

Culture and its influence on interpretation with special reference to Arabic and English

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ABSTRACT

The socio-semiotic or cultural approach is recognized as one of the most important approaches to interpretation which means that interpretation goes beyond mere correspondences to cultural presuppositions and value systems which create a different world picture specific to every culture and not only restricted to the meanings of sounds, words, grammar and rhetoric (Nida, 1985:121). The different problematic areas in interpretation that occurred due to some cultural differences in to which the two languages belong is the main focus of the current paper.

1. Introduction

Globalization enters a world in which people of different cultural backgrounds increasingly come to depend on one another (Chen, 2010). Intercultural communication has become more and more frequent. A person who has a good command of knowledge and is able to communicate with people from different countries is the great need of the society. Therefore, cultivating interpreters' intercultural awareness has been paid more attention to, because intercultural awareness is the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence that refers to the understanding of cultural conventions that affect how we think and behave (Chen, 2010).

This paper explores the impact that cultural factors can have on interpretation in intercultural interactions. Of course, all interactions that involve interpreters are

inevitably intercultural interactions, but many intercultural interactions can (and very frequently do) take place without the involvement of interpreters.

Interpretation is one of those kinds of language communication processes which aim at transforming one language form to another through oral expression, one of the primary communication manners among the exchanges between different nations with dissimilar cultures (Zhao, 2003). It can be obviously seen during the process of interpretation that interpretation involves a lot of difficulties and challenges. While interpreting, the interpreters have to listen to the source speech, analyze the message and reconstruct it in the target language on the spot. Within the interpretation process, interpreters are not able to consult dictionaries or any other reference documents while interpreting the speeches. So, interpreters must be highly qualified, in order to achieve successful interpretation. Generally, a professional interpreter is required to have a high level of linguistic proficiency, a strong sense of duty, wide encyclopedic knowledge and a good mastery of interpretation skills (Xu, 2006).

To conclude, the cultural differences while doing interpretation must be highly taken into account and must be paid more attention. The interpreters need to find a common point of similarity between the native culture and the foreign culture and make a proper adjustment according to the occasion to achieve an effective communication. Interpretation as an intercultural communication bridge requires the interpreters to master exquisite language techniques, as well

as rich and generous knowledge of different culture backgrounds.

What is Culture?:

Culture is the representation of our nature in our way of living and thinking. It is obviously seen in our literature, in our religious practices, in recreation and enjoyment. Culture has two main and distinctive components, namely, material and non-material. Material culture consists of objects that are related to the material aspect of our life such as our dress, food, and household goods. The type of culture that refers to ideas, ideas, thoughts and beliefs is known as Non-material.

The concept of culture is different for different scholars and it has many definitions that affect everything people do in their society because of their ideas, values, attitudes, and normative or expected patterns of behavior. Culture is not genetically inherited, and cannot exist on its own, but is always shared by members of a society (Hall 1976, p. 16).

The fabric of society operates and becomes visible through our use of language. This fabric includes the social context of language use which naturally presupposes the existence of a particular society. Society has implicit and explicit values, norms and laws, and with all its particular conditions of life: economic, social, political and cultural (cf Davis 1977: 21- 57).

Hofstede (1980, pp. 21-23) defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another”, which is passed from generation to generation, it is changing all the time because each generation adds something of its own before passing it on. It is usual that one’s culture is taken for granted and assumed to be correct because it is the only one, or at least the first, to be learned.

Culture is defined as the way of life and its manifestations, which are unique to a society that uses a particular language as a means of expression (Newmark, 1988:94).

Culture may be defined as a set of beliefs, which governs the behavior patterns of a society. These beliefs include religion, economy, politics, literature and language. Thus, language is an integral part of culture, and interpretation involves two cultures, the culture of the source language(source culture) and the culture of the target language(target culture)(Aziz and Muftah, 2000:85).

Major Cultural Problems of interpretation :

Since interpretation is a process of constant search for the transfer of a message from the Source Language (SL) into the Target Language (TL), it is often beset by many problems and difficulties that may be a result of the differences in both languages or differences in the cultures represented by them. Among the linguistic problems touched upon in this paper are some of the semantic and stylistic problems that face any translator of any text. There is also an attempt to shed light on some cultural problems that may be more likely to be encountered and more dangerous. Cross-cultural interpretation includes many problematic areas. This is true of interpretation between English, which represents part of the western culture, and Arabic, which belongs to the oriental culture.

2.1 Geographical Culture:

When the two cultures involved in interpretation may have different backgrounds related to some topics like animals, plants and climate. Arabic speaking person may be said to inhabit States generally characterized by a hot and dry climate like Iraq, Syria, North Africa etc, whereas the culture of Western Europe is cold and wet. Within these two cultural frameworks, the different geographical terms will acquire different shades of meaning for the people using them.

2.2 Religious Culture:

Religion has deep roots in many different cultures and is revealed in how people speak and behave for example “Islamic beliefs which are connected with every aspect of Muslim social

culture even proper names. "Mohammed" and "Abdullah" are common names in Islamic culture because they have religious significance. Many of the Muslims choose their children's names from the Quran, names of prophets, compound variations of -14a "slave", "servant" and the names of "God" or religious occasions. Parents believe that these names will bless their children. So, Arab societies are more conventional and traditional in using proper names than Western societies. It is difficult for the target language reader to understand the religious dimensions related to such proper names. Traditional proper names may also be a good indicator of social and cultural background. For instance, urban communities have a greater tendency to use new names than rural communities. Sometimes, it may be appropriate to have a footnote in the interpretation to explain the related social and cultural aspects or religious dimensions of proper nouns. Therefore, some communities are more religion conscious than others. In general, the impact of religion is stronger and more obvious in the East than it is the West.

2.3 Social Culture:

A number of problems are raised due to social ideologies. These include the attitudes of various societies toward love, marriage and the concept of decency. Social and historical terms denoting territorial administrative units or divisions; departments, professions, titles, ranks, greetings and treatments, institutions, patriotic and religious organizations. This type of culture represents a set of beliefs, customs, practices and behavior that exists within a population. Social culture factors are customs, lifestyles and values that characterize a society. Some examples are religion, attitudes, economic status, class, language, politics and law. These factors can affect quality of life, business and health

2.4 Material culture

Material culture contains the objects or belongings of human beings. It includes a wide range of physical items. Anything you can see, feel or touch that is non human is considered to

be an item of material culture. Architecture, artwork, documents, photographs, gardens, a can of soda or the electronic device you are using to read this lesson are all examples. Some socio linguists argue that entire cities and the surrounding geography are elements of material culture. Human motion, such as dance, may be described as material culture in that it has shape and a physical form.

A full understanding of the physical objects of a culture gives us a better chance to appreciate the complex lives of the people who interacted with those objects. Material culture gives us insight into nonmaterial culture, which includes the ideas, beliefs, habits and values of a people. While an object commences as simply a physical item, over time it acquires some nonmaterial and symbolic aspects of a culture. For some, a can of alcohol may be considered as a kind of illegal drinks that leads people to commit offenses and such belief is mostly found within the Arabic culture, while for others, it may be viewed as a fun and pleasurable drink. "Food is for many the most sensitive and important expression of national culture; food terms are subject to the widest variety of interpretation procedures" (Newmark, 1988:97). The terms coming under this category are further complicated due to the "foreign" elements present.

2.5 Linguistic Culture:

How do the external world is viewed in the people's minds and what differences they composed between its various parts that are seen in their language: some linguists draw a distinction among three basic language functions. These basic functions are interpersonal, ideational and textual. They are realized differently in different languages. At the ideational function, for example, English recognizes two terms as far as the number system is concerned: the singular which means(one) and the plural which means(more than one) whereas Arabic distinguishes three terms: singular which means(one), dual which means(two) and plural which means(more than two).

Definition of interpretation :

Interpretation is simply defined according to Jones (2002, p. 3), as “immediate

oral interpretation “However, he is in the idea that such a definition does not give the best idea of what interpretation is really about. Interpretation is about communication. Linguistic barriers are not the only difficulty that an interpreter has to overcome. Cultural difficulties, as Jones describes, “can manifest themselves both explicitly and implicitly.” Explicit manifestations would contain having to interpret a cultural reference that has no direct equivalent in the target language, while implicit manifestations would mean having to understand the intention of the speaker and what is hidden behind the words, such as in the case of irony. Jones (Ibid, p.4) therefore describes the interpreter’s work as “being one of continuous explanation and explication.”

On the other hand, interpretation is defined by Pochhacker (2004, p. 11), as “a form of interpretation in which a first and a final rendition in another language is produced on the basis of a one-time presentation of an utterance in a source language.”

Pochhacker’s definition focuses on immediacy rather than the dichotomy of oral vs. written as a feature that distinguishes interpretation from other types of interpretation .

2.3 Types of Interpretation

Interpretation is categorized into three major types based on the environment in which interpretation is taking place: conference interpretation , court interpretation and community interpretation . It is also divided into two main types based on the way of interpretation which is either simultaneous or consecutive.

2.3.1 Conference Interpretation

Phelan (2001, p. 6), defined conference interpretation “conference interpretation is the most prestigious form of interpretation and the

most financially rewarding.” To Phelan, conference interpretation talks about the two main modes of interpretation : simultaneous and consecutive interpretation .

2.3.1.1 Simultaneous Interpretation

Simultaneous interpretation is described according to Seleskovitch (1978) as follows:

In simultaneous interpretation the interpreter is put on a booth in isolation. He speaks at the same time as the speaker and therefore has no need to remember or omit down what is said. Furthermore, the processes of analysis-comprehension and of reconstruction-expression will be limited. The interpreter works on the message word by word, giving the part of the speech he has understood while analyzing and understanding the next idea. (p. 125). Seleskovitch’s description illustrates how simultaneous interpretation is a multi task assignment that requires a high level of concentration. That is the reason why, Phelan (2001, p. 9) emphasizes that, nowadays interpreters are not able to interpret for more than fifteen minutes although in the past it was not unusual for interpreters to interpret for thirty minutes.

Simultaneous interpretation is used in different occasions and situations such as sight interpretation , telephone interpretation , sign language interpretation , television interpretation and whispered interpretation .

Sight Interpretation

In certain situations, interpreters are asked to read and translate documents aloud. Sight interpretation is known as a special type of simultaneous interpretation because the interpreter reads the document and immediately translates it at the same time of speech.

Telephone Interpretation

Telephone interpretation is a liaison interpretation done over the phone. It occurs in certain situations such as in community interpretation and in business meetings

especially in emergency situations and for first contacts. This type of interpretation is available in many languages at any time and from anywhere.

Sign Language Interpretation

The language used by deaf people is known as Sign language. Unlike in the past, sign language is now recognized as a language in its own right that uses hands and body gestures. It even has different dialects. Deaf people do not understand the original speech of any language. Interpreters provide this type of interpretation simultaneously to help deaf people understand the speech. In this type of interpretation, the interpreter is visible to the audience.

Television Interpretation

Television interpretation is common in Europe where simultaneous interpretation is provided for foreign guests appearing on television programs. The interpreter sets in a fully equipped booth where he or she can see the speakers. The interpreter must sound as confident as the TV presenter. In this particular type of interpretation, the convention is that male interpreters interpret male speakers and female interpreters interpret female speakers.

Whispered Interpretation

Whispered interpretation can be also referred to as chuchotage. This type of interpretation occurs in sittings where one or two people do not understand the source language. The interpreters in such settings render the interpretation to the listener or listeners simultaneously and in a very low voice.

2.3.1.2 Consecutive Interpretation Seleskovitch (1978) describes consecutive interpretation as follows:

In consecutive interpretation the interpreter does not start speaking until the original speaker has stopped. He therefore has time to analyze the message as a whole, which makes it easier for him to understand its meaning. The fact that he is there in the room, and that the speaker has stopped talking before he begins, means that he

speaks to his listeners face to face and he actually becomes the speaker. (p. 123).

Consecutive interpretation therefore is time consuming. It takes almost double the time needed for simultaneous interpretation. This is one of the reasons why simultaneous interpretation nowadays is widespread while consecutive interpretation is limited to certain situations where simultaneous interpretation equipments are not available.

Note-taking is a central element that distinguishes consecutive interpretation from simultaneous. In consecutive interpretation the interpreter takes notes while listening to the speaker. There is no one exact technique for note-taking. Interpreters may develop their own symbols or techniques. In order to save time and effort, most interpreters take their notes in the target language rather than the source language.

Unlike the simultaneous interpreter, the consecutive interpreter will be sitting next to the speaker and not in a booth. This is considered to be an advantage of consecutive interpretation because the interpreter will be able to ask the speaker about any unclear information and about what exactly was meant by a certain segment. One of the settings that requires consecutive interpretation is liaison interpretation.

Liaison Interpretation

Liaison interpretation is also sometimes referred to as bilateral interpretation or ad hoc interpretation. This type of interpretation is used in informal situations and especially in community interpretation where interpreters interpret for two or more people. Liaison interpreters are very visible and they are usually controlling the situation. They can control how much speakers say and when to speak or even to stop. They can also ask the speakers to speak up or to explain any unclear information.

2.3.2 Court Interpretation

Interpretation is used in courts when any of the people involved in a case do not understand or speak the language. In court interpretation in

particular, accuracy is a very important issue because so much depends on what the different parties say. In addition, every thing that is said will be documented in the court records.

Court interpreters use consecutive interpretation to interpret questions and answers and they may need to take notes if the statements are long. They also use whispered simultaneous interpretation to interpret the whole testimony for the defendants. Sight interpretation may also be used in courts when interpreters are asked to translate any documents that relate to the case.

2.3.3 Community Interpretation

In the recent years, there has been an increasing interest in community interpretation as a new evolving type of interpretation. Community interpretation is used for people who are not fluent speakers of the language of the country they live in. This type of interpretation enables them to communicate with public service providers and gives them access to all different kinds of services such as medical, educational, governmental, and social services.

Community interpretation is referred to by many different terms. Some like to call it public service interpretation, while others like to refer to it as community based interpretation, ad hoc interpretation, contact interpretation or even - is done face to face. Depending on the situation, community interpreters are required to provide whispered, consecutive, or simultaneous interpretation. They are often asked to provide sight interpretation of short texts or documents. People involved in the communication process should be trained how to deal with the interpreters in order to achieve the highest level of understanding. Community interpreters, on the other hand, are encouraged to remind the two parties involved in the communication, to address each other directly rather than addressing the interpreter.

Medical interpretation is a main type of community interpretation which is provided for

patients who do not understand the language of their care givers. In medical interpretation, interpreters use a combination of simultaneous and consecutive modes of interpretation. They may also use sight interpretation to translate medical prescriptions or instructions.

5. Interpretation and Culture:

By virtue of cultural specificity cultural presuppositions and value system create a mental set characteristic of each culture and it is expected that various mental sets overlap between one language and another, but they rarely match exactly. These mental sets as reflected by language look like some invisible borderlines drawn across the world image, which does not largely differ among and between languages.

To clarify the idea of the differences between these various cultural mental sets, we can take a clear example from the western world which regard dragons as symbols of dire danger and as such they fit in the Book of Revelation which harbours several terrible creatures besides the dragons while the dragon is normally regarded as a symbol of good luck in the Orient.

There are several events recorded in a text may have quite different meanings as well because of different cultural values. For instance, among the Muslims the story of Ibrahim and Ishmael is regarded as one of the most significant proofs of the grace of God while less significance is attached to this story in the western world. Also kings of Israel are considered prophets in the Holy Qur'an and Solomon in particular is almost mythified while in the Old Testament they are all represented as historical figures. This impression of the Muslims, therefore, differs from that of the western man of those figures since each culture is influenced by a different prototype. A sociosemiotic approach to interpretation has led to some problems of meaning and ambiguities since the cognitive structure or rather the mapping of the cognitive structure as reflected in words does not match among cultures. Among these problems are the distinction between the designative and the

associative meanings (which paralleled to some extent, the distinction between denotation and connotation) and the metaphoric representation (Nida, 1985:21-3).

The above mentioned aspect becomes clear in the representation of colours in different cultures. The word (black) for instance, is a term of abuse or insult in several white cultures while the designative meaning of the same word in a white culture does not contain or suggest any pejorative shock. The term of insult is another example, "you cow" does not mean anything pejorative in an Indian culture nor does "a mouse" in China mean any passive connotation. On the other hand, designatively both "cows" and "mice" can be used neutrally in all cultures (Dulf, 1984:11-2).

Related to this problem is that of cultural relativity of peacocks, pandas, camels kangaroos, and penguins are representatives of India China, Arabia, Australia and Eskimos equally as representatives of their respective species. Snow regions as contrasted to desert regions have created different metaphors relating snow in the former and heart in the latter to boon and pleasant things. Different parts of the body are given different weights of significance in different cultures thus affecting not only the aesthetic standards but the metaphors attached to these standards.

Also, it is often broadly admitted that since language is an embodiment of an underlying human common experience which the thesis of linguistic universals implies the translator's job is to actualize this presupposition whatever the peculiarities of the language he is dealing with.

A narrow consideration of the concerned languages, however, shows that the above assumption is not quite adequate because it aims at universalization of usage while ignoring at the same time cultural variations. Ecology, it is my impression, does not homogenize but it rather determines linguistic variance across cultures. First let's assume that an Arab native speaker receives good news and that he must formulate

his psychological enjoyment into a sentence. He will literary say:

"This news freezes my chest"

A statement which, to say the least, will seem particularly bizarre to his English interlocutor. The reason for this unusual wording of the experience of the Arab can only be explained with reference to the ecological conditions of the Arabian Desert which structure and explain his repertoire of metaphoric images.

Needless to say, that the translator handles such a culturally- bound expression with the idea of giving it back into English. He certainly does not need to be weather specialist to find the appropriate corresponding expression. The Arab item is cold oriented whereas the English item is hot- oriented, each of them responding respectively to his environment conditions. Moreover, this item shows a difference in terms of the symbolic representation of affectivity which is represented by the physical organ "chest" for the Arab and by "the heart" for the English.

Culture- bound expressions explicitly spot light the cultural relativity and prove that the Linguistic Universal Theory does not comprehensively hold in time and place.

Let's take some local examples, Satan the crow, the Magi and the Jew. Different cultures harbour different systems of beliefs what is held sacred for an Indian can only be viewed with horror or disrespect for an Arab. Satan is worshipped by the Yezidiz while damned by Muslims. In reviewing the folklore of the Middle East nations two phenomena stand out. The first is the hostility between the Arabs and Persians; the second is hatred between Jews and Muslims. The first discord is national and racial while the second one is principally religious and historio-political.

For many Muslims, the term "Jew" is a term of insult. It is a synonym of niggardly, miser, mean and lousy, while the term "magus" stands for passive association. Whether derived from

the Arabian Nights or some other sources, this stereo-typical example betrays cultured bias and as such cultural relativism. A cow to a North African is an animal of boon on good omen while an owl is a bird of bad omen to most nations. It is not the bird by any characteristic ominous but rather human bias which associates this bird to deserted and directed places. Being a night bird...the associative meaning thus single out certain entities as being positives or passively. When these entities, say animals, and colours, are used in a text like Chinese, Indian, Russian, Arab or English they definitely cannot show their positivism or passivism. "Black" certainly is a benign colour for African Negroes thus affecting not only language but the aesthetic sense (cf Nida, 1985:123).

6. Conclusion:

All in all, these cultural aspects have their great relevance to interpretation and it seems that cultural equivalence when lacking can very likely block the process of interpretation. One method to solve this problem is to provide an explanation and place it in the footnote for making clear this aspect to the readers. Another method is to expand cultural awareness of both translators and readers through an over-expanding cognitive mapping and wider- world view so as to understand such differences in the TL in their SL meaning potential and connotation without affecting any change in the TL text equivalence. However, it seems that along time must pass until this aim becomes within reach and since this cannot be achieved on, by resorting to footnote.

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