence of Culture on Translation Activities. There are two aspects of the influence of culture on translation activities. The first aspect is the scope and mode of national culture and the second aspect is the influence of culture on the process of translation.

1. The scope and mode of national culture determining the translation activities: translation process involves many aspects of the target language culture, consciously and unconsciously. Thus, the degree of openness of each nation determines the limitation of translation activities. For instance, in an intensified religious country, some kinds of literature may seem inappropriate to be translated. On the contrary, there is no such restriction in the highly open-minded country.

2. The influence of culture on the process of translation. The translator's view of the translation somehow reflects the influence of culture on the process of translation as translation is the exchange of meaning between two languages. The translator may lack awareness of the influence of culture and show the cultural imprint in the target language. Thus, when learning a foreign language, culture should also be covered in the course. This will positively affect the translator's attitude and knowledge about the culture which can also influence the richness of the content and style of the translation. For example, the differences between regions make the interpretation of weather environment signified different meaning. The western culture located in the temperate

zone welcomes the sun associated with warmth whereas many tropical countries are not quite fond of the big fireball bringing blazing heat.

In conclusion, translators may be unaware of the influences of culture on translation. It is therefore vital that they should consider the cultural contexts of both the source language and target language as well as their own cultural contexts in order to avoid making translation mistakes caused by their own assumptions and misinterpretations.

Cultural-Specific Items

There are many categories for culture-specific items defined by different scholars. These are explained below:

According to Snell-Hornby (1993), there are five basic groups of Culture-specific Items (CSI) which are as follows:

1. Terminology / nomenclature
2. Internationally known items and sets
3. Concrete objects, basic level items
4. Word, expressing perception and evaluation often linked to socio-cultural norms
5. Culture-bound elements

In addition, Newmark (1998) theorized five different classes of "cultural categories". Those categories are as follows:

1. Ecology
2. Material culture
3. Social culture
4. Organizations, customs, activities, procedures, concepts
5. Gestures and habits

From the two lists above, it can be seen that some elements overlap. In addition, each item can be comprised of many more detailed items. In conclusion, culture-specific items are words and phrases characterized by the cultural differences, presenting both abstract and concrete items.

Translation for Cultural-Specific Items

Each country has its own set of culture regarding habits, values, norms, concepts, ideas, judgement and classification systems. Sometimes neighboring countries may share

some of these elements and at the same time may be significantly different. There are several strategies to deal with CSIs but the choice depends on the target language society's degree of acceptance and tolerance.

Aixela (cited in Akbari,2013) presents seven strategies for translating CSIs as follows:

1. Repetition
2. Orthographic adaptation
3. Linguistic (non-cultural) Translation
4. Absolute Universalization
5. Naturalization
6. Deletion
7. Autonomous Creation

Also, Vinay and Darbelnet (cited in Akbari,2013) presents 7 different strategies for translating CSIs as follows:

1. Borrowing
2. Calque (loan shift)
3. Literal Translation
4. Transposition (Shift)
5. Modulation
6. Equivalence
7. Adaptation

In Mona Baker's theory(1992), there are seven different procedures for translation of culture-bound elements which are summarized as translation by:

1. A more general word (superordinate)
2. A more natural/less expressive word
3. Cultural substitution
4. Using a loan word or a loan word plus explanation
5. Paraphrase using unrelated words
6. Omission
7. Illustration

Therefore, choices about which strategy to apply depends on the translator's decision based on the consideration of cultural context. Some translations may require more than one strategy to clarify the meaning in the target language.

Cultural Contexts

Knowledge about culture is vital in translation especially in the business world. Advertising is one example of this. When advertising a product in different countries, the slogan or catch phrase needs to be translated. Nevertheless, some companies may neglect the cultural aspect of the translation. which may result in not only the loss of the intended message but can also seem culturally insensitive and cause offence. Consequently, translation without consideration being given to cultural context can have disastrous consequences to the reputation of the company are at stake.

As stated above, there are many aspects of cultural context. Here are some examples of cultural contexts in translation.

Connotation. Connotation is an essential component which much be considered in translation. First, the associated meanings of the source language may not in accordance with those of target language. This may cause misinterpretations or miscommunications which are critical when dealing with business matters. One example such a mistake was made by a company which chose to use a product name which translated to ‘manure.’ which not surprisingly did not appeal to the consumers Clairol made a huge mistake when promoting its product ‘Mist Stick curling iron’ in Germany without knowing that “mist” is German was slang for “manure.” Other examples relate to the cultural interpretation of the word ‘moon’. In many Asian countries the moon is revered and represents beauty, romance and serenity. It can also represent gentle feminine qualities. In contrast, the moon in some English-speaking cultures, is associated with madness.

Idiomatic phrases. Idiomatic phrases, expressions and slang are all based on cultural contexts. So, the translator needs to consider this when translating, because an idiom translated word for word will, in many cases, make no sense to speakers of other languages. For example, many English idioms derived from Greek or Roman mythology would make little sense to people who are not familiar with these myths.

Social values. The differences between social values of different cultures may vary significantly and for businesses venture into this foreign culture, need extra care. Some concepts may be misunderstood or may be not conveyed at all after translation. The concept of family, for example, is very different in most Asian cultures. The concept of family refers to the extended families related by blood and marriage. Feelings of gratitude, family obligation and loyalty seem to be common and promoted in many

advertisements while these concepts may seem completely alien in other cultures which emphasize different values.

In conclusion, cultural contexts play significant roles in today's translation for business especially in advertising. Mistakes in translation of advertising slogans may negatively influence how the company is perceived and hence impact their financial situation. Without the awareness of different cultural contexts in translation, a single word in the brand name or slogan may be the cause of unnecessary losses. Translators, therefore, need to focus on the cultural contexts in translation. Some examples of cultural contexts for translation are connotations, idiomatic phrases and social values.

Summary

Culture and Translation are interwoven and represent and reflect each other. Therefore, apart from the meaning, careful consideration to cultural contexts should be made in order to avoid making mistakes. There are many kinds of culture-specific items related to food, plants, festivals as well as norms or values. These CSIs may or may not be easily interpreted. Moreover, the differences of cultural contexts are not only between source language texts and target language texts but also include the translator's own cultural context. So, translators need to remind themselves of these different cultural contexts when translating. There are many strategies for cultural context translation ranging from using loan words, generalizing word or using a more general term for the specific cultural items, and in some cases, the omission of or even avoidance of translating a word. Translators should be aware of these strategies and apply them accordingly. Cultural contexts must therefore be considered when translating in business contexts so as to avoid translation mistakes which could potentially cause ridicule or offence. Lack of awareness of cultural contexts when making translations may not only cause offence, but also negatively impact how the company is viewed by the public raising doubts about their professionalism. Neglecting these considerations can be devastating to the future of a company which has invested substantial sums of money to promote their product.

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