| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Overlapping Sociolinguistic Underpinnings with Semantic Aspects of Cross-cultural Communication in African Drama Texts Translation

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| ABSTRACT

Analyzing semantic aspects of cross-cultural communication in drama texts translation within the African socio-cultural perspective constitutes a major challenge in the field of sociolinguistics, especially in this era of globalization influenced by aided technology, linguistic diffusion, and socio-cultural identity adulteration. Within this perspective, it is obliging for translation problems to constitute the core of communication across cultures, especially African cultures that are still considered rudimentary. The fact that many African languages do not exist in written forms constitutes a limitation to the effective transference of mother tongue socio-cultural linguistic nuances to learned official languages entangled with sociocultural context meanings of actions, thoughts and feelings as lived and experienced within the immediate or larger linguistic community. Present trends on effective drama text translation – (delocalization, polarization between performability and readability) are in favor of reviewing social structures as meaning oriented, while observed behavior is now equally being recognized as a manifestation of a deeper set of codes and rules. From this, the task of the translator is seen more as that of unraveling contextually appropriate communication within cultural frames than just a lexicosemantic restitution of texts. This study sets out to examine the convergent stances in sociology and linguistics and to postulate that the language used in a social context raises serious questions about language and communication in heterogeneous speech communities. The paper further argues that analyzing semantic aspects of cross-cultural communication in drama texts translation within the African socio-cultural perspective constitutes a major challenge in communicating across cultures since translators must sort to establish the highest possible degree of semantic agreement and intelligibility. The paper rabes up with the justification as to why sociolinguistic analysis should have precedence over semantics, for not only what is said is central to translation but how, to whom, in what manner and under what particular social circumstances must be seen as semantic markers.

1. Introduction

Translation is a purposeful goal-oriented activity whose objective is to exteriorize a system of rules which define correct linguistic comportment in a given language system for appreciation and consumption within a different language system with the intention of creating the same impulse as stimulated in the original language system. The translator is thus seen as directing his effort:-, either under his own volition or with pedagogic persuasion, towards submission to authority. The choice of the topic and the purpose of the study were arrived at following attempts to address questions surrounding the process of African drama texts translation. Among these questions, the following were found particularly obliging.

Communicating across cultures requires conforming to or changing established sets of conduct and social behaviors that the society recognizes and accepts as part of their lifestyle. The question most preoccupying from this statement is that, does translating African culture into English or French articulates the socio-cultural richness of its local color in the target language or

does English/French constitute a clash of ideological mind-set with local languages from its very nature that language is strongly linked to culture and society? In other words, does the Western ideology and culture of translation constitute a linguistic barrier to communicating African socio-cultural identity through drama text translation; if that is the case, then what can be the best approaches that enhance local color cross-cultural translation of African drama texts into English or French?

Attempts to answer these questions will examine the outlets of a socio-cultural approach that hits the highest possible degree of target community reality in the process of translation.

2. The cultural dimension of translation

Codes of conduct, linguistic and otherwise, are necessary social controls on behavior and the use of language, but they rarely determine what people do in any absolute sense. Indeed, in the very process of translating extra linguistic features, as in the case of drama texts, we discover ways of evading them or turning them to our own individual advantage. And so, it is with the rules of language. In the process of acquiring translation expertise, we equally either consciously or unconsciously acquire social norms. We learn how to exploit them and how to escape from their confinement in order to express individual experiences. In learning competence, we also learn how to exercise our capacity for making meaning in language.

Furthermore, the orderly conduct of human affairs requires individuals to conform to social norms. There are patterns of acceptable behavior and exigencies of etiquette which control the wilder impulses of eccentricity and keep us in our orbit. We are socialized into acceptance of the established order in the very act of acquiring inter-language communication. As Besong (1998) writes:

They will no longer listen to the national Old Testament prophets who predict   cosmic annihilation if they don't love their own exploiters to the point of folly   (emphatically). They are asking for their own paradise here and now. (P.11)

Of course, there will always be some playwrights who will openly flout authority and assert the primacy of self by denying the social contract to conform: drop-outs and other disaffected elements. But then they risk losing the benefits that the system provides for those who subscribe to it, and the consequences of challenging the established order can be serious. There are, thus, very strong pressures on people to accept the constraints of social convention, and they will, in general, seek some scope for the individual initiative within it rather than try to break it down at the barriers. Let us examine this statement:

..I give small bouai power…ones mall bouai power Shegedanbansaar…I go come dey (a long pause) Amot, ma-a ding sonara money…Oweh money mbeng. wa ding money? Bebelezamba-a! (Ibid p.1)

How are such discordant instances of language to be translated? They are, in certain respects, expressions in English since they are combinations of English words and dialect words. But the combinations are not in accord with the standard syntactic and semantic rules. Though they are deviant and discordant, they are in English and draw on the resources of the language without commitments to the rules which normally constrain their use. In this respect, can we not say that they reveal not competence but capacity?

How are such cases handled in communication across cultures, and to which procedures are such cases ascribed in translation? When a translator is confronted with such expressions duly considered by Widdowson (1984: 68) as "evidence of an interim inter-language system of the author's own devising", the expressions are seen as makeshift efforts patched up from a partial knowledge of the target language, and indicative of a transitional stage in the conversion of a standard system. How are they resolved in translation in general and theatre translation in particular?

We do not suppose that Bate Besong needs instruction in the rule for language shifts. We are aware of the fact that he knows the rule but chooses to disregard it because it does not provide him with the precise expression; he needs to match his meaning, even though the correct form would fit just as well into the rhyme scheme. Or it could also be a way for him to demonstrate his disagreement concerning the theme he is treating. Bate Besong is known for being an outsider, and this can also be witnessed in his writings, so he chooses to express himself as such. Are such moves to be considered idiosyncratic or sub-cultural markers? Whatever the way we consider the expression, how should they be handled in translation?

We do not think of adjusting the structures to make them accord with correctness. We know that to regularize the language into conformity here would be to diminish its meaning. It is equally asserted that to reform the expression would be to deform the potency; in this case, what criteria should be used in our evaluation to engage standards of correctness and communicative effectiveness? We recognize that deviant expressions may be evidence not of deficiency but of a more than common ability to realize the resources of the language for making meaning, especially in the case of theatre and poetry. When is this accepted in translation?

It also suggests that the violation of conventional norms of correct linguistic conduct can be attributed to two different and apparently opposite causes. On the one hand, it is the result of a *deficiency* in a language, in which case we call it an error, and on the other hand, it is the result of a heightened *proficiency* in a language, in which case we call it art. Can this be judged just from

the discourse emanating from the text? If we cannot judge by appearances, then how does it tie with Lefevere's (1992: 9) remark that:

I generally find that when I write a line which I believe to be a fresh thought expressed in an original way, that the passage is marked 'query' in the proof when it comes back from the printers.

The committing of an error and the creation of an artistic effect can result in the same kind of linguistic object. But although the products are similar, the ability to exploit the resources for making meaning available in the language, whether these have been codified or not, is a matter of linguistic competence. How can communicative translation improve the cross-cultural semantic transfer of such codes or linguistic signs and symbols?

The knowledge a translator has of the codified language constitutes linguistic competence. But although this is what he learns as a function of socialization into the conventions and customs of particular speech communities, it represents only that part of the total meaning potential of language which has been given social sanction. It may constrain a translator's capacity into appropriate channels, but it does not suppress it by complete confinement. At any time in point, seasoned translators can always find ways of expressing individual concepts and perceptions through innovative turns of phrases. There is scope for creativity which is denied to ordinary mortals; if they were, their work would defy interpretation. They simply have a greater talent for exploiting this capacity to artistic effect, and that is why drama text translation is recreating drama. But on what should the translator rely to affect such a move?

The human capacity for making meaning out of linguistic resources is not, then, confined within competence, nor is it simply converted into competence in the language acquisition process. One is sometimes given the impression that the sole purpose of innate language capacity is to activate the acquisition of competence in a particular language, and that is a vital force. We may be tempted to believe that the creative force is channeled into a code and finds expression only in the production of sentences according to the rule. But the fact that we are able to produce and interpret utterances which do violence to such rules makes it clear that creative capacity has an independent existence. Then at what level should creativity be accepted as a norm, and under what circumstances should it be considered a translation procedure?

Like ordinary people, translators do adjust their language to an acceptable norm for two reasons: either in order to be more effectively communicative or in order to indicate a sense of identity with a particular group of language users. Both the communicating and the identifying functions of language call for conformity. If the translator appeals to the principle of correctness in spite of the fact that what the writer says is perfectly intelligible, then he is, in effect invoking the identifying function. That is to say, if the translator makes a remark of the kind: Well, I understand what you mean, but actually, we do not say it like that: the correct way is X', what he is saying is that correctness is not necessary for the satisfactory operation of the communicative function, but is only required for social considerations. In this case, how free is a translator to perform such corrections without distorting the notion of fidelity or the author's leitmotiv?

The aim of translation has generally been understood as the gradual consolidation of cross-cultural communicative competence. Correction is crucial to this operation since competence in translation means conformity to rules, and any expression that does not conform is, by definition, ill-formed and a sign of incompetence. But to subject the translator to compliance irrespective of the authors' style is to suppress the very creative capacity by which competence is naturally achieved. It is not surprising; therefore, that attempts at "error" elimination by reformulation or through cultural relocation are so seldom accepted.

3. General considerations

The logic of the line of argument I am pursuing here leads us to the fact that it is counter-productive to focus attention on the broad notion of fidelity as a barometer for competence since it is a variable with both linguistic and communicative properties. Translation competence, I think at this point, will be the natural engagement of language capacity in the context of cross-cultural communication, allowing naturalness to grow out of such activity as a prerequisite of communicative requirement. Competence, in this view, is not something that is direct but something that translators fashion for them by recognizing the need for conventional controls over their creative efforts in the interest of better communication. In this way, competence comes as a corollary to effective communicative use. And correctness is what the translator moves towards, not what he begins with; something he achieves and not something that is trusted upon him. An instance in point is the translation of **colanut** in the Nigerian context as **bière** in the Cameroonian context.

Now, if the translation process is conceived of in this way as the gradual achievement of competence by the exercise of capacity, then the notion of fidelity must be re-defined. It can no longer be a matter of handing our parts from a language kit with instructions on how to proceed stage by stage to put them together to make the approved model. Instead, the translation task today must aim at assembling the parts which gradually approximate standard structures as a function of their increased

effectiveness for communication, whereby the necessity of the *Ethnotic* Procedure or simply the communicative translation approach.

Although communicative effectiveness may exert conforming influence, it does not guarantee correctness because, as it was argued earlier, correctness is not only a matter of effectiveness but also a matter of etiquette. This cosmetic aspect of correctness is difficult to acquire precisely because of its lack of communicative relevance. Translators who are impressionable will acquire it, and those who are not will not. But it seems to me that translators are more likely to be influenced by cosmetic correctness by its being represented as a contingent aspect of purposeful activity than if it is imposed upon them by pedagogic norms. The capacity for making meaning from resources available in one language into another language, I would argue, is the essential creative process of translation as language use. The extent to which it produces native speaker competence is of secondary and contingent concern.

The fact that translation deals with language marks it a complex issue. Many linguists and anthropologists, including Lecher (1989), Lefevere (1992) and ArdÓ (2001), have come up with definitions of language. The commonality in these definitions is that language is found in all cultures of the world, and it is a symbolic system of sounds which, when put together according to a certain set of rules, conveys meaning to its users. By implication, language is subjected to and helps determine social norms and behavior. But what connection has a culture made with translation?

The hypothesis I am developing emanating from these interrogations is that if the context and concept of drama texts are wrapped up in a mixed cultural imbroglio wherein socio-cultural beliefs have a bearing on people's understanding of their community, then in drama texts translation, emphasis must be laid first on the communicative components of the target community so that the target audience can be engaged with cultural mapping from their own frame of cultural mind-sets. In this light, foreignization and domestication, though apparently divorced strategies, can be brought together to serve the same function. Within the context of this study, both approaches converge to meet the common purpose of informing the present-day reader on the socio-economic and political situation that prevailed in the source texts that constitute the corpus of this study. If these approaches are brought together, they will enhance the communicative function of translation since language is the vehicle for human thought, and linguistic categories provide the basis for concept formation. It is in language that energy, dynamism, and the excitement needed to appreciate, interpret and understand drama are channeled. This excitement can only be rightly appreciated and interpreted if placed within its socio-cultural framework.

4. Conclusion

A critical analysis of the present trends in drama text translation reveals some shortcomings in the translation of African drama texts into modern European languages. The most recurrent is language mismatches and de-contextualization. This is what a semantic aspect of cross-cultural communication in drama texts translation seeks to redress by compounding the foreignization and domestication approaches to achieve a socio-cultural communicative translation strategy I have termed the Ethno-translation approach. I am of the opinion that if the ethno- translation approach (the ethanoic approach) I am propounding is applied in translation as to be demonstrated, because of its holistic capacity to unravel meaning, it will provide an overall attempt to view translation from the relationship between language and cultural behavior and all other aspects of language in use and will account and respond the most to the notion of fidelity and leitmotiv transfers in cross-cultural semantic restitution. This is because this approach offers a two-dimensional model where the first part emphasizes the linguistic aspect of the translation based on the concept of transliteration, while the second dimension looks at the social and cultural aspects of translation in relation to language and cultural behavior. The combination and merging of these two strategies provide a holistic appreciation of any communicative act hence the nearest meaning interpretation of the scenario and the nearest meaning negotiation for effective translation. The importance of such an approach is to reveal that the capacity for making meaning from resources available in one language into another language is an essentially creative process of language use as manifested in the writing of drama texts and other literary works.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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