Linguistics and the Study of Translation with English-Igbo Illustration

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Abstract

The relationship between linguistics and translation is such that there can be no translation without linguistics. This assertion provides an acceptable justification for this paper, the objective of which is to explicate how a translator can appropriate the knowledge of linguistics for unambiguous translation and be able to link two linguistic aliens in every social event. The study is anchored on three theoretical frameworks: The Contextual Theory of Meaning, The Theory of Interpretative Translation and The Theory of Dynamic Equivalence. The first theory captures the impact of context on meaning. The second places a high premium on contextualized source message interpretation and deverbialization. The central thrust of the last is that the interpretation of a given source message in L_2 codes produces the same perlocutionary effects which it produces when rendered in L_1 codes. The sampled source and translated messages in this study rendered in the English and Igbo languages, respectively, show that translation originates from autonomous linguistics to stand as a professional sub-field of instrumental linguistics. This major finding of the study makes the knowledge of autonomous linguistics imperative for every translator.

Keywords: Linguistics, Translation, Linguistic context, Non-linguistic context, Dynamic equivalence

Introduction

Translation is inevitable in every bilingual and multi-lingual society. In Nigeria, for instance, it is almost always necessary due to the nation's ethno-linguistic plurality. Given the fact that there are at least 250 ethno-linguistic communities in Nigeria as noted by Adeyanju (2004), it is indisputable that the need for translation would almost always arise. The need for translation would also arise because of the indispensability of inter-ethnic communication.

In as much as some Nigerians are polyglots, or bilinguals at least, the fact remains that there are undeniable social and other situations that bring together Nigerians who mutually isolate one another in linguistic terms but still need to interact. Such situations necessitate translation. For example, an educated Igbo business magnet who needs to acquire some acres of land from an uneducated Yoruba landlord certainly requires a middleman. This middleman known as an interpreter must be a proficient speaker of Yoruba and any one of English and Igbo, else, he cannot serve as an effective link between the business magnet and the landlord.

To effectively play the role of an interpreter, a middleman, consciously or unconsciously, exploit the knowledge of linguistics. Hence, it is incontrovertible that linguistics occupies an indispensable place in translation. The relationship between linguistics and translation is such that there can be no translation without linguistics. This assertion provides an acceptable justification for this paper, whose objective is to explicate how an interpreter or translator can appropriate the knowledge of linguistics for unambiguous translation, and so, be able to link two linguistic aliens in every social and other kinds of event. The next

section of the paper proceeds to provide operational conceptualization for the key terms that constitute its subject matter.

Conceptual Clarifications

The two key terms that require clarification in this study are 'linguistics' and 'translation'. Basically, **linguistics** refers to the scientific study of language. To scientifically study a language is to learn and master the use of its language-specific and language-universal features in both speech and writing, that is, to achieve proficiency in the use of a language as appropriate to every other person who speaks it. Following Halliday (1978), linguistics may be autonomous or instrumental. In other words, there are autonomous and instrumental linguistics. By autonomous linguistics, we mean the sub-fields of linguistics that strictly objectify effective communication skills. On the other hand, instrumental linguistics is synonymous with applied linguistics and it encompasses every linguistics sub-field whose goals go beyond effective communication to include the facilitation of knowledge acquisition in other fields of study. For instance, syntax and semantics are autonomous branches of linguistics, while stylistics and discourse analysis are instrumental linguistics.

In the light of the forgoing, it is clear that the knowledge of autonomous linguistics is a pre-requisite to that of instrumental linguistics. It also follows from the foregoing that, more often than not, one relies on both linguistics taxonomies for meaningful pragmatic life, especially as regards professional practice. This deduction is valid in view of the maxims that there is no end to learning and that man requires bits and bits of every branch of knowledge to live a meaningful life, that is, no knowledge is a waste.

Consequently, the study of translation demands in-depth knowledge of autonomous linguistics in connection with both the source (L_1) and target (L_2) languages. Hence, a translator's knowledge of either language by means of contrastive analysis sharply illumines his knowledge of the other. This observation identifies translation to be an aspect of instrumental linguistics and sheds light on its conceptualization. See Newmark (1981) and Kwofie (1999).

Translation, therefore, refers to equivalent meaning realization in an L_2 as encoded in an L_1. It entails a reasonable decoding of L_1 expressions in L_2 codes. Equivalent meaning realization is here construed to refer to approximate, precise and pragmatic meaning derivations. This definition rhymes with Teinlayo's (2004) illustrative exposition on the subject matter from literary and international socio-political perspectives. The definition also mirrors that of Skinner (1974) who asserts that translation can best be defined as verbal stimuli that have the same effects as the original on a different verbal community.

An Overview of Some Linguistic and Translation Theories

The purpose of this section is to concisely review a few major linguistic and translation theories. The overview is intended to confirm the assertion in the last section that linguistics is the backbone of translation.

For reason of spatial configuration, only one linguistic theory is reviewed here. The theory, however, very aptly depicts the interconnections between linguistics and translation, and consequently, alerts the translator on his constant need for linguistic knowledge. Because the paper is essentially about the study of translation, this overview features two major theories of translation.

The linguistic theory which readily satisfies the objectives of this section is taken from Semantics: The Contextual Theory of Meaning. The contextual theory of meaning is reputed to be the most reliable among other semantic theories such as the inferential, conceptual, componential and definitions theories of meaning.

The contextual theory of meaning is first credited to Malinowski (1923), an anthropologist, and subsequently to Firth (1957), a linguist. The former conceptualizes meaning to be a function of two contextual variables: the contexts of culture and situation. To the latter, meaning is a complex of contextual relations appropriate to all levels of linguistic description. He identifies these contextual relations to subsist among three variables:

(a) The participants: persons and personalities
(b) The actions of the participants: verbal and non-verbal actions.
(c) The effects of the verbal actions, equivalent to the perlocutionary effects of J.L. Austin's (1962) speech act theory.

Relying on the notions of contextual impact on meaning, linguists have delineated two broad varieties of context: linguistic and non-linguistic contexts. The former derives from Firth's second contextual variable above, while the latter embeds Malinowski's contexts of situations and culture. See Saeed (2003), Palmer (1981) and Alo (2004). The import of the foregoing is that a translator, irrespective of the translation theory that anchors his interpretations, must not restrict these interpretations to mere literal or denotative meanings. Cf. Bariki (2002). Another implication of the contextual theory of meaning is that a translator should and must possess sound knowledge of semantics and pragmatics, because the theory cuts across both sub-fields of linguistics.

Equipped with semantic, pragmatic and other forms of linguistic knowledge, a translator should then make a suitable choice of translation theory to use as an assessment for the translation. There are several such theories available to him or her: the theories of communicative translation, interpretative translation, dynamic equivalence and pragmatic translation. A translator's choice of any of these theories is largely determined by the sub-field of translation in focus: intralingual, intersemiotic and interlingual translation. This taxonomy of translation is in line with Roman Jacobson's classification as cited by Bariki (2002).

Intralingual translation entails rewording: it is the interpretation of linguistic signs within the same language. Intersemiotic translation deals with the interpretation of linguistic signs by means of non-linguistic signs: the transcription of verbal messages into sign language or paralinguistics. Interlingual translation refers to the interpretation of linguistic signs from one language to another, that is, translation per excellence. Jacobson's notion of interlingual translation captures the understanding of translation in this paper, and so, determines the translation theory that drives the practical demonstration in the next section.

Every translation theory identified above is capable of yielding target interpretations and can overlap another. Hence, as already stated, the use of a particular one depends on a translator's choice. The theories of interpretative translation and dynamic equivalence appear to be the most authoritative of all the translation theories identified in this study. This observation is valid because according to Bariki (2002) both theories guarantee the translation of both the illocutionary act and perlocutionary effect of given texts or utterances. In other words, the two theories affirm the essential role of pragmatics (context) in the study of translation in connection with J .L. Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory. For this reason, both theories are reviewed in this study to ensure that no translator leaves out the contextual components of source messages.

The theory of interpretative translation was formulated by the teachers at Early Support for Infant and Toddlers (ESIT), Paris. It places a high premium on contextualized source message interpretation as well as deverbialization. Deverbialization means L2 rendition of a source message in terms of its semantic equivalence as opposed to the use of its corresponding lexical synonyms. That is, the theory does not insist on word by word transcription of the source message into the L_2. See Bariki (2002).

The theory of dynamic equivalence is the brainchild of Nida (1964). The central thrust of the theory is that the interpretation of a given source message in L_2 codes should and must produce the same perlocutionary effects it produces when rendered in L_1 codes. Hence, the theory lays emphasis on equivalent effect. Consequently, a translated message is acceptable whether or not it is deverbalized in so far as it yields an effect equivalent to that of the corresponding source message. See Bariki (ibid). Observe that both theories advance contextualized interpretation of such messages.

Translation as Applied Linguistics

The objective of this section is to demonstrate the translation theories reviewed above. By this objective, it shall be established in the paper that translation is linguistics applied for specific practical purposes. For the purpose of the demonstration, English is the L_1 while Igbo is the L_2. The source message is a friend-to-friend conversation taken from Bariki (2002). It is appropriated to concurrently illustrate the validity of both the theory of interpretative translation and that of dynamic equivalence. The conversation goes as cited below:

Friend A: *Holding and sipping a cup of tea with the left hand*.
Friend B[1]: I love your left hand.

Friend A: *In reaction to friend B's statement, transfers the cup of tea to the right hand.*
Friend B[2]: I love your right hand.
Friend A: *To his sister:* My friend wants tea.

The translated message or L_2 rendition of the same conversation is presented below:

Friend A: *Ji nwayo aṉu iko tii o bu n'aka ekpe ya.*
Friend B[1]: *Aka ekpe gi a maka.*

Friend A: *Bughari ri iko tii na−aka nri*
Friend B[2]: *Aka nri gi a maka.*

Friend A:
Gwa nwanneya nwannyi : biko mere o yi nwoke tii ya.

       A critical look at the translated message clearly shows that it is deverbialized in line with the theory of interpretative translation. In other words, the L_2 message does not reflect word-by-word interpretation. In line with the theory of dynamic equivalence, the L_2 message produces the exact perlocutionary effect reflected in the source message: serving Friend B a cup of tea on the orders of Friend A. This perlocutionary effect is certainly the contextual connotation or conversational implicature of Friend B's utterances to Friend A and is in tandem with both theories going by the explication in the last section before this. The translated message above is not a word-by-word interpretation. It is not, because friend B's statements 1 and 2 literally translate to: Your hand is good. This literal translation is surely not the same with the source message equivalence: I love your hand; but it still produces the same effect as the latter. It produces the same effect, because it is not literally but idiomatically understood in Igbo, and so understood, it translates to an indirect expression of desire for what the hand holds.

       This source message if rendered literally in Igbo reads: A furu m aka gi n'anya; which is obviously a meaningless expression in the Igbo language. This is so, because in the language the verb 'to love' does not collocate in any form with a body part just as it does not collocate with non-human (inanimate) entities. It rather collocates with human beings: man, woman, boy or girl.

       The ability of a translator to unambiguously translate the source message for this demonstration into L_2 such that the message is understood, even when L_2 wording largely differs from that of L_1 is doubtlessly a reflection of linguistics in action. In this particular instance, the translator has demonstrated sound knowledge of English as well as Igbo pragmatics and semantics, both of which are subfields of autonomous linguistics.

Conclusion

This paper has, in very clear terms, shown that a translator or an interpreter relies on the knowledge of linguistics to achieve unambiguous translation. As evident in the last section before this, proficiency in translation is a direct function of knowledge of autonomous linguistics, especially pragmatics and semantics, as well as socio-linguistics, if we concur with Newmark (1981). Apparently, this deduction makes translation a sub-field of autonomous linguistics. However, if as in the opinion of this paper, translation is seen as an independent professional field of study, it is certainly a subfield of instrumental or applied linguistics which has its roots in autonomous linguistics like every other subfield of instrumental linguistics.

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