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Teaching French Culture and Translation in Tandem

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When a learner is confronted with a new way of communication, a class of language segmentation occurs because there is a conflict between the previous knowledge of the learner and the new language he is about to acquire. For this reason, and being conscious of huge task ahead of them, the foreign language teachers find means of teaching the language in a way that will facilitate the understanding of the learner. Bearing in mind that the teaching of a language entails the teaching of its culture, we try to see how the task can be done through translation without creating any confusion.

Introduction

The teaching of foreign language through the traditional methods which consisted of memorising interminable lists of equivalent words and abundant rules of grammar gave privilege to translation; consequently, this practice placed the practical skill of communication in a tethered situation. With the present pedagogical trend, translation has taken another dimension. It is practiced in the language classroom in order to help students attain a high level of language proficiency.

It is a cinch that foreign language teaching implies teaching of foreign cultures; and if the approach to teaching new culture is well adopted it will give the learners a sense of belonging to the new cultural background. The responsibility of the teacher is to create an integrative motivation which aims at fastening the learners' activities of the new language. From the traditional methods to the communicative methods, translation plays constituents roles for our cultures for being the essential wheel for intercultural exchanges. With its different genres, translation has helped to diffuse vital information on scientific, technical and literal knowledge. It has also helped in mastering (among other functions) lexical, syntactical, phonological aspects of foreign languages. Most especially, it has helped in bringing nearer what seemed so far. It is known that encountering another man's culture

can shape our objectivities, enhance our social experience, challenge our culture assumption and alter our mode of thinking" (Buttjes 54). This is the reason that informs our focus in this paper.

What is Culture?

The word culture is so vast that it entails many definitions. Different definitions have been given by different scholars on the word culture. Dollot, cited by Cordonnier (5) observes that the definition of culture is elusive; Affergan, also cited by Cordonnier echoes Dollot by stipulating that nobody agrees on the definition of culture. For some, culture refers to an appreciation of good literature, music, art and food. According to Burgess (49), the word culture brings to mind *cuisine*, which is culinary oriented. He continues by observing that culture also evokes museum, opera. But to limit the definition of culture to this aesthetic domain confers it to a superficial appraisal. Strauss, cited by Burgess, agrees that the definition of culture goes beyond the aesthetic field. On this same note, Fiske (254) explains that

Culture is not conceived of as the aesthetic ideals of form and beauty to be found in great art, nor is it more humanistic terms as the voice of the human spirit that transcends boundaries of time and nation to speak to hypothetical universal man [...] culture is a way of living within an industrial society that encompasses all the meanings of that social experience.

Simply put, culture is the means available for any linguistic community which can be passed from one generation to another. It is therefore structured like language; indeed it is unthinkable to separate culture from language. Culture enables members of a society to lay down codes and structures needed to establish smooth interaction. It can also be defined as a discourse, as gestures that are unsaid but can easily be detected and interpreted by members of a linguistic community. If such undeclared message can easily be understood by members of the same community because of the experience they share, it may be difficult for a foreigner to grasp. But the veiled message can be revealed through the act of translation.

What is Translation?

Weinreich cited by Manna (25) says that different languages come into contact through bilingual individuals and not through geographical area. This also implies that the passage of one language into another is done through translation. According to Manna (25),

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"translation consists of describing a word into another language differently from how it is usually described". Translation is an exercise through which a message is transferred from one language to another. When practised in the language classroom, it gives room to comparison between the two languages; it highlights the analogy and the difference between the two languages. It is an activity that quickly helps teacher to detect the deficiency of a student, his limited vocabulary and his problem of assimilation. It is an indicator to the teacher to improve on his methods. Translation helps to improve the linguistic level of the student and it also enriches his cultural knowledge. From time immemorial till date, translation has gone through a chaotic path, and this is explained by the fact that translation activities inevitably engender difficulties that emanate from the impossibility of translators to grasp in its own entity the message of the language in which transformation is to be operated. In this case, when a translator does not grasp the substance of the content of the source language (SL), the rendition is done in an uncompleted way. Sometimes, the problem encountered by the translator can emanate from his lack of sound understanding of the target language.

This aspect emerging from translation makes its existence to be appreciated or denied by scholars who are divided by their ideologies. On the one hand stands the universals and on the other hand stands the relativists. The universals accept translatability of sentences i.e. they believe that all sentences are translatable as long as there is common traits to all languages despite their differences. This fact is based on the linguistic segmentation of all languages as they possess syntactical, lexical and phonological rules.

The relativists are opposed to translatability of any given language, based on the argument that not every aspect of a language could be translated. They believe that no language could be translated into another without distortion of idea or without the loss of semantics, given the fact that language structures differ from one another. Their argument is also based on the fact that the reality of nature is expressed in different ways among members of different linguistic communities. They thus conclude that to advocate the possibility of translation boils down to a mirage. The relativists believe that translation is betrayal. The emergence of the modern linguists like Viney and Dalbelnet who were the first linguists to dress a clear table on translation through their seven theories eased the task of a translator.

George Steiner recommends a fair dosage of translatability and untranslatability of a text on the ground that translation is at the

equivalent in the target language; he warns against literary translation because some expressions might not correlate with objects or notions of the target language (TT). Marouzeau cited by Manna (26) reminds us that "translation is the middle way, equidistant to all extreme (our translation). Translation must deliver the messages of the original text, respect the style, must be in conformity with the original text and must produce same aesthetic effect. So, despite the fact that the way people view the world is determined by the structure of their mother tongue, a translator, in his exercise must try as much as possible to retain the flavour of the original, the uniqueness of the text.

The Connection between Culture and Translation

Discourse implies a statement, and also an abstract code that generates sentences. It also implies the place, the moment of statement, a person that expresses something and the audience to whom the statement is being addressed. Thus, translation has the optimum function of rendering the sentences in their original form without distortion. Translation has double constraint: faithfulness to the message and production of the equivalence. Translation is an interlink between different cultures; so (the) translation exercise goes beyond the transformation of the sentences or the meaning of the source text, but, culture of the other is being exposed to the audience during the exercise. The task of the translator is to bring nearer to his audience the culture of the others; this means bringing closer what seems so far away through translation. Translation is an activity that makes communication possible between people of different cultures, if it is carried in an effective, positive and pragmatic way. However, members of a culture, being inherent to a linguistic community, are stereotyped and are considered as inferior to the others who believe that their own culture is superior. But such behaviour promotes misunderstanding among people. The other is seen as a stranger, an edifice that might resist translation if good methodology is not applied. Culture, according to Stefanink (22) "is the implicit speech shared by a linguistic community". It is then left to the translator to apply his strategy efficiently in order to break the edifice and unveil what is kept hidden to lay path into another man's culture. In a given society the undeclared message is understood by members sharing the same language, but difficult for an outsider to grab. Yet, the unrevealed statement ought not to bar the harmony of translation which is the

hallmark of a socio-cultural background of the audience of the target language.

Because of the divergence of culture, every society sees the world through its own prism; that is what makes a culture difficult to be interpreted into another man's language. One can easily deduce at this juncture that if translation has to be effective, what is required is to render the target language in such a way that the recipients respond the same way as the audience of the source language respond to the original text. But, such objective can be problematic because as it is put by Hervey:

SL speakers' response to the ST is never likely to be replicated exactly by effects on members of a different culture. Even a small culture distance between the ST audience and the TT audience is bound to produce a fundamental dissimilation between the effects of the ST and those of TT – such effects can at best be similar in a global and limited sense; they can never be the same. (23)

For example, the effect required by the author who writes about "a delicious dog meat soup" will be a reverse case to the recipient of the target text. If such statement makes the mouth of the original audience water, it might shock the target audience. So, to avoid the shocking effect, the translator has to find a way of creating sameness of effect by replacing "dog meat" with "goat meat" to avoid the likely repellent effect. If a translator is to absolutely adopt sameness in what is accepted to be unavoidable different (culture), the task is likely to be difficult. The translator should strive to produce something approximately similar. It is known that translation involves a certain degree of loss or gain of semantics.

Ross, cited by Percin (64), recognises that "the target language is for one reason or another not up to expressing the ideas with the same precision and force as the source language". When a word is cut or when more are added to produce the target text, some words which in the source language seem very impressive or are meant to create a stronger effect might be less so in the target language. For example, in rendering "il gribouillait des pattes de mouche" by "he crawled more and more illegibly", an obvious loss has occurred: the English version does not retain the vivid image projected by the French version even though the transformation attracted a grammatical gain; the comparative "more and more" and the adverb "illegibly". The attitude of a translator is to minimise translation loss so as to preserve the

main function of translation which is "to bridge the gap between monolingual speakers of different languages" (Hervey 23).

If the theory of equivalence is adopted in an appropriate manner, translation will enable people to see the world in diverse forms, and will allow an individual to make sense of it through his own perspective. Through translation, one can easily accept another man's culture; and to this purpose, Bergman, cited by Kramer (59), stipulates that "this mutual experience of otherness shapes our different identities".

Attaining Cultural Competence via Translation

It is obvious that there is a close interaction between language and culture, thus, the teaching of a foreign language entails the teaching of a foreign culture. The communicative method lauded by many didacticists has played a preponderant role in the teaching of French as a foreign language because of its emphasis on socio-cultural competences. Translation, though a perilous task (because you cannot translate a passage without the loss of some elements of semantic), when well practised in the classroom, helps in establishing the socio-cultural differences or similarities between the languages in contact. For example, the typical example of the Yoruba language characterised by the use of "eyin" (second person plural), which is very near to the "vouvoiment" in French: *vous* is used for an elderly person or somebody with whom no intimacy is apparent. Also, in Yoruba, the honorific pronoun, that is the 2nd person plural pronoun is used to address a person but the 3rd person singular pronoun to talk of a third person in a polite manner; and it is impossible to render such an utterance by "ils" (but *vous* and *il* respectively because such a statement is not acceptable in French).

With the communicative method, it is possible the teacher refers to the mother tongue of the learner when the situation warrants an explanation in that language. In that case, the introduction of the mother tongue is done for pedagogical purposes, to draw the attention of the learner in order to make him be aware of the divergence in the two modes of language behaviour. At this juncture, Manna (26) says that "the consideration of the learner's mother tongue and his official language intends to make the learner conscious of the specification and the originality of each language in order to highlight the history and to manifest the socio-cultural implication". Translation, an aspect favoured by communicative method, becomes necessary in foreign language classes because it helps to culturally enrich the target

Having ceased to be a mere subject, who only listens passively to the teacher, having become an active learner who is responsible, a social actor, who can also take decision in the learning process, the learner has to be made to realise that he ought to use the already known languages to help him widen his scope of knowledge, because, in intercultural encounter matters in the learning of a foreign language. Translation can help in keeping the contact between different language communities. In the same vein, literature is another means by which foreign culture can be made accessible to learners. But if translation activities are solely based on translating literature texts, then rather than being a linguistic tool which helps the learner understand foreign culture (cultures of peoples are better learnt through their literatures not just through language structures and isolated lexical elements) and lexis; such act could rather hamstring the expected cultural and semantic richness aimed at. As it has been made clear earlier, translation activities go beyond the acquisition of lexis, it contributes to open up the mind of the learner towards the foreign culture by associating the already known language to the one that is being learnt. This aspect makes translation to become a component in language learning that helps to differentiate between L1, L2 and L3. Translation can also promote communicative idiomatic of the target language. For example, as it is explained by Perrin (64), in rendering "manger les pissentits par la racine" to "pushing up the laisies", it shows that French attaches more importance to culinary matters and gestation than do the British. We can also observe through translation that in the use of syntactic nominalisation, the English language is more flexible than the French language. For example, let us examine the translation of these sentences:

1. He wants to know the *rights* and the wrongs of the question.
2. Nothing goes *right* for him.
3. The problem will *right* itself.
1. Il veut connaître tous les détails de la question
2. Rien ne lui réussit.
3. Le problème va s'arranger de lui-même.

It is interesting to note that the English word "right" is translated differently in each sentence in French according to each context. If in English "right" can be used to mean different things according to the grammatical class it belongs to, it is not so in French. It is also interesting to note that translation helps to minimise the problem of lexical semantics, most especially when learners are confronted by the translation of metaphoric expressions. When the two languages

exploit exactly the same image, translation problem does not occur. For example, in rendering "il n'y a pas de fumée sans feu" by "there is no smoke without fire", there is no problem of translation because the same image of fire and smoke is exploited in the two languages.

But interpretation can be difficult when a shift of meaning occurs i.e. when the image of the translated language does not correspond with the target language. The example given below clarifies the above statement.

"It is not everybody's cup of tea": "Ce n'est pas du goût de tout le monde". There is a partial change of image between *cup of tea* and *goût* (taste).

A cultural fact is hidden behind most passages. Thus, it is left to the teacher to focus his teaching on the cultural aspect he intends to highlight. For example, if the objective of his teaching is "to let the learner know that French people have a great sense of humour", the teacher will not limit his teaching to the translation of sentences like:

"Les français ont le sens d'humour": "French people have a sense of humour".

Such pedagogical attitude to socio-cultural approach will definitely be considered as a sense of misgiving in the function of translation. To create a socio-cultural interaction, we have to choose a text that is funny to the French people; but, we have to bear in mind that humour itself is a culture-bound phenomenon which implies that what is funny to the original audience might not produce same effect on the intended readers. In this case, some semantic elements can be added or reduced to produce sameness of effect.

Conclusion

Social conventions differ from one society to the other and the socio-cultural differences are so wide that speakers of different socio-cultural background find it difficult to understand each other. Judging from the divergence of culture, one can easily conclude that translation is an impossible activity. But despite the problems of translation such as language interference and others, it has from time immemorial helped transaction across cultures. If translation is applied as part of teaching programme, it will surely be a potential gain for the students because, apart from making them acquire semantic, idiomatic and

communication use of language; it also promotes their acceptance of the others, thus making them understand themselves better.

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