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CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN TRANSLATION: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

To know the relationship between Culture and Translation, it is observed that Culture is the product of interacting human minds, and hence a science of culture will be a science of the most complex phenomenon on Earth. Culture gives birth to language; translation and culture are intimately connected. To say 'a phrase that appears easy to translate may actually contain cultural subtleties' that, unless they are accounted for, can bring just the opposite meaning than is intended. So translation without deep cultural context can be dangerous, especially when meanings are critical. There are other structures that help us better in understanding a country more than language. One of these structures can be regarded as culture. In this way knowing about the culture of a society takes us beyond our purpose. It is assumed that a nation's culture flourishes by interacting with other cultures. Cultural variety opens our eyes to human rights, but cultural variety can only be recognized through discussions. It is in this context that the notion of translation, or more precisely that of cultural translation, has such immense importance. To translate literary texts, however, is not an easy task, since it certainly poses many problems for the translator? One of the problems a translator can face arises from the fact that some words or phrases denoting objects, facts, phenomena, etc... are so deeply rooted in their source culture (SC) and so specific (and perhaps exclusive or unique) to the culture that produced them that they have no equivalent in the target culture (TC), be it because they are unknown, or because they are not yet codified in the target language (TL). To be very transparent, translation must be sensitive to the moral, spiritual values associations of the words and symbols in the language to find meaning equivalents or similarly accepted meaning of culture based words.

Key words: culture, translation, meaning, structure, symbols, translator, understanding

1. Introduction

One language cannot express the meanings of another; instead, there is a distinction between the meanings built in and the meanings that must be captured and expressed. In this sense, different languages predispose their speaker to think differently, i.e., direct their attention to different aspects of the environment.

Translation is therefore not simply a matter of seeking other words with similar meaning but of finding appropriate ways of saying things in another language. Different languages, then, may use different linguistic forms. But these forms are only one of the aspects of the difference between the two language systems.

2. Culture and Translation

Cultural meanings are intricately woven into the texture of the language. The creative writer's ability to capture and project them is of primary importance for, this should be reflected in the translated work.

Caught between the need to capture the local color and the need to be understood by an audience outside the cultural and lingual situation, a translator has to be aware of two cultures.

One of the main goals of literary translation is to initiate the target-language reader into the sensibilities of the source-language culture.

2.1. Some problems

The process of transmitting cultural elements through literary translation is a complicated and vital task. Culture is a complex collection of experiences which condition daily life; it includes history, social structure, religion, traditional customs and everyday usage. This is difficult to comprehend completely. Especially in relation to a target language, one important question is whether the translation will have any readership at all, as the specific reality being portrayed is not quite familiar to the reader.

We shall discuss some of the problems a translator encounters while translating a text from one language to another in the Indian context.

A name is a linguistic cultural element, and an author uses it for its associative value. It resists translation; therefore its evocative value is lost.

In the Indian culture, people show respect to their elders by addressing them in plural. A simple he/she cannot be substituted, because then the idea behind the use of plural address would be lost. So, in addressing an elder person, either choice-retaining the plural form or replacing it by a simple "you"-will lead to ambiguity.

It seems artificial here for family members to greet one another with "good morning," "have a nice day," etc., to apologies, or to express gratitude by saying "thank you."

Regarding social relationships, most Indians used to live with their extended families. A need to address each relative arose. For this reason, there are different words in all Indian languages to refer to each relation. There are words to address a wife's mother or father, a wife's sister or brother, a husband's sister or brother, a mother's sister or brother, and so on. This concept (practice?) of extended family living together is unheard of in western countries; therefore, the English language lacks the corresponding terms.

One may say that this extended-family lifestyle keeps many family values alive. In some texts, awareness of the society's or the family's values must be stressed; the linguistic manifestations of these values cannot be translated into a language where the audience is unfamiliar with these values.

Dress code or ornaments used and the symbols behind each of them also pose a problem for a translator. Here some of the ornaments are meant for only a woman whose husband is alive. A widow has certain restrictions. This idea of widowhood is non-existent in western countries. The pain behind this widowhood cannot be conveyed to such an audience.

Regarding food habits, the very flavor behind a food or its significance is untranslatable to an audience who has never heard of it. For instance, certain foods are prepared only during certain festivals, and such foods remind Indian readers of the season or some religious story. But this is not experienced by an audience of a different culture.

Customs and tradition are part of a culture. Be it a marriage or a funeral, be it a festival or some vows, the story and the significance or hidden symbolism behind it become a stumbling block for a translator. For

instance, in a Christian marriage, the exchange of kisses is part of the ceremony. In an Indian context, this would be totally inappropriate! Even expressing feelings in public is outrageous here.

Beliefs and feelings change from culture to culture. The color white may represent purity and black evil in the Indian context, but it may not be the same in another culture. What is considered a good omen, whether an event, an animal or a bird, may not symbolize the same thing in another culture.

Religious elements, myths, legends, and the like are major components of any culture. They present major hurdles in translating a text. This sensitive issue demands the translator's full attention.

Lastly, geographical and environmental elements are also part of one's culture. For instance, snow is a part of the Eskimos' life. There are different words to identify different kinds of snow in their language. In India, people have no idea of snow, and there are no words to describe different kinds of snow. Another example: the Chinese language has different words for different types of ants; in the Indian languages all kinds of ants are just ants!

3. Conclusion

Cultural transfer requires a multi-pronged approach. It is concerned with the author's relationship to his subject matter and with the author's relationship to his reader. These should be reflected in a good translation. The translator has to transmit this special cultural quality from one language to another.

Most translations are intended to serve, however imperfectly, as a substitute for the original, making it available to people who cannot read the language in which it is written. This imposes a heavy responsibility on the translator.

Awareness of history is an essential requirement for the translator of a work coming from an alien culture. Thorough knowledge of a foreign language, its vocabulary, and grammar is not sufficient to make one competent as a translator. One should be familiar with one's own culture and be aware of the source-language culture before attempting to build any bridge between them.

If the reality being represented is not familiar to the audience, the translation stumbles and becomes difficult to read. The translator would have to consider whether similar or parallel language resources exist in the literary subculture of the target language. In translations of a culture rich in literature, the question of relevance to the projected audience is more significant to the translator than to the original author. A translator has to look for equivalents in terms of relevance in the target language and exercise discretion by substituting rather than translating certain elements in a work. Even with all the apparent cultural hurdles, a translator can create equivalence by the judicious use of resources.

Translation is an intellectual activity that will continue to thrive, deriving inspiration from fiction in the source language and passing on such inspiration, or at least appreciation, to target-language readers.

As Goethe observes: "There are two principles of translation. The translator can bring to his fellow countrymen a true and clear picture of the foreign author and foreign circumstances, keeping strictly to the original; but he can also treat the foreign work as a writer treats his material, altering it after his own tastes and convictions, so that it is brought closer to his fellow countrymen, who can then accept it as if it were an original work."

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