Translations have been always an inter-cultural task

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1. Translation from one language to another - the obvious challenge to deal with

Why and for what purpose do we make translations? At first glance, this question seems unnecessary; of course, it is always to transfer text from one language to another. The reason underlying this activity is communication between people of different backgrounds, and the goal is successful communication between the author and the reader of a text or message. To carry out this work successfully, the translator must have very good language skills, both in the language of the original and the target language. Ideally, for a translator, the two languages are the mother tongues (if he/ she grew up bilingual). However, since this is rather the exception, in order to produce accurate results, we usually translate from a language that we have studied into our mother tongue. In addition, if it comes to expert contributions, the translator must be familiar with the common terminology of a specific industry or an academic discipline or at least be willing to acquire these terms. These few explanations already show how complex just the linguistic challenge is, which is considered to be mastered. At the same time, linguistic skills are not sufficient, because even the correct translation of words and terms isn't always ensuring that the overall message is actually understood by the target reader.

2. Dealing with inter-cultural aspects - a hidden challenge that often goes beyond words

The task of a translator is not only to enable the communication between the languages, but also to be able to mediate between cultures. For a translator, it is therefore extremely important to know the concept of culture and intercultural communication. Because the term "culture" can be used on so many different levels, a general definition appears to be almost impossible. For translators, however, the term culture can be defined as all that, what is worth knowing about the source and the target society. So, the translator can judge whether certain expressions, and, even of more significance, certain ways of thinking, distinctly differ from the norms of the target reader or society. The translator can behave society-compliant by this knowledge. He can customize his own expectations and, if the original text is not in conformity with the expectations of the target society, he should consider or estimate possible consequences. At best, the translator is thus able to empathize with the target groups and to perceive his own texts like a local. This requires not only the linguistic competence of the translator, but also his knowledge of the other culture on the basis of practical experiences in dealing with the people of the country of origin. He or she should have lived in that country for some time or at least have many years of experience in dealing with representatives of the corresponding culture. In short, it is widely recognized that a good translation requires both linguistic and intercultural communicative competence.

3. Examples

Sometimes, during the translation of a text, cultural obstacles are likely to occur. Of course, the problem differs according to the context we are dealing with. In the following, we will illustrate this remark with some examples.

First, there are some words or expressions that are difficult to be translated one-to-one, because they are, to a certain extend, unique in a given culture. Take, for instance, the Japanese concept of *Wabi-sabi*. *Wabi-Sabi* (詫び寂び) is often translated as "modest simplicity." However, no Western reader, who is still unfamiliar with the Japanese culture, would understand what it really means. To be able to make him or her understand the meaning of *Wabi-sabi*, it is necessary to give a detailed description of a situation where this term plays a significant role, such as during a tea ceremony (茶の湯) in a tea room (茶室), surrounded by a quiet, but sophisticated tea garden (茶庭). Only by describing the traditional Japanese taste, corresponding materials and the particular atmosphere of such an event and its environment, a foreign reader might get a first idea of what a tea ceremony might be. There is no chance of a direct translation.

The same is true for the German expression "gemütlich." When translating it into English, we would probably use the word "comfortable," but this does not exactly match the German meaning. In Japanese, the expression *kokochi yoi* (心地 好い) comes close to it, however, it rather means "comfortable" than "gemütlich." How can we explain the nuances? A sofa, for instance, might be "comfortable" with the meaning of "bequem" in German language. However, the German term "gemütlich" means more than a comfortable armchair. It involves a pleasant situation and atmosphere, such as gatherings of family or friends in a warm room with candlelight, drinking tea or a glass of wine, while outside there is a cold winter. Just as in the above-mentioned example of "*Wabi-sabi*," a direct translation of "gemütlich" often remains unsatisfactory; only a more detailed description in a given social context reveals its true meaning.

Second, I would like to talk about spatial-related situations in daily life. These days, I read a small article about the latest Grimm-Kongress in Kassel, Germany, discussing the international perception of the famous Brothers Grimm fairy tales. Many participants came from China, Korea and Japan. There is a well-known fairy tale where at one point, translation became difficult: 'The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids.' In the original German text, one of the kids quickly hides under the table, when the wolf came in. However, in a Japanese context, such a picture can be hardly imagined, because at least traditional Japanese tables in a *tatami* room, are very low in height, so that a little goat would not be able to hide under it. Thus, this example shows that ideas of a certain spatial situation are always bound to our own culture and environment.

Third, it is important to understand the differences that relate to a social system. For instance, the Japanese society is, above all, based on groups. To a certain degree, this is also true for China and Korea. In Japan, the group comes first, it is like the pillar of society, and the

individual person has to follow the rules of the respective group it belongs to. It is of vital importance to harmonize with the group. In order to achieve this goal, quite often, the individual person has to restrain him- or herself. By contrast, in Western countries, the individual is the starting point, shaping the view of life. Of course, there are also groups, such as sports clubs, but they mainly exist for a functional reason. At the first glance, if we take a sports club as an example, groups seem to be similar in the East and the West. But in fact, the Japanese understanding of a group is quite different from the European one. This difference sometimes becomes significant in terms of translation. If we translate, for instance, descriptions of a workplace environment and its social dynamics, and if the meaning of belonging to a group is involved, the Western reader will read such a text with a different eye. For example, when it comes to the finishing time at work, for the sake of both the company and the group, in Japan, if necessary, everyone is expected to work overtime. But in Europe, even there also exists overtime work, an individual employee may say, "I am sorry, but this evening I already have an important appointment that I cannot cancel." While in Europe, such a behavior belongs to a person's individual right, in Japan, such a remark would be already considered as selfish. How can one person finish work for private reasons, while all others have to work overtime? In Japan, this kind of behavior is likely to be considered very unpopular.

From these examples, we may learn that a translator has to be aware of a number of different linguistic meanings and its social implications.

4. Machine translation (MT)

Finally, when we discuss translation issues, we cannot avoid mentioning machine translation (MT). Despite the fact MT has been developed over a period of the past six decades, it is only recently that it has become popular with the expansion of PC-based work and the internet. For instance, MT is now widely used when visiting a web page in a foreign language, gathering first information and seeking for a rough understanding. Furthermore, as Hutchins (2005) shows, MT has its justification as a tool for translating technical materials, such as instruction manuals, that are too boring for human translators. Another field of application is large corporations that want the terms to be translated in the same way every time, since computers are consistent, while human translators avoid reiterations (ibid.).

At the same time, because of its frequently poor results, MT is not highly regarded by most professional translators. In fact, at the present time, it is not useful for producing publishable, top quality translations. What is more, when it comes to cultural aspects of translation, machine translation will always fail. Hutchins puts it in a nutshell: "If the human translator has inadequate familiarity with the cultural background the translation will often fail; and MT must always fail wherever cultural background is needed because computers do not have any culture" (Hutchins 2005: 21).

To conclude, translations have been always an inter-cultural task.

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