

Contrastive Linguistics in Translation : its Validity and Application

HAROUNI Zahri
Université De Constantine

This paper attempts to show the relevance of contrastive linguistics to translation and particularly the relevance of the contrastive analyses carried out at the lexico-semantic and socio-cultural levels. Translation is therefore viewed here as a microlinguistic and macrolinguistic enterprise.

It is commonly known and very frequently observed that there are serious problems encountered by translators at various levels of linguistic description: phonological, syntactic, lexico-semantic, discourse and cultural levels. Significant misunderstandings and sometimes even a complete breakdown of communication or total misinterpretation of the message or discourse may result from the incorrect usage and inappropriate use of words and expressions and insufficient knowledge of the socio-cultural patterns of the languages involved, i.e., the source language or language translated from and the target language or language translated into or arrived at. Research in translation and interlanguage studies has shown that there are numerous sources of errors due to interference and intercultural transfer mainly because the belief in one-to-one correspondences between the source language and the target language still prevails particularly at the lexical level. It should be understood, here, that 'lexical' does not imply a stock or an inventory of isolated lexical items but rather refers to items in context, linguistic as well as situational and socio-cultural context. Knowledge not only of the words, but also as stated by J.R. Firth, "of the company that words keep", i.e., their co-occurrence possibilities or collocational distribution, is an essential part not only of linguistic competence but also of communicative competence. Yet, it is often precisely in that area that the translator as well as the very advanced language learner have the greatest difficulties certainly because of the lack of exposure to collocational and socio-cultural information in pedagogical material such as textbooks, dictionaries, especially bilingual and multilingual, and research projects of a comparative/contrastive nature. We believe that combinations of lexical items at sentence and discourse level, or words in context, find, as stated by many linguists, their full dimension only when they are considered contrastively, i.e., when both the source language and the target language are taken into consideration, compared and contrasted. Such comparisons and contrasts help the translator master not only the core meaning of words but also the associations of various kinds which words contract with other words at the syntagmatic and paradigmatic levels and particularly the meaning which derives from the human world of experience or extra-linguistic context. In other words, the translator must be aware of the characteristic co-occurrences of words in both the source and the target language

and distinguish the restricted combinations of words such as 'show value' or 'carry weight' (in the case of an object or of an argument for instance), 'run a business ' or 'run a system of payment' (manage , direct, control), 'come or jump to a conclusion', 'pay a visit' for 'visit', 'give a ring' or 'give a call' for 'phone', 'heavy drinker' or 'heavy smoker', 'light complexion', 'strong coffee' etc., from the non-characteristic or non-restricted co-occurrences or free-word combinations as is generally found in the language. The translator must also be able to identify typical relations between words as exemplified with 'kick' and 'foot', 'slam' and 'door', 'bark' and 'dog' etc. At the paradigmatic level, he must recognise the various shades of meaning or semantic 'nuances' or specificities between lexemes of the same semantic field as exemplified with the following series of synonyms or near-synonyms in Arabic: 'dja:ʔa', 'ʔata:', 'qadima' and 'ʔaqbala'

which all correspond to the English verb 'come' and with the following co-hyponyms, i.e., words from the same lexical sub-set as the English verbal lexemes 'cook', 'boil', 'fry', 'bake', 'roast', 'simmer' etc. and their corresponding items in the other languages. Such an awareness, i.e., the ability to recognize the existence of all the linguistic facts discussed or exemplified so far and the ability to perceive them and deal with them and with other language aspects which will be presented further in this paper is a fundamental requirement at the intralingual and interlingual levels since translation illustrates, par excellence, the situation where languages are in contact. And since this is so, it goes without saying that the above requirements are not limited to syntactic and semantic compatibilities between words at the intra-sentential level or within the sentence only but also include all questions of cohesion and coherence and appropriateness to the context, linguistic and situational as specified earlier, going therefore beyond the sentence and reaching discourse with all its linguistic and its socio-cultural norms and which constitutes the basic unit of translation. In other words, the translator must have linguistic capacities which enable him to convey the meaning of the source language piece of discourse by using expressions in the target language that are not only grammatical but also appropriate and native-like. The translator must be equipped with a linguistic and a communicative competence which will provide him with the necessary knowledge for selecting, as stated by Pawley and Syder (p.194) " a sentence that is natural and idiomatic from among the range of grammatically correct paraphrases, many of which are non-native like or highly marked usages ". In order to achieve native like control of the language, whatever the location of this language in the translation process, i.e., source or language of departure and target or language of arrival, it is necessary as specified again by Pawley and Syder (ibid.) " to learn a means for knowing which of the well-formed sentences are native-like, a way of distinguishing those usages that are normal or unmarked from those that are unnatural or highly marked" as exemplified with the following sentences respectively:

" I had four uncles " and " The brothers of my parents were four "

" I am so glad you could bring Harry " and " That Harry could be brought by
you makes me so glad " or " Your
having been able to bring Harry
makes me so glad " or again
" That you could bring Harry
gladdens me so "

Other productions characterized by a certain ‘unenglishness’ of expression are more significant in the sense that they contain frequent lexical mistakes which make them sound definitely unnatural and foreign as illustrated with the following combinations of lexical items: “this watch walks well” which is a direct transfer from languages such as Arabic or French into English which selects “this watch works well” or “this watch runs well”. Such occurrences which are rather culture-specific are illustrated by what Szule (cited in Waldemar, 1977, p.40) calls ‘conventional syntagms’ or ‘conventional syntagmatic word groupings’ which represent ways of saying things and which vary from language to language as well as from culture to culture. A similar example has been recorded by Waldemar (ibid., p.41) who says that “a suit ‘fits’ you well in English, but it ‘lies’ on you well in Polish and it ‘sits’ on you well in German and Russian.” This shows that native-like language selection is not a matter of syntactic rules alone, but it also includes conventions, institutionalizations, in brief, what we call socially and culturally acquired knowledge. Pawley and Syder (p.198) wonder, for instance, why English time telling is rendered as follows: “it’s twenty to six” since we can also say, no less grammatically “it’s six less twenty” or “it’s forty past five” or “it’s ten minutes after half past five” etc. This is also true in many other languages and dialectal varieties within the same language and shows, once again, that discourse is a matter of conventions, of norms and cultural behaviours, of beliefs and ways of communication. Therefore, the analysis of lexis or lexical relations in discourse, whatever the register, perhaps more significantly than the analysis of

other areas of language structure involves matters of meaning which is, as specified earlier, context and culture based and failing to take this into account will result in complete misunderstandings and mistranslations as in the following case where a translator made a formal and semantic association between the source language item 'parentérale' and the target language item 'parental' when converting a scientific text from French into English writing "oral or parental administration of the drug" for "l'administration orale ou parentérale du médicament" (JAM, vol.7, no.4, juillet-août 97). Mistakes of this kind and others such as the selection in the translated piece of discourse of 'able' instead of 'unable', 'known as' instead of 'labelled as', "consult" instead of 'treat' etc., are numerous and vary in importance leading sometimes to total confusion as illustrated with the above cases.

Another example of lexical confusion but of a different kind and from a different register is found in the following pairs: 'liberty of expression' and 'liberty of speech' which should be 'freedom of expression' and 'freedom of speech', the latter being more natural or ordinary, reflecting idiomatic usage, i.e., likely to be preferred by native speakers whereas the former illustrate what is generally called 'foreignisms'. The example of G. Mounin "he crossed the river by swimming" is also illustrative in the sense that it is a literal translation of the French sentence "il traversa la rivière à la nage" and therefore it is less natural than "he swam across the river" which reflects idiomaticity in English. G. Mounin (1977) wonders whether the English sentence is more concrete than the French one just because in English the concrete action is expressed by the verb while in French it is expressed by the complement of manner. He gives a further example in "he gazed out of the open door into the garden" and its French version "il a regardé dans le jardin par la porte ouverte" and points out that "Le génie de la langue anglaise et la mentalité anglo-saxonne manifestent leur préférence pour le concret en ce que la phrase suit l'ordre des images, puisque le regard a traversé la porte avant d'aboutir au jardin." (Linguistique et traduction, p.54). It should be specified here that expressing action through such combinatorial means or collocational devices such as verb + particle is very common in English, especially with verbs of motion, compared to other languages such as French or Arabic which use other lexicalization patterns. For instance, Arabic, a derivationally rich language, is characterized by an abundance of what Emery (1988) calls 'bound collocations', i.e. collocations obtained through various morphological patterns. We need not go any further into all the different procedures used for categorizing the same world which, as illustrated in the foregoing discussion, are sources of intercultural and linguistic transfer in translation resulting in lack of idiomaticity.

Suffice it to say, as G. Mounin (op. cit., p. 62) states: "dans le passage d'une langue à une autre, en fait, tout n'est presque toujours qu'idiomatismes. Ceci explique que le passage d'une langue à une autre dans la traduction n'est pas un passage immédiat d'un mot à un autre mot. Il faut chaque fois repasser par le

CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTICS IN TRANSLATION

découpage de la réalité propre à chaque langue. Ceci explique aussi qu'apprendre une langue signifie deux choses: apprendre les structures et les mots de cette langue, mais aussi apprendre la relation qu'il y a entre structures et mots et la réalité non linguistique, la civilisation, la culture de cette langue." All these aspects, i.e., the linguistic and cultural differences as well as the overlappings can be obtained through a systematic contrastive analysis of the languages under concern. Using the same methodological framework and drawing on the results of semantic studies in linguistics, discourse analysis and other macrolinguistic branches as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, such research projects are feasible. For instance, the semantic field approach, the lexical decomposition approach or componential analysis together with the selection-restrictions of transformational generative grammar, case relationships and valency will provide possible theoretical frameworks for contrastive lexico-semantic studies for translation purposes. The criteria for selection of the lexical and socio-cultural aspects to be compared and contrasted are based on various considerations such as the frequency of given items and combinations of items in each type of discourse, the productivity of certain patterns, their importance as a source of difficulty, the importance of the register itself for the community in question together with the needs of such a community such as knowledge of a specific scientific vocabulary, awareness of the linguistic and pragmatic features involved in a scientific encounter etc. Such contrastive analyses carried out at the macrolinguistic level will certainly contribute to designing reference and pedagogical material for the translator and will provide him with the necessary tools in the sense that he will be better equipped for his task.

In conclusion, we give the following extracts from G. Mounin (*ibid.*, p. 86): " la linguistique offre aux traducteurs des instruments plus rigoureux et plus fins pour analyser les difficultés qu'ils rencontrent. L'ambition de la linguistique, à l'égard des traducteurs, est moins de les former que de les informer, moins de leur enseigner leur art, ou de transformer cet art en une science infaillible, que de leur fournir sur les phénomènes du langage une culture générale plus large et plus complète qui les éclaire."

-Phonetic identification of transliterated consonants and vowel used in the Arabic examples:

- dj voiced affricate
- q voiceless uvular fricative
- ? glottal stop
- a: long vowel

-REFERENCES

1. Aisenstadt, E. " Collocability Restrictions in Dictionaries",
In Hartmann, R.R.K. (ed.), *Dictionaries and
their Users*, University of Exeter, 1979,
pp. 71-74
2. Dimitrijevic, N.R "Problems and Implications of Contrastive
Analysis of Vocabulary and Culture" in
Gerhard Nickel (ed.), *Contrastive Linguistics*,
Stuttgart, 1978, pp. 31-48
3. Emery, P.G. "Collocation: A Problem in Arabic-English
Translation ", *Quinquereme*, Vol. 11, no. 2,
1988, pp. 178-184
4. Firth, J.R. *Papers in Linguistics*, Oxford University
Press, 1957
5. Hartmann, R.R.K. " Contrastive Lexicology " *Eric report*,
paper presented at the Annual General Meeting
of BAAL, 1973
6. Mounin, G. *Linguistique et traduction*, Dessart et
Mardaga, Belgium, 1976
7. Pawley, A. and Hodgetts Syder F. *Two Puzzles for
Linguistic Theory : Native like Selection
and Native like Fluency*, pp. 191-226
8. Waldemar, Marton " Foreign Vocabulary Learning as
Problem no. 1 of Language Teaching at the
Advanced Level ", *ISB*, no. 2, 1977,
pp. 33-57
9. JAM (Journal Algérien de Médecine), vol. 7, no.4, juillet-
aout, 1997