Study on Communicative Translation

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Abstract. The present paper first expounds the importance of the communicative approach to translation. Next, by way of analyzing the translated versions of some typical Chinese and English idioms, the paper draws the conclusion that it is highly necessary to resort to the communicative translation approach for the sake of cultural communication and that the need for communicative translation should be tremendously amplified as well.

Introduction

During the twentieth century, linguistics underwent its dramatic shifts of concern. Before the 1940s, linguistics was restricted to the study of form and the classification of the forms of a language, without reference to the categories of meaning, so the characteristic feature of Bloomfieldian American structuralism was its concern at this period of time. In the late fifties, Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures (1957) represented a revolution in the aims of linguistic study. Taxonomic classification of structures is no longer considered adequate, and from thenceforth linguists became concerned with developing systems of rules aimed at accounting for the inner structural relationships of a language. Revolutionary as it was, Chomsky’s theory still attached importance to the study of language structures, or the study of syntax. Then came the 1970s, when linguists viewed language as communication. A remarkably powerful and lucid expression of the communicative ideology was found in D. H. Hymes’ paper ‘On Communicative Competence’ (1972). In this paper, Hymes formulates his own redefinitions of communicative competence and performance which are the two concepts central to Chomsky’s theory. The influence of Hyme’s communicative approach to linguistics was so prevalent that it was felt not only by the linguistic field, but also by other sub-divisions of linguistics, such as translation.

As a branch of linguistics, translation accordingly experienced its shifts of emphasis from the structural approach to the communicative approach. With the increase of world communication, the requirements of translated materials from other cultural sources for the purpose of communication increased correspondingly. Hence, the latter part of the twentieth century witnessed the bloom of translation, especially that of communicative translation.

It is an established fact that communication plays a dominant role in translation, yet the picture of communicative translation remains obscure. This is what needs elaborating on in depth. Besides, various problems arise in translating communicatively, and this paper also focuses on the possible problems so as to draw a clear picture of communicative translation.

The Characteristics of Communicative Translation

Being reader-oriented is the first and foremost characteristic of communicative translation. The ultimate purpose of communicative translation, according to Peter Newmark (1981), is for the reader. He believes that communicative translation is intended to produce the same effect on the target readers as that on the original readers so as to realize communicative values. What it emphasizes is the ‘force’ rather than the content of the message, and the effect rather than the exact contextual meaning of the original. In other words, the ‘message’ in communicative translation is most important, and the essential thing is to make the reader think, feel and/or act. Due to this fact, a communicative translation tends to be smoother, simpler, clearer, more direct, more effective,
more elegant, and more conventional. In communicative translation, the notion that translation is for the reader also means that a communicative translation is ‘tailor-made’ for only one category of readership, does one job and fulfils a particular function. This results in both the tendency of its conforming to a particular register of language and the tendency of under translation, i.e., to use more generic, and more hold-all terms for translating difficult passages.

Another striking characteristic of communicative translation is its loss of meaning. Communicative translation works on a narrow basis, it does not address to all readers who have ears to hear and who are able to read. Instead, it tends to pick out the useful information and simply neglects the parts which can be made redundant as long as the main message keeps intact. That is why the more linguistically complicated an original work is, the more versions there will be for it. Different translators remove in different ways the deep structures and keep message of different kinds for their individual purposes. Yet, it should be noted that this is supposed to be acceptable for the purpose of communication and it virtually contributes greatly to cross-cultural communication.

Still another prominent characteristic of communicative translation is that it is compatible to Eugen Nida’s Dynamic Equivalence (1964/1969). Eugene Nida holds the belief that translators should take the reader’s response into consideration when evaluating the effect of a translation, from which we can conclude that he perceives translation communicatively. In fact, Nida is distinguished for his theory of the reader’s response. According to Nida, dynamic equivalence means ‘the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language’. If a translation is to be looked at in terms of the reader, rather than its specific forms, then the total intelligibility and impact a message has on the reader is far important than the reproduction of the grammatical structures themselves. Accordingly, Nida stresses that what a translator should strive for is equivalence rather than identity. To attain the goal of dynamic equivalence, Nida permits certain rather radical departures from the formal structures. He believes this is not only legitimate but may even be highly desirable. This is actually the essence of dynamic equivalence.

As can be found out, whatever the specific approaches involved in elaborating on translation, both Newmark and Nida take the reader’s response into account and put it first, which is a sufficient indication that they look at translation communicatively.

It is not surprising at all that communicative translation has its weaknesses. The most obvious weakness is its intuitive feature, that is, translation is done and also evaluated imaginatively and intuitively in this approach. Translation in this way relies on the intuitive power of the translator, which inevitably results in problems and disadvantages.

As an approach of translation, communicative translation does not avoid falling into the noted dichotomies in which other translation approaches are stuck. Such dichotomies are: literal translation or free translation; adaptation or alienation; translatability or untranslatability. In order to provide a panoramic view of communicative translation, the three dichotomies are to be discussed here.

**Dichotomies of Communicative Translation**

**Literal and Free Translation**

Literal translation refers to an approach of translation in which the primary senses of the original are translated as though out of context, but the syntactic structures of the target language are respected. It hardly needs arguing that translation should be done literally for the sake of the original writer. Besides, there is unanimous agreement that literal translation is justified in translating high literary works. Just as Newmark put it, ‘a bad translator will do anything to avoid translating word for word’. And he stresses that in communicative translation literal translation is not only the best but also the only valid method of translation if the equivalent effect is secured.

However, for the purpose of communication, not all information needs translating literally, since communicative translation directs only at a certain category of readers. More importantly, few, if any, general language qualities can be translated literally unless there is a complete cultural overlap.
For example, any language calls a ‘window’ a ‘window’, a ‘house’ a ‘house’. In both English and Chinese, we find ‘tighten one’s belt’, ‘put the clock back’, so on and so forth. But this kind of overlaps is rare between languages. At the same time, literal translation for the sake of being faithful to the original work may turn out to be misleading, for the stylistically heavy translation may make comprehension impossible. Then, it is no wonder that free translation is what translators should turn to for help.

Generally, free translation is considered to be the substitute of paraphrasing or translation only to keep the main meaning. But by free translation, I mean a communicative approach of translation, in which a translator tries his best to keep the semantic structures with the maximum effort he can manage, while he is not so rigid as to try hard to keep everything of the original version. So ‘free translation’ in this paper means the translation method other than literal translation, but it is different from the traditional notion. This eclectic approach of translation (I still call it free translation, though) is justified by the following reasons: 1) It conforms to Nida’s theory of kernels (Nida, 1969: 483), which means one kernel is eligible for varied surface structures. So, to some degree, departure from the original work is acceptable as long as it is true to the kernel. 2) The fact that total identity is impossible makes free translation necessary. Generally, the more difficult a sentence is linguistically, the greater the number of translations will be acceptable. If a sentence is given to twenty competent translators, it is unlikely that the same version would come up twice. 3) The same word may have different meanings in different contexts, a translator’s job is to ‘put the proper words in proper places’ (Swift) rather than render the absolute literal meaning. To translate language which is highly context-dependent, a translator has to decide the varied meaning cognitively and flexibly.

In summary, there is no reason why something has to be translated literally or semantically. The ‘ideal’ translation lies in the need of communication. All translation, in fact, must be to some degree both literal and free.

Alienation and Adaptation

In addition to literal and free translation, a translator also inevitably turns to alienation or adaptation. Alienation is source language oriented, largely allowing for new expressions from the source language. For the objective of communication, it seems justifiable that a translator favors alienation. This will enrich both the target language and its culture tremendously. Yet, since alienation requires the reader’s capability and background knowledge to understand the source language, and a translator is not apt to give cultural explanation and linguistic analysis, too much alienation tends to make a version hard to understand or even intangible. Furthermore, it may make the new version bear too heavy a trait of translationese and thus fails to do justice to the rich sources of the target language.

More often than not, communication can also be made concisely, intelligently, and fluently with the minimum effort, and the requirements of the target language readers are satisfied without copying the source language expressions. This is, in fact, the application of adaptation. Use of adaptation is exceedingly prevalent in the translation of idioms. In order to facilitate the target language readers, idioms are adapted to the target language culture features. Let us look at the following example: It was a simple bread and butter issue. I examined my bread closely to see where it was buttered. ‘Bread and butter’ here refers to the ordinary means of livelihood. While in Chinese culture, the basic means of livelihood are such things as charcoal, rice, oil, and salt (柴米油盐). Translation in this case has no choice other than adaptation, or the alienated translation will be meaningless. As a matter of fact, this type of cultural adaptation is what Nida terms as ‘functional isomorph’, meaning an object in the target language which performs the same function as the one in the source language. To illustrate this, Nida uses the example of ‘to grow like mushrooms’, and he asserts that it should be translated into ‘雨后春笋’ in Chinese instead of ‘雨后蘑菇’ (Nida, 1999: 121).

It seems obvious that neither adaptation nor alienation takes precedence over the other. If the focus of communication is on the introduction of an alien culture, it is admirable that alienation be
adopted. For example, when translating ‘削足适履’ into English the alienated translation ‘cutting the feet to fit the shoes’ should be superior to the cliché ‘Procrutes’ bed’; ‘竭泽而渔’ as ‘draining the pond to get all the fish, instead of ‘kill the goose that lays the golden eggs’.

In communicative translation, both alienation and adaptation have their values and they should not be considered as contradictory methods.

**Translatability and Untranslatability**

Over the years, linguists and translation theorists share conflicting ideas as to translatability and untranslatability. Those who favor translatability believe that all linguistic features can be translated, because language reflects basic human practice and mental word-pictures, human beings have by and large the same activities and feelings. On the contrary, those who favor untranslatability argue that translation is almost impossible. They insist even if the common words of different languages overlap, these overlaps leave gaps of meaning, let alone the connotative and figurative words and expressions.

It seems true that if anything is translatable, what people pursue would be total identity rather than functional equivalence. The fact that functional equivalence plays a dominant role is enough of indication that language is sometimes untranslatable; at least part of language is untranslatable. Hence, in daily translation activities, a translator is always faced with a dilemma of translatability and untranslatability (Nord, 2001: 73).

The characteristic of untranslatability of language makes it hard for a translator to achieve the communicative purpose. All common and general concrete words have connotations, and when these words are translated, their connotations are prone to be lost. Generally, the commoner the word, the more abundant its connotations are. This may follow that all translations are nothing but a futile attempt to replace the words in one language with those of another language, which inevitably results in loss of meaning. This is easy to understand: Firstly, languages are of different systems, for instance, Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, which focuses on parataxis; while English is an Indo-European language, which focuses on hypotaxis (Nida, 1982: 16); Chinese language is ideographic while English is alphabetic. These innate features of languages create obstacles for translation. Secondly, even if translation goes on between languages of the same family, the connotative meaning does not always overlap. Certainly, this is also the case of languages of different systems.

Let us look once again at the example related to ‘bread’ and ‘butter’ mentioned above. Suppose we translate the first part of the sentence by way of adaptation into ‘面包黄油’, the style of the original discourse will be lost completely, since the repeated patterns of the words convey a play of words on the literal meaning of this idiom. On the other hand, if the idiom ‘bread and butter’ were translated literally in order to preserve the repeated patterns, the translation would be both confusing and false.

As to translating culture-loaded language elements, there is a tendency of adaptation, which is actually a process of changing untranslatability into translatability. When these elements are translated literally, they will prove to be untranslatable, or, even if translated, they would become sheer nonsense. For example, ‘green with envy’ will have to be translated as ‘嫉妒得眼发红’ instead of ‘green’. So is the idiom ‘a piece of cake’, it should not be translated as anything other than ‘小菜一碟’ in Chinese.

Whatever the situations, a translator’s job is to figure out the best method to turn out the legitimate translation. What’s more, he should be competent enough to change untranslatability into translatability. Only in this way, will the communicative aim of enriching and introducing a country’s language and culture be attained.

**Conclusion**

There is wide agreement that the main aim of translation is to reproduce meaning, thought and language, or to entail communication between different cultures via languages. Thus, the
communicative function of translation should never be ignored. The intensified world communication in all fields has been giving rise to the increasing demand of translated materials, which is why translation for the purpose of communication becomes more and more prevailing. Needless to say, in the translation process, it is highly necessary that stress should be laid on communicative translation.

Yet, what should not be ignored is that communicative translation covers the greatest spectrum of variance so that it has both its advantages and weaknesses, thus it is far from an ideal approach. As stated above in this paper, communicative translation does not necessarily adhere to any single creed as long as translation accomplishes the objective of communication and sufficiently meets the fundamental and urgent needs of language.

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