Manipulation in the Translation of Diplomatic Discourse

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Abstract: Manipulation in translation is generally seen as the linguistic manifestation of intervening strategies meant to hide or change the true intentions. It is broadly defined as "all that appears as new with respect to the original, or fails to appear where it might have been expected." Aspects of the manipulative lineament of translation, particularly of political and diplomatic discourse, have been held forth by a host of scholars, many of whom advise that translation should be studied within a broader political and cultural context, with regard to institutional and ideological components.

Keywords: Translation; Manipulation; Diplomatic discourse; Political discourse

1. Introduction

There is not a shadow of doubt that translation has assumed a prominent role in connecting the dots between civilizations, hence its substantial contribution to what mankind has achieved in all walks of life. Yet, only recently has it come under rigorous scrutiny as an academic subject *per se*, hastening a dramatic departure from the orthodox mold of thinking that had relegated translation to a footnote for centuries. Such irreverent attitudes had bred deep-seated resentment that perhaps no statement exudes more distinctly than John Dryden's "[W]e dress the vineyard, but the wine is the owner's" [1].

2. Translation as manipulation

Translation theory had conventionally leant towards emphasizing linguistic equivalence as the fundament of any translated work. For instance, Jakobson [2] asserted that meaning and equivalence are closely linked to the inter-lingual form of translation, which refers to identical messages expressed in two different codes. Equivalence also received the solicitude of Eugene Nida, who discarded the "literal/free" debate in favor of "formal/dynamic equivalence," two concepts that shifted the accent to the target audience. Building on the work of Nida, Peter Newmark reached the conclusion that the discrepancy between source and target languages would perpetually remain a common difficulty, hence the virtual impossibility of equivalence. He substituted

"semantic translation" and "communicative translation" for "formal equivalence" and "dynamic equivalence," respectively, and altered the focus of translation back to the source text.

The source-oriented approach had permeated into the study of translation for an extended period. With the emergence of "cultural turn" in the 1970s, however, its tide ebbed and focus changed towards other equally important issues such as history, culture, and ideology. In this respect, Venuti [3] affirmed that translation theories emphasizing equivalence should inevitably come to terms with the presence of "shifts" between the source text and the target text. Catford [4] was, indeed, the first to apply the term "shift" to the theory of translation, defining it as deviation from formal correspondence in the course of transition from the source language to the target language. Eventually, Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet proposed direct procedures for translation. Building on their work, Kitty van Leuven-Zwart elaborated her own theory based on the idea that final translation represents the outcome of numerous shifts away from the source text and that the cumulative effect of minor changes would significantly convert the end product.

Furthermore, Bassnett and Lefevere [5] brushed aside the linguistic theories of translation that have transitioned from the word to the text as a unit, yet have not progressed further, as well as the detailed comparisons between the original and the translation which did not consider texts in their cultural environment. In doing so, Bassnett and Lefevere transcended the mainstream view of language as a set of textual practices to make interaction between translation and culture the cynosure of all eyes, dissect the ways in which culture encumbers translation, and address the broader concerns related to context, history, and established conventions.

The linguistic-oriented approach and the concept of equivalence associated with it had ultimately succumbed, and new patterns stepped into the spotlight. Katharina Reiss, for instance, continued to study equivalence on the text rather than at the word and sentence levels. Additionally, Juliane House explored source text and target text registers, and expanded Halliday's thoughts of field, tenor, and mode. She proposed a translation paradigm allowing comparisons between source and target texts variables prior to the decision on whether to employ an "overt" or "covert" translation. The former revolves around the source text and fails to heed the sociocultural context of the target audience. The latter, however, raises the target text to the rank of the original.

In addition, Hans Vermeer ushered in the term "skopos," meaning "purpose." It revolved around the function that would be fulfilled by translated texts in the target culture, which would not necessarily be of the same nature or status as the purpose of source texts within the source culture. The emphasis stayed with the target text audience as the translator decides on what strategies to employ to reach a group of recipients within the target culture. The significance of the Skopos theory is that any text can be translated in different ways depending on the purpose delineated by the translation commissioner, which would allow translators to prioritize issues of concern before making a decision as to what to include, omit, and elaborate, while taking into account the sociocultural context.

The late 1970s witnessed the emergence of a descriptive approach spearheaded by Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury. Their common denominator was a methodological framework woven around the search for norms, and a global agreement that translation should be studied within a broader political and cultural context taking into account institutional and ideological components. The school precepts had been exclusively applied to literary translation before their purview expanded to encompass non-literary translation. The concept of "polysystem" lied at the very heart of such a trend, introduced by Even-Zohar [6] as a "system of systems, based on the study of how systems work." The "manipulation scholars," as they are called, turned away from the conventional idea that the target text is a faithful reproduction of the source text, affirming that the purpose of manipulation in translation is to align the target text with a certain system of norms in the source culture. They similarly turned their back to linguistics as the basal source of influence for their work, since translation is, by definition, interdisciplinary. As a result, it became evident that linguistics could not serve as an appropriate

foundation for the examination of literary translation.

3. Diplomatic discourse, translation, and manipulation

It might sound oxymoronic but, irrespective of a delicate thread, diplomacy bears more than a passing resemblance to politics, as one of the sets of instruments through which decisions are implemented. From another perspective, Barston [7] saw diplomacy as a method for regulating the interactions between nations and various stakeholders through the formulation and implementation of foreign politics, and the safeguarding of specific interests. As is the case with virtually every field of activity, diplomacy has peculiar ways of enunciating meanings, commonly known as "diplomatic language." In fact, diplomatic discourse takes on a political aspect in that it rhetorically approaches an official attitude with a view to exercising dissents through dialogue in order to maintain the perspective of the user. In other words, the political dimension of the diplomatic discourse emerges owing to the intrinsic conflict in the political activity [8].

In international relations, diplomatic discourse looms large as an instrument through which States construct narratives and assign meanings to their actions. Indeed, international communication through diplomatic discourse encloses arguments in which at least two aspects of interests interact: the first concerns domestic policy debates among internal groups; whereas the second is relative to negotiations with external actors. It is specifically within the negotiation of meanings among clusters of actors and interests that tensions and conflicts come into visible manifestation. They stem from the discursive act considering that the relational nature of power is exposed as an intrinsic aspect of the entirety of such exchanges. In politics, negotiations depend on aligning reasoning with reality. Within the scope of diplomatic discourse, it strays from what is effectively in place and is socially formulated [9].

By considering diplomatic discourse as an object of political communication, it becomes possible to examine the underlying argumentative mechanisms that shape both parties. In this respect, certain academes appraised the disparities between diplomatic and political discourses, concluding that the latter resorts to a language rich in metaphors, whereas the former employs neutral and less implicit language. This assertion carries some vestiges of the belief held by Robert T. Oliver that the rationalization of discourse gives room for ambiguity [8].

An oft-quoted example of ambiguity is the "Yalta Declaration," which had enshrined multiple equivocal provisions that had served to fill the gap between the positions of the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union with regard to the post World War II global order. Particularly notorious for ambiguities had been the chapter dedicated to the Polish question. The three parties could not concur on many issues, and their last resort had been to draft a vague text allowing for different possible interpretations. The United Nations Resolution 242 is yet another ancillary illustration. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War in 1967, the Security Council had adopted a resolution mirroring the profoundly divisive political opinion at the international organization at the time. The provision which had provoked different interpretations had read as follows: "withdrawal of Israeli armed forces 'from territories occupied' in recent conflict." The deletion of the definite article "the" had brought up the question of whether Israel had been urged to retract from "all" or just "some" of the territories occupied in the recent conflict. The contention had been further fueled by the French translation of the document, which, unlike the English original, had used the definite article: "retrait 'des territoires occupés' lors du recent conflit" [8].

Obviously, as the communication mechanism of the international community [10], diplomacy is unthinkable in default of translation, especially in multilateral settings or when the parties involved do not share the same language. As a matter of fact, diplomatic records bristle with tales about how much damage translation can cause. A case in point is when the former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been inaugurated, the correspondent of *The New York Times* reported him as saying "wipe Israel off the map." The statement

triggered a worldwide wave of anger and condemnation. Experts pointed out that Ahmadinejad was just quoting Ayatollah Khomeini, and that the statement in Persian merely says that "Israel would collapse" [11].

4. Conclusion

As an ostensibly strictly linguistic activity, a brief historical overview of translation reveals the extent to which it is permeated by manipulation. Considering the abstruse nature of translation, the multitude of attempts at a general theory applicable to every possible translation situation have been of little avail. Terminological confusion in the field has engendered a "theoretical Babel." No wonder that many scholars, such as Mary Snell-Hornby [12], rightly dismissed absolute equivalence, asserting that translation cannot be scaled down to a mere linguistic exercise. As a matter of fact, a number of academes have endeavored to examine translation in the light of miscellaneous disciplines, yet the outcome remains unsatisfactory. If the ambition of a general theory of translation is to be attained, the discipline of translation studies needs to reconsider how different models interact with each other beyond the seemingly simplistic overlap. It is imperative that the focus shifts from the traditional horizontal view of models, as independent circles intersect occasionally, to a vertical perspective that sees them as "babushka dolls," models of decreasing size placed one inside the other.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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