

LINGUISTIC ISSUES IN TRANSLATION

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INTRODUCTION

What is it that translators need to know to be effective language translators and code transfer professionals? How is this knowledge learned and practiced? The linguistic issues of translation explore the linguistic knowledge and skills that translators make use of in their translations. The paper focuses on understandings and practices of those linguistic issues which should be taken into consideration during translation. A competent translator recognizes them while practicing translation. The paper will emphasize on three core subfields of linguistics, i.e. phonetics, morphology, and syntax to answer what type of effect a linguistic approach make to translation? Since all languages around the world are hierarchical, these subfields also exist in a hierarchical relationship, and there is a constant overlap among them.

Chomsky separates competence and performance in his *Aspects of the theory of Syntax* (1965) where competence involves knowing the language whereas performance involves doing something with the language. Drawing on this dichotomy from the foundations of generative grammar, I have defined translation as a performance where translators use their competence of two language codes in transferring meaning and conveying sense. Two translated versions of a creative writing, such poetry, novels, or short stories cannot be same, however they can be similar. This aspect of translation puts it closer to the generativist tradition and gives insight into the Universal Grammar that generativists see as underlying all human language systems.

Translation is an advance operation where semantic transfer of sign (*signifier/signified*) is being performed on languages. During translation, the original meaning is lost, but an easily identifiable core is maintained¹ (Das 2) as translators do not simply translate words rather they translate what language users do with words in their languages (Robinson 142) . Translators

generally do four things to attain translation competence: (i) they attend to SL form; (ii) interpret and produce signed texts; (iii) apply knowledge of the sociological context; and (iv) apply knowledge of discourse in organizing, structuring and sequencing TL text.

But there is a word of caution. The nature of what we mean by effectiveness in translation is not easy to define because conception of a good translation is not objective. Whether a translation is good or bad depends upon the intuitive judgment of the readers. Similarly, a sentence is grammatical and acceptable in a language depends upon the intuitive knowledge of the native speakers. Some translators prefer to provide more exactness in their selection of words, and control and maintain a respectful distance between untranslatability and ambiguity. Whereas few translators prefer metaphors to provide meaning, and view words as mere a facilitator in conveying sense. These different understandings of good translation are reflected in the following extract from H R Bachchan's short Hindi poem 'Jo beet gayi so baat gayi.' (That which is past, is gone).

Translation A gives more emphasis to similar meaning words, also known as synonyms whereas Translation B gives way to metaphors. But such deviations while practicing translation affect linguistic choices made by the translators. The second word of caution for translators is to make their decisions linguistically, rather than going for a random selection.

Hindi poem 'Jo beet gayi so baat gayi' by H R Bachchan	Translation A (Literal)	Translation B (Metaphorical)
Jeevan Main Ek Sitara Tha Maana Vah Behad Pyara Tha Vah Doob Gaya To Doob Gaya Jo beet gayi so baat gayi	There was a star in life Agreed, it was much loved When it sank , it did sink That which is past, is gone.	There was love in my life Agreed, she was much loved Now she is no more, any more That was gone, she was gone

Table 1: Literal and metaphorical translation of a Hindi poem

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper addressed the following research questions:

(1) What are the linguistic issues in translation? How are they significant in translation?

(2) How does translation take place in linguistic contexts?

(3) How can an understanding of key areas of linguistics guide and inform some decisions made by the translators?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for this paper were taken from the texts of Hindi and English languages. Not only the published texts were taken into account, but the author also juxtaposed machine translation and variations in translation with the original text in order to make a comparison. The examples from other languages are also taken to support the argument that the knowledge of phonetics, morphology and syntax is helpful for translators. The paper also draws on insights from areas such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and cognitive linguistics in which both translation and language function.

This paper assessed both the sides of translation: the contribution made by linguistic approaches, and the limitations of their approaches. However, the focus is on the contribution part. The author takes help of both the structural linguistic paradigm, and the generative one to support his argument. The objectivity of this paper is well-balanced as the only linguistic analysis was considered while observing data.

The remainder of this paper is organized under the following headings: “A History of Linguistics and Translation” describes the historical background of translation with respect to linguistics; “Sounds and Translation” examines how knowledge of sound systems helps the translator to reach better results; “Morphemes and Translation” recounts the significance of morphology in translation; “Syntax and Translation” infers that without human agency there cannot be any good translation.

A HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS AND TRANSLATION

Translation is a new discipline in academia, and it draws on the findings and theories of other related disciplines in order to develop and formalize its own methods. However, it had been practiced in ancient times too, and in the East (particularly in India) and regarded as new writing, whereas in the West it was considered as a secondary activity. The following map of

disciplines interfacing with translation illustrates the scope of translation studies, where as the green colored area highlights the scope with respect to linguistics.

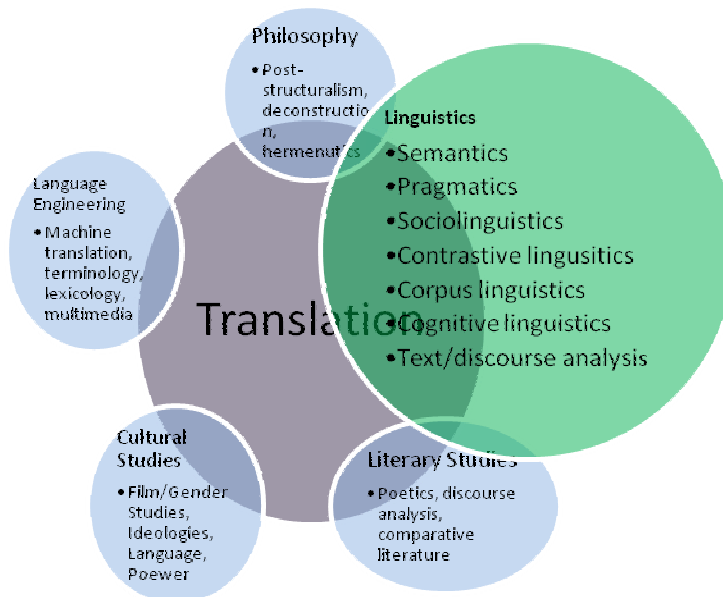


Figure 1: Map of disciplines interfacing with Translation Studies

First linguistic attempt in the field of translation was initiated by Cicero, who created Latin philosophical vocabulary and introduced many neologisms, and philologists of the 19th century classified and grouped together languages into families genealogically which proved a unique solution to translation into closely related languages (Vinay & Darbelnet 134). But the purely linguistic approach to translation began in the nineteenth century when anthropologist Malinowski confronted with the limits of translation while working on the life of the Trobriand islanders of New Guinea in the southwest Pacific, and this untranslatability later on drew the attention of Whorf and Sapir who emphasized on disparity in world view between speakers of vastly different languages and formulated Sapir-Whorf hypothesis¹.

Bloomfield's *Language* further limited the linguists' views to study language, and only the rules and structures of language were investigated during 1930s and 1940s. First serious

¹ See Whorf, B. L., & Carroll, J. B. (1956). *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings*. Cambridge, Mass.: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

consideration between linguistics and translation was initiated by Roman Jakobson who presented three types of translation: interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic. Post publication of the book *Syntactic Structures* (1957), the interest of linguists shifted from controlled verbal behavior to intuitive knowledge, and problems and limitations of translation came into the forefront with respect to issues such as, syntactic ambiguity, competence, performance, and principles of universal grammar. But Chomskyan transformative-generative grammar did not provide any procedural solution to translation between two codes; however, it provided an opportunity for a theory of translation given a linguistic framework.

Since then many theorists of translation, including J. C. Catford, Eugene A. Nida, Mona Baker, Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Derbelnet, Peter Newmark, Basil Hatim and Ian Mason contributed to this field, and they considered translation as primarily a complex operation performed on language.

SOUNDS AND TRANSLATION

Language is a closed system which produces an open-ended system, i.e., each language has a finite set of phonemes (vowels and consonants) and words out of which speakers combine words and produce an infinite set of sentences (Fawcett 11). The translation practitioners are actually not worried about the technical terminology of sound systems whether a sound is bilabial, velar or glottal, but they are careful about sound effects to find out whether it is accidental or intentional, or to judge the possibility of transferring it to another code.

A text in Hindi language on causative verbs shows that in causative (1) type of construction A makes B to do something while in causative (2), A makes B to make C to do something, and the entire operation is performed with the help of infixing syllable 'aa' for causative (1) and 'waa' for causative (2). Following is an example of Hindi causative verbs for the verb kar 'do':

(1) karnaa 'to do something';

(2) kar[aa]naa 'someone (A) makes someone (B) do something'; and

(3) kar[waa]naa 'someone (A) makes someone (B), and someone (B) makes someone (C) to do something.

If translators are aware of phonological variations, such as the difference long and short vowel makes in a language or how an honorific sound ‘ji’ will give different meaning than its translation ‘Mr’, they can provide a good translation.

The main aim of translators is to pass information whereas constraints such as; deadlines, fees, and size of texts restrict their decision whether they should spend more time on a particular word or phrase. An understanding of phonetics and phonology would create a concept of ‘minimax’ for translators (Levy 1171-82). They can achieve maximum effect for minimum effort in translation if they know sound systems, and its grammatical implications. Although translators cannot provide same rhyme as the original text in a target language yet with knowledge of sound systems they can create similar rhyme.

The following map presents the manner features of consonant sounds: [continuant], [nasal], [strident], [lateral], and [delayed release]. If translators do not find a word with a continuant sound [w] in the target language, they can go for other continuants, such as [y], [r], [l], [th], and so on and so forth during translation of SL in TL.

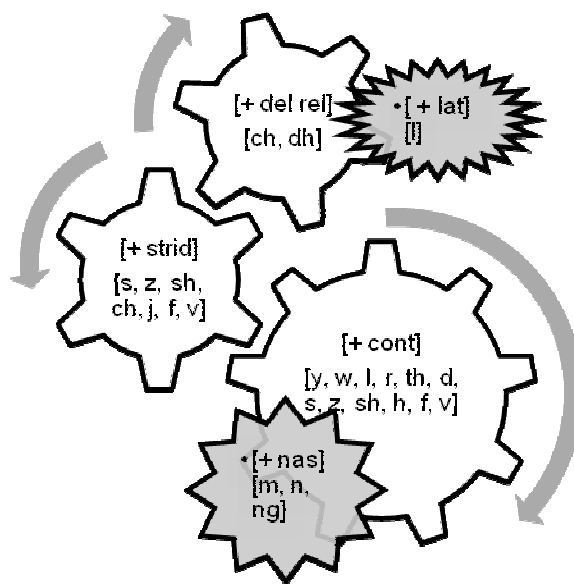


Figure 2: Map of Manner Features in Consonant Sounds

Translators often use bilingual dictionaries while practicing translation. The pronunciation of each lexicon in a standard dictionary is represented in phonetic transcription. The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a system of phonetic notation devised by the International Phonetic Association as a standardized representation of the sounds of spoken language (Albright 5-10). The IPA does not provide direct help in translating, but it helps translators to maintain similar sound effects in rhyme. The phonetic notation assists translators to make a choice: whether to translate a text at its sound level or to maintain its meaning. Furthermore, translators can use the transcription for writing any language which can be later on written in the regional scripts.

The following table shows a poem by a renowned poet Harivansh Rai Bacchan in two translated versions. Translation A focuses on the literal translation, whereas Translation B provides a metaphorical representation of the original text. The phoneme [s] in the word ‘sitara’ is a continuant sound which is maintained in Translation A while for the bilabial [b] sound in the word ‘behad,’ a different bilabial sound ‘m’ is employed in both the versions of translations.

Translators can use similar sounding words, or go for a word representing similar sound groups, i.e. continuant; lateral, nasal, etc., if they do not find a word with the same sound. By this, they can make their translation closer to the original text.

Hindi poem ‘Jo beet gayi so baat gayi’ by H R Bacchan ²	Translation A	Translation B
Jeevan Main Ek Sitara Tha Maana Vah Behad Pyara Tha Vah Doob Gaya To Doob Gaya Jo beet gayi so baat gayi	There was a star in life Agreed, it was much loved When it sank , it did sink That which is past , is gone .	There was love in my life Agreed, she was much loved Now she is no more , any more That was gone , she was gone

Table 2: Translations of Harivansh Rai Bacchan’s poetry

Sound translation is again useful in inter-semiotic translation, e.g. dubbing in films and documentaries where mismatches between what audiences see and what they hear may create an aesthetic problem. However, some translation theorists view these techniques of sound maintenance as translation imperialism.

² See H. R. Bacchan, (2000) *Meri Shreshtha Kavitaayen* ‘My best poems,’ New Delhi: Rajpal & Sons, p. 32.

MORPHEMES AND TRANSLATION

Morpheme is defined as a minimal meaningful grammatical unit in a language. A word is composed of one or more than one morphemes, and each word has a root and stem. While root is called the base word, the stem is a part of word to which affixes can be attached. A morpheme may contain one semantic meaning or more than one grammatical function. In the following examples, morphemes represent many grammatical functions:

(1) He [speaks] English.

There are four morphemes, three free and one bound, in this sentence: (a) he, (b) speak, (c) English and suffix (-s). The grammatical morpheme (-s) indicates that the speaker of this sentence is third person and singular, and the tense of this sentence is present. Similarly, 'jaaeingi' in Hindi tells that subject can be either third person plural/third person singular honorific or first person plural, feminine with future aspect:

- (1) we ghar jaaeingi She will go home.
 (2) meidam ghar jaaeingi Madam will go home.
 (3) ham ghar jaaeingi We will go home.

In both the examples, morphemes convey more than one grammatical meaning, thus they are known as portmanteau morph. An understanding at morphological level may assist translators to maintain accuracy in translation, such as 'mein samaj raha hoon.' should not be translated as 'I am understanding.' but as 'I understand.'

Portmanteau morpheme & type	In English (grammatical function)	In Hindi (grammatical function)
-s; bound	third person; singular; and present tense (3 functions)	xxxxxx
-eingi; bound	xxxxx	third person plural; third person singular honorific; feminine; first person plural; future

Table 3: Role of portmanteau morpheme

When there is a lack of equivalence at word level, translators simply borrow the word from the source language or modify it with the help of bound morphemes, such as prefixes and suffixes. If you consider a Hindi word ‘kampyutariikrit’ (means computerized) you will note that there are two distinct elements of meaning in it: ‘kampyutar’ and ‘krit’ i.e. computer + ized. The word computer in Hindi language is an example of borrowed noun word whereas morpheme ‘krit’ is a bound morpheme of Hindi language, suffixing ‘krit’ to noun converts a noun into adjective. Similarly, English language borrows words from Indian philosophy, such as ‘dharma’ (means religion) and ‘karma’ (means action), and using derivation morphology suffix ‘-ic’ converts them into adjective as ‘karmic’ and ‘dharmic.’

Language speakers are quite creative in forming new words. Recently, a facebook user from Rajasthan created a new word ‘Tagara/Tagari’ for other users who excessively tags people in their personal photos and profile pictures. Rajasthani language has words, such as ‘chora’ and ‘chori’ for boy and girl respectively. The language user blended two codes and made a neologism. Similarly, in Bigg Boss Session 8 (a primetime show on Colors channel) a contestant named Puneet Issar devised a special adjective for another contestant Karishma Tanna, calling her ‘Dufferandu’ for her stupidity. These words became popular later on among the users and viewers of that media though these neologisms maintain the root meaning of their original words: ‘Tag’ in ‘tagara’ and ‘tagari’, and duffer in ‘dufferandu.’

Morphology guides translators to make better decisions while translating words having sense or nonsense words. A little knowledge of morphology will give meaning to their translations.

SYNTAX AND TRANSLATION

A computer machine is restricted in its memory. Yet it is possible to feed it with all the words, and infections of two or more languages. This morphological input can yield accuracy in translating individual words from the source language into the target language. But it is impossible to feed a system with all possible sentences in a language and its equivalent translated version. This limitation of a computational machine provides space for a human agency while undertaking translation.

The following text (from Coelho's *The Zahir*) has been translated into Hindi language: translation one, with a software named Google Translate, and two, by a translator:

(a) Her name is Esther; she is a war correspondent who has just returned from Iraq because of the imminent invasion of that country; she is thirty years old, married, without children³. (Word count: 31)

Translation 1: Usakā nāma ēsthara hai; vaha sirpha irāka sē vāpasa ā gayā hai, jō ēka yud'dha sanvādādātā hai usa dēśa kē **āsanna ākramaṇa** kī vajaha sē; vaha binā śādī kī, tīsa **sāla purānā hai baccē**. (Word count: 34)

Translation 2: Uskaa naam esthar hai. wah yudh sanvaadadaataa hai jo irak se abhi-abhi isliye lauti hai ki us desh par hamlaa hone hi waala tha. uski umra tiis saal hai, shadishuda hai par bacche nahi hai. (Word count: 35)

The following observations can be drawn from the above text:

- (1) The original text is composed of simple and relative clauses with a presence of one slightly uncommon word, imminent.
- (2) Machine translation (translation 1) is inaccurate because it does not take care of the linguistics issues, e.g. gender agreement, and violates one of the hypotheses of universal grammar which states: an anaphor must agree in person, gender and number with its antecedent (Carnie 4).
- (3) Although machine translation attempts to transfer sound effects, e.g. 'imminent invasion' have been translated as 'aasanna akramana,' this phonetic equivalence disrupts the semantic equivalence, a literary word in Hindi 'aasanna' does not go with other colloquial words in the text, and it makes the overall text anomalous.
- (4) During machine translation a simple clause has been translated into relative clause, and vice versa; moreover, the machine translation has been failed to translate the last sentence of the text grammatically, and thus semanticity has been violated.
- (5) The human translation (translation 2) maintains equivalence in transfer of meaning of words and clauses between two codes.

³ See P. Coelho, & M. J. Costa, (2005). *The Zahir: A novel of obsession*. New York: HarperCollins, p. 3.

(6) Both the translations-machine as well as human- exceeds the words from that of the original text.

The human agency cannot be ignored during translation. A computer may provide a good translation for routine phrases and patterns. But machine translation has a serious flaw: it does not check grammaticality and acceptability criteria. Since language is human, the translation of a sentence into the target language always requires a human agency to ensure exactness and accuracy.

CONCLUSION

It is possible to read this article without worrying about this conclusion. The present paper aims at describing linguistic issues in translation while emphasizing the value of linguistic knowledge for a translator. The discussion indicates that translation is a careful act, and it can be performed accurately if translators are introduced to basic linguistics. This observation also

infers that translation cannot be dealt adequately without proper consideration of the subfields of linguistics, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Machine translation is useful though, it is risky to go such translation without a positive interference of a human agency.

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