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Challenges and techniques of translating officialese and inflated language in diplomatic texts

تحديات وتقنيات ترجمة اللغتين الرسمية والمفخّمة في النصوص الدبلوماسية

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Abstract:

In this paper we aim to give an overview of the process and challenges of diplomatic translation and identify some techniques of translating officialese and inflated language in diplomatic texts. We adopt the Relevance theory approach, suggested by Gutt (1991) to analyse some samples of officialese and inflated language in a number of diplomatic texts. The significance of the study is to explore the boundaries of diplomatic translation from a relevance theory perspective and the limitations of the challenging task of translating officialese and inflated language in the diplomatic sphere. The main difficulties encountered by translators are untranslatability, loss of connotative and figurative meanings, and absence of equivalents. Translators have to identify these two categories of doublespeak, grasp their full meanings, and try to determine the true intentions of the original speaker as well as the expectations of the TT receiver.

Keywords: Diplomatic translation; Inflated language; Manipulation; Officialese; Relevance theory

ملخص:

نهدف في هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تقديم لمحة عامة عن عملية الترجمة الدبلوماسية وتحدياتها والتعرف على بعض تقنيات ترجمة النصوص الدبلوماسية. سنعتمد على نظرية الملاءمة في الترجمة التي اقترحها جوت (1991) لتحليل بعض النماذج من اللغة الرسمية والمفخّمة في عدد من النصوص الدبلوماسية. تكمن أهمية الدراسة في استكشاف حدود الترجمة الدبلوماسية من منظور نظرية الملاءمة وكذلك صعوبات ترجمة اللغتين الرسمية والمفخّمة في المجال الدبلوماسي. تتمثل أبرز الصعوبات التي يواجهها المترجمون في تعذر الترجمة وفقدان المعاني الضمنية والمجازية

وغياب المكافئات. وعليه، يجب على المترجمين التعرف أولاً على هذين النوعين من الخطاب المزدوج، وفهم كامل معانيهما، ومحاولة تحديد النوايا الحقيقية للمتحدث الأصلي إضافة إلى توقعات مستقبل النص الهدف.

كلمات مفتاحية: ترجمة دبلوماسية؛ لغة مفخمة؛ تلاعب؛ لغة رسمية؛ نظرية الملائمة

1. INTRODUCTION

Officialese and inflated language are both part of doublespeak and can be used as a means to mislead and manipulate the international opinion through hiding the truth, distorting reality, softening harsh meanings, and using language strategically. On the other hand, diplomatic translation, as an international communication act, may contribute to shaping foreign relations, implementing ideologies, and establishing hegemony. It requires broad knowledge, language accuracy, good understanding, and effective intercultural communication. Thus, diplomatic language, officialese and inflated language will be discussed. Relevance theory principles will be presented to gain a full understanding of how they can be effectively applied to the translation of officialese and inflated language in diplomacy.

2. Diplomatic language

Diplomacy requires a variety of skills in managing international issues and achieving foreign policy objectives. There are many types of diplomatic documents divided according to their content such as official diplomatic documents pertaining to governments, including statements, declarations of government representatives, agreements, conventions, whether published or unpublished, and non-official documents mainly represented by memoirs. There is also diplomatic correspondence such as: personal notes, verbal notes, memorial notes, memorandum, and semi-official private letters. (Akmadiyeva, Mussabalina, Zhumanova, Kabylishayev & Stambulov, 2018, p. 352)

It is noteworthy that diplomatic documents are a special type of written sources which have developed throughout history. According to Podany (2010), “the first diplomatic letter was written 4300 years ago in cuneiform on a baked clay tablet excavated in present day Syria” (as cited in Constantinou, Kerr & Sharp, 2016, p. 244).

Further, the choice of language that should be used by diplomats and statesmen is very crucial. Many principles govern the use of certain terms and

expressions as part of diplomatic language, since the latter achieves many roles and functions.

Diplomatic language is not a “universal language or an international auxiliary language”; it “corresponds to the language used by Nation-States when communicating with each other” (De Carvalho, 2011, p. 54) That is to say, the language that is used in diplomacy differs from the language used in other fields and is relevant to specific diplomatic events.

The importance of studying and analysing diplomatic language may be explained by the needs of understanding and interpreting diplomatic terminology as well as constructing mutual perceptions of international developments.

Further, diplomatic language is “instrumental; it was constructed over time to overcome the natural dissonance arising from different semantic assumptions and frames of reference expressed in the vernacular languages of varying states” (Constantinou, Kerr & Sharp, 2016, p. 244). That is, diplomatic language is used to serve many purposes within the international community and aims to achieve clarity and avoid conflicts and misunderstandings.

Moreover, diplomatic language is the “language of unspoken suggestions and implications and non-verbal communication” (Behari, 1996, p. 171) That is, diplomatic language is a polite, soft, formal, and subtle language that is often used to hide the truth, distort realities, evade responsibility, and manipulate others. Thus, there is a clear relation between diplomacy and doublespeak, since diplomatic language is often associated with the hidden interests of statesmen.

3. Doublespeak

3.1 Definition of doublespeak

As we have seen earlier, doublespeak can be part of both political and diplomatic language. This term appeared in 1972 by fusing the terms: newspeak (euphemistic language) and doublethink (the presence of two contradictory opinions) (Gibson & Lutz, 1991).

Doublespeak is used strategically in diplomacy to serve many purposes, such as: lying to others, furthering the agendas of statesmen, gaining support (Smith, 2000), obscuring facts, and evading responsibility (Maimon, 2007). It reflects dishonesty and aims to deceive others.

William Lutz states that: “doublespeak is incongruity, the incongruity between what is said or left unsaid and what really is” (Lutz, 1996, p. 4) That is,

there is a huge gap between the utterance and intentions of the speaker as well as the reality.

Given the nature of diplomacy, doublespeak abounds in diplomatic documents to serve different purposes that are often difficult to identify.

3.2 Categories of doublespeak

There are four main types of doublespeak which can be sometimes intertwined: euphemism, jargon, gobbledygook or bureaucratese, and inflated language. (Lutz, 1989). All these categories are context-bound. In addition, they take their meanings from political and social influences.

Euphemisms are “ameliorative, periphrastic, or acceptable substitutes in order not to violate linguistic censorship when referring to taboos” (Depner, 2016, p. 94). Hence, taboos and euphemisms are closely linked; both of them are context dependent. Euphemisms are considered to be a category of doublespeak when they are used with bad intentions, and therefore, mislead people.

As for jargon, it is defined as “characteristic language, such as technical terminology or idiom of a special activity or particular group” (Salmela & Sell, 2011, p. 44). It is perfectly acceptable when it is used among professionals; otherwise, it is considered as a form of doublespeak since it may create confusion over the used terminology, make the simple sound complex, and cause communication gaps.

3.3 Officialese

The term “officialese”, “first recorded in 1884, is used pejoratively, to refer, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it to “the formal and typically verbose language considered characteristic of officials or official documents, turgid or pedantic official prose” (Fowler, 2015, p. 569). It can be inferred that officialese relies on verbosity, which is reflected in using more words than necessary.

Officialese also called “bureaucratese”, “government-speak” or “the language of bureaucracy” is often used to impress the listener or reader. Officialese language often “dilutes messages to such an extent that readers may not understand the meaning of the ideas being expressed” (Deetz, 1994, p. 214), because the officialese language expresses banal ideas in a long, vague, and complex style of writing. For instance, the terms and expressions: *functionality*,

funding streams, procure, slippage, paradigm, open a formal investigation, and recalibrate are considered officialese.

Further, officialese is generally considered as “incomprehensible and aesthetically unsatisfying” (Deetz, 1994, p. 214). In this regard, Foucault deems that incomprehensibility is an effective means to establish power and make the speaker sound important. Thus, officialese is powerful and belongs to “the narrative of Authoritative Administration” (as cited in Deetz, 1994, p. 214). Incomprehensibility results from using wordiness, abstract nouns, and jargon. Most people may not understand the terms: “*Synergy, incentivise, leveraging, wow-factor, low-hanging fruit*” which are considered as officialese that have been inappropriately overused. (Crystal, 2012) Using plain language may be more suitable in certain contexts.

We notice that officialese is part of deeply-rooted linguistic habits in a given society. It mainly relies on verbosity and abstraction through using many obscure terms that serve no purpose and avoiding plain language. It is both used by bureaucrats and diplomats.

3.4 Inflated language

Inflated language, also called “elevated” or “bloated” language, is “simply another means of sounding impressive. Through a careful use of adjectives, the most ordinary event can be turned into a spectacle”. (Chaplain, 1974, p. 19) That is to say, people may inflate or even overly inflate simple and casual words into pompous words. For instance: “*I have the knowledge of*” instead of the verb “*know*”, “*They are indications of*” instead of “*indicate*”, “*it is suggestive of*” instead of “*suggest*”.

Moreover, gobbledygook is a language that “tries to overwhelm the reader or listener with words, the bigger the better!” (Andrews, 2012, p. 284). In this regard, diplomats or politicians who use inflated language may be arrogant, unconfident, or unable to speak plainly on the topic due to lack of knowledge.

Inflated language is a form of pretense in which plain words are replaced by “big words and fancy phrases in an attempt to sound smart and sophisticated” (Andrews, 2012, p. 284). This type of language should be avoided because it is obscure, confusing, loaded with doublespeak and dark connotations.

Here are some examples of inflated words and their plain counterparts:

Inflated words	Plain counterparts
At this point in time	Now
Commence	Begin
Endeavour	Try
Facilitate	Help, aid
In close proximity to	near
Instrument	Tool
Transpire	Happen

Table 1: Inflated language and their plain English counterparts (Kaplan, 2010, p. 18)

Inflated language is also used to create exaggerated effects and embellish facts (Shiyab & Halimi, 2015) to make simple actions look great. In diplomacy, inflated language is widely used to create linguistic and rhetorical effects through adopting a dignified and sophisticated style, very formal words, jargon, pompous expressions, abstraction, and more elaborate figures of speech.

4. Relevance theory

Relevance theory was first suggested by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in their 1986's co-authored book "Relevance communication and cognition". This cognitive and pragmatic theory is related to communication and the interpretation of various explicit and implicit utterances. Further, this theory has been used to study several linguistic phenomena.

The search for relevance is the key idea around which this theory revolves. It sustains that humans strive for relevance when interpreting utterances through making less cognitive efforts. Word choice, forms of language, intonation, and context are key elements that help the reader or listener in interpreting any given utterance.

There are many relevance theoretical principles such as the cognitive principle of relevance which is mainly related to the relevant elements of an utterance and

the construction of new pieces of contextual information to create implicature for the least processing effort. (Maruenda Bataller, 2002, p. 19) Sperber and Wilson (1986, p. 221) give the following example to explain the cognitive principle of relevance:

- (1) My childhood days are gone.
- (2) My childhood days are gone, *gone*.

There is obviously a difference between (1) and (2), in utterance (1) the interpretation is relatively obvious and does not need much processing efforts, while the word “gone” in utterance (2) adds extra cognitive effects intended by the speaker and requires more cognitive efforts.

Further, implicature and explicature, intentionality, and communication clues are among the relevance theory principles. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) That is, each utterance vehicles some intentions which can be explicit or implicit. As for communication clues, they may enable the reader or listener to understand the explicit or implicit meaning of an utterance. These clues can be semantic, pragmatic, syntactic, phonetic, or formulaic.

The application of relevance theory to translation marks the “shift from a descriptive approach to an explanatory truth-laden value one” (Hussain & Khuddro, 2016, p. 33). Since translation is closely related to communication whose aim is to convey the ST message within the TT environment, Gutt (1991/2000) has tried to apply relevance theory to translation given that it is related to the interpretative use of language across cultural boundaries.

The concept of direct translation implies that the translator should convey the same meaning and preserve the same properties of the ST. While, in indirect translation, the translator can be less faithful and may transfer the most relevant features to the readers to meet their expectations based on their existing assumptions.

Thus, the translator may use various flexible strategies and techniques to achieve the relevance principle through reproducing the ST cognitive effects and conveying the informative intentions of the original author using the words and expressions (communicative clues) optimally relevant to the receiver with less processing efforts.

5. Analysis and Discussion

In this section, we will attempt to discuss some samples of officialese and inflated language which have been used in some diplomatic statements and analyse the techniques of their translation based on relevance theory principles.

A- Officialese:

Here is a selection of excerpts from the US embassy website in Egypt that contain officialese and government-speak that we will discuss and analyse.

- 1- Because we have significant vital interests in the world that we cannot afford to ignore. (Biden, 2021)

- لأنّ لدينا مصالح حيوية كبيرة في العالم لا يمكننا تجاهلها.

“Vital or national interest” is a widely used concept in diplomacy and International Relations (IR) given that every state seeks to pursue its own “vital interests”. Therefore, it is an ambiguous and fluctuating concept that may carry different meanings according to the contexts in which it is used. It is generally used to justify political and military actions (wars, coalitions...)

The ambiguity surrounding this concept “hinders the process of formulating a universally accepted definition of National Interest” (National Interest, n.d.) Most often, this term is used to hide and obscure harsh realities.

The translator used the common phrase “مصالح حيوية” which is largely used in Arabic to render the original version and optimally relevant in this context by adopting the technique of literal translation as part of the descriptive model of translation that requires less processing efforts based on the existing cognitive assumptions. However, the meaning of “vital interest” is still ambiguous in the Arabic version and requires a thorough analysis to grasp all its hidden meanings.

- 2- The latest iteration of an American cultural presence in Alexandria that began with a library in 1947, the Corner features a library with resources on American history. (The US Ambassador, 2021)

- الركن الأمريكي الجديد في الإسكندرية الكائن في المقر السابق للقنصلية العامة الأمريكية. يُعد الركن الأمريكي امتداد للتواجد الثقافي الأمريكي بالإسكندرية، والذي بدأ بتأسيس مكتبة في سنة ١٩٤٧ حيث يوفر الركن الأمريكي الجديد مكتبة ثرية بمصادر المعلومات المختلفة عن التاريخ.

The term “iteration” is usually considered part of government-speak or officialese and may not be easily understood by citizens. It has several meanings that should be identified according to various contexts. It means “the repetition of a process or utterance”, it also refers to “a new version of a piece of computer hardware or software”. (iteration, n.d.)

The first thing we infer from these two definitions is that the word “iteration” is not a synonym of the word “corner” ; it simply means a version or repetition. The translator may have found this type of officialese ambiguous and preferred to use an Arabic word that fits well the context and that may be more relevant to Arab readers through adopting an interpretative model of translation as part of a communicative approach that requires less efforts to understand the general meaning of the sentence. This choice was governed by the translator’s assessment of the cognitive environment and the audience expectations.

- 3- Egypt plays a crucial role as a factor of security and stability in the Middle East. With broad engagement that includes military assistance, economic development, and education programs, the United States partners with and supports Egypt’s security, stability, and sustained development. (US Embassy, 2015)

- إنَّ مصر تلعب دوراً حيوياً كعنصر من عناصر الأمن والاستقرار في منطقة الشرق الأوسط. ومن خلال مشاركة واسعة النطاق تشمل مساعدات عسكرية، وتنمية اقتصادية، وبرامج للتعليم، فإن الولايات المتحدة تدعم أمن مصر واستقرارها، وتنميتها المستدامة.

The above press release is full of officialese and government-speak that tells little of a clear substance. It sounds impressive, but actually it is ambiguous. In fact, “the crucial role” played by Egypt is not well-defined within the Middle East (positive or negative ?), the nature of the “broad engagement” is not prespecified (interference, domination, partnership... ?), the “military assistance” is not fully described (military base, weapons of mass destruction, training... ?), and “the sustained development” (democracy promotion, economic growth... ?) is ambiguous and uncertain.

The translator mainly used a descriptive model of translation through adopting the literal translation technique to transfer officialese and convey the surface meaning of the original without trying to explain the underlying information.

The original words and expressions are generally used in diplomacy and politics to introduce vagueness, ambiguity, inaccuracy, and cloud communication. Arab readers may rely on their existing assumptions to understand all the meanings and connotations of these phrases to achieve optimal relevance given the nature and functions of these types of officialese.

- 4- I have come to Cairo to help leverage Egypt's counterterrorism strengths and improve our collaboration. (Egypt and the United States, 2015)

- لقد جئت إلى القاهرة للمساعدة في دعم قوتها في مواجهة الإرهاب وتطوير التعاون المشترك.

The term “leverage” is largely used in diplomatic statements, it sounds important, but it is marked by abstraction and may be difficult for readers to understand. According to [investopedia.com](https://www.investopedia.com), “leverage results from using borrowed capital as funding source when investing to expand the firm’s asset base and generate returns on risk capital” (leverage, n.d.). It is mainly used in finance and economics. It may also mean the “power to influence people and get the results you want”. (leverage, n.d.) Hence, the use of this term is quite pompous and even pedantic. The translator has not used a financial term but opted for a simpler verb that renders the meaning of the original and which seems relevant to the Arab reader, since an effective communication requires that the speaker’s intentions overlap with the audience expectations.

B- Inflated language:

In this section, we will discuss some examples of inflated language used by the US president Joe Biden in his remarks on Afghanistan on August 15th, 2021.

- 1- The plans we have put in place to respond to every constituency, including any contingency, including the rapid collapse we’re seeing now. (Biden, 2021)

- لتنفيذ الخطط التي وضعناها من أجل كل دائرة انتخابية، بما في ذلك الخطط الطارئة لمعالجة الانهيار السريع الذي نشهده الآن.

According to Hartwell Fiske (2005), the phrase “put in place” is wordy and could be replaced by just one verb with the same meaning in English. (p. 36) The president could have avoided this phrase and used a verb equivalent in meaning

such as: develop, arrange, elaborate, establish, launch, introduce, which are simpler and less wordy to reduce both wordiness and the pompous effect.

As for the noun constituency, it has at least four meanings, the first refers to “a body of citizens entitled to elect a representative”, the second refers to “the residents in an electoral district”, the third refers to “a group or body that patronizes, supports, or offers representation”, the fourth refers to “the people involved in or served by an organization” (constituency, n.d.). However, the meaning of the noun constituency in this context is not very clear. At first glance, it seems a little pompous and difficult to understand.

The phrase “put in place” is translated with the verb “وضعناها” which is equivalent in meaning, less wordy, and simpler. The translator used the common equivalent of the original, which is an adequate relevant correspondence with less processing efforts.

2- Today, the terrorist threat has metastasized well beyond Afghanistan. (Biden, 2021)

- لقد انتشر التهديد الإرهابي خارج أفغانستان اليوم.

The verb “to metastasize” is generally used in medicine to mean the spread of a cancer from one organ to another.

In this context, this verb has strong connotations and is used to describe the spread of terrorism in the world as a metastasis of a cancer that potentially affects everyone. This use is figurative and part of inflated language; it suggests that terrorism is deadly, effective, and must be stopped.

The verb “metastasize” is translated with the verb “انتشر” which is quite neutral and less strong compared to the English one. It is an undertranslation that does not resemble the original version in sense, since it does not render all the strong and negative connotations of the English verb. The translator should have used “انتشر كالسرطان” to render all the nuances of the English verb, although it is longer in terms of word count.

The translator has not added the word “cancer” and used only the verb “انتشر” which simply means “spread” to avoid evoking this deadly disease and conjuring up painful pictures which may have been inappropriate and irrelevant to the Arab reader since the English verb “metastasize” does not clearly mention the “big C”.

- 3- We've developed counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability that will allow us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on any direct threats to the United States in the region and to act quickly and decisively if needed. (Biden, 2021)

- لقد طورنا القدرة على مكافحة الإرهاب عبر الأفق مما سيتيح لنا التنبيه لأي تهديدات مباشرة للولايات المتحدة في المنطقة والتصرف بسرعة وحسم ما يحصل إذا لزم الأمر.

According to Myre (2021) "Over the horizon" is "more a fuzzy concept than a polished military plan". The meaning of this phrase is not really determined. President Biden keeps repeating this phrase when talking about US support to Afghanistan. However, this phrase is unclear, ambiguous, and confusing when used in the military field.

The translator used the phrase "عبر الأفق" through adopting the technique of literal translation. However, the meaning is still vague. The translator preferred to rely on contextual information which may reduce the processing efforts of the Arab reader by choosing a common phrase.

As for the phrase "keep our eyes firmly fixed", it is quite high-sounding and wordy. The US president may have wanted to stress the importance of identifying potential threats and risks that are not immediately visible.

The translator simply used "التنبيه" which means "being alert, wary of". However, it does not belong to the same register as the original. The translator could have used the Arabic phrase "نبقي أعيننا مفتوحة على" which is equivalent in form and meaning and renders all the connotations of the English phrase. The translator opted for an interpretative model of translation based on the contextual assumptions intended for the Arab audience to achieve successful communication.

- 4- Or Americans who have fought and served in the country — serve our country in Afghanistan — this is deeply, deeply personal. (Biden, 2021)

- للأمريكيين الذين قاتلوا وخدموا بلادنا هناك، هذا أمر شخصي جدا.

Repetition in diplomatic and political speech is a powerful tool to attract the listeners' attention and make them more conscious of the content of the message being delivered. Further, it is a form of lexical cohesion that is used to enroll the emotions of the audience. The US president has repeated the adjective "deeply" twice to talk about American soldiers who both served and died in Afghanistan.

The translator preferred not to translate the adjective “deeply” twice and used “جدا” once based on the assumption that this adjective, which is an adequate relevant correspondence, may render all the nuances of the original with less processing efforts although it is pragmatically different from the English version.

- 5- Maintain a laser-focus on our counterterrorism missions there and in other parts of the world. (Biden, 2021)

- مواصلة التركيز على مهام مكافحة الإرهاب هناك وفي أجزاء أخرى من العالم.

The phrase “laser-focus” means “the mental ability to give 100 percent of your attention to the task you have prioritised in the present moment... just like a laser beam can concentrate a lot of light on one small area”. (Qayum, 2021)

The US president wants to say that the United States of America is intensely focusing on fighting terrorism to the exclusion of everything else, which is a sort of exaggeration. The use of this term is wordy, inflated, and exaggerated. The translator simply used “التركيز” which means “focusing, concentrating”. However, it does not render all the meanings of the original, which involves a more emphatic description. After doing research, we came across an article dealing with “laser personality”. The translator could have added an adjective to describe the process of concentration being referred to in the English version, such as “شديد، مطلق” which may render the nuances of the English phrase.

The phrase “laser-focus” may not be compatible with the Arab reader’s assumptions because the word laser is not used in Arabic as an adjective to describe concentration (cognitive environment). Hence, the translator opted for the interpretative model of translation to achieve relevance in translation by taking into consideration the expectations and assumptions of the receiver.

6. CONCLUSION

Diplomatic language is a special language characterised by high levels of formality, figures of speech as well as hidden meanings and intentions. Further, diplomats and statesmen use officialese and inflated language to serve various purposes that often have negative effects. The translation of officialese and inflated language can be quite challenging because they are ambiguous, inaccurate, pompous, and wordy. The main difficulties encountered by translators are

untranslatability, loss of connotative and figurative meanings, and absence of equivalents. Translators have to identify these two categories of doublespeak, grasp their full meanings, and try to determine the true intentions of the original speaker as well as the expectations of the TT receiver. In this regard, relevance theory may offer flexible choices to translators who should select the most relevant elements to be transferred based on the cognitive environment, the contextual assumptions of the TT audience, the processing efforts, the interpretative or descriptive use of language, and the communicative clues. Translators may not strive to achieve accurate equivalence or preserve the ST properties; rather, they should focus on the principle of optimal relevance for the least processing efforts.

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